

# The Development Divide in a Digital Age

## *An Issues Paper*

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## Preface

The international community is engaged in a number of important efforts to harness information and communications technologies for development. Leaders of the G-8 countries, meeting in Okinawa, recently established the Digital Opportunity Task Force. The United Nations Secretary-General, acting upon the suggestion of ECOSOC, is creating an ICT Task Force. The International Telecommunications Union has called for a World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in 2003.

One of the principal objectives of these efforts, and many others, is to improve the effectiveness of co-ordination, so that the actions of different groups and institutions are mutually reinforcing. Certainly it is necessary to use available resources wisely. But the need for coherence in development co-operation should not overshadow the necessity—also clearly expressed in these initiatives—to leave space for diversity. In the ICT field, as in any other, there are no standard models for success. Each case is to some extent unique; and to harness the enormous potential of ICTs for development requires careful consideration of specific regional, national and local situations.

In the following pages, Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara highlights the diversity of applications and services usually subsumed under the acronym ICT, and she urges greater originality in devising programmes that put some of these tools to good use for development. She also draws attention to the frequent contradictions between hopes for ICT-led progress and the actual course of change in particular circumstances. The gap between claims and accomplishments is usually associated with insufficient attention to the broader social, institutional and policy environment that determines the usefulness of specific ICT initiatives. Often the local knowledge on which to base effective decision making in this field is simply not available.

Action-oriented research and dialogue within developing countries can provide the kind of insight required to develop innovative ICT programmes of relevance to concrete local situations. Therefore, as the international community attempts to ensure more equitable access to information and communications around the world, it should consider collaboration on a number of fronts: not only improving the physical infrastructure and the economic climate for the extension of modern technologies, but also strengthening the capacity for analysis and debate on ICT issues in relatively more disadvantaged countries and regions. This, in turn, can improve the coherence of development policy from the bottom up.

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## Summary/Résumé/Resumen

### **Summary**

This paper considers the role that information and communications technologies (ICTs) can realistically be expected to play in improving the level of living and quality of life of people in different parts of the world. It focuses above all on low-income countries, where most development assistance efforts are concentrated and where the challenge of utilizing ICTs effectively is greatest.

The title of the paper reflects its central argument. The *digital divide* is an integral part of a much broader and more intractable *development divide*. The likelihood that people in low-income countries can improve their life chances is often sharply limited not only by their lack of access to modern means of communication and sources of information, but also by a complex network of constraints ranging from unresolved problems of poverty and injustice in their own societies to the structure and dynamics of the global economic system.

When designing ICT programmes in developing countries, these broader constraints must be explicitly taken into account. Thus, at the international level, discussion of possibilities to use the Internet for improving trade and employment opportunities in low-income countries must be accompanied by a frank evaluation of impediments associated with the current global financial and trade regime. If the surrounding context for proposed innovation is not sufficiently analysed, and remedies for pressing economic problems addressed, many well-meaning efforts will have short lives and minimal results.

Lack of attention to the macroeconomic environment (and to deficiencies in basic physical infrastructure and public sector capacity) frequently leads to over-optimism concerning the development potential of e-commerce and telework in the majority of Third World countries. Inattention to these factors can also lessen possibilities for success in other areas. Even the most apparently local initiative—like the provision of access to the Internet in a Third World school or clinic—is likely to fail if that country's debt burden makes it virtually impossible for the government to maintain adequate programmes of public education and health. Similarly, it is unlikely that the potential of ICTs to improve public administration will be realized when cash-strapped local governments cannot improve incentives within an underpaid and thoroughly demoralized civil service.

Better co-ordination between international ICT initiatives and broader debates on finance for development is thus essential. If the new technologies are to be used well in the struggle against disadvantage, there must also be improved co-ordination between those who work on ICT programmes in development ministries and agencies, on the one hand, and colleagues who follow the sometimes arcane debates on telecommunications and information policies within international organizations like the ITU, WIPO and the WTO, on the other. A development focus is notably lacking in most of these technical debates, yet their outcomes directly affect conditions of access to, and use of, information technologies across the globe.

Turning from international to national policy environments, the paper considers differences among Third World countries in their capacity to use information technologies for development. The most successful efforts to incorporate modern technologies in national economies have occurred in countries with strong and efficient states, as well as a firm commitment to invest in education. In some cases, privatization of the telecommunications infrastructure has been important, but in others it has not. As numerous studies have pointed out, the quality of public service and public regulation are far more significant variables than the structure of ownership. There are virtually endless combinations of the latter, ranging from full state control through different kinds of public-private partnerships, to fully private initiatives – all of which can be effective under certain conditions.

To a very large degree, low-income countries depend on foreign institutions and actors to create both an adequate telecommunications infrastructure and a regulatory framework that is progressive and fair. Development assistance is crucial in this regard. The effort is likely to be more effective if it takes place within the context of national ICT strategies, which make explicit the need to adapt available technical and economic options to the needs of specific countries. These strategies should also provide a framework for better national co-ordination of many disparate efforts, by NGOs and others, to use ICTs to improve public administration and social services, and to support democracy in Third World countries.

It is important to keep an open mind about the kinds of ICTs that are likely to be most appropriate for these purposes. There is a tendency at present to centre discussion of information and communications technologies around the Internet and to channel development assistance largely toward facilitating access to it. But cutting-edge applications are not always what people need most. In some cases, Internet use may prove too expensive or too difficult for local people to maintain, and thus be unsustainable. And in others, the Internet is simply not the best medium for supporting local socioeconomic and political progress.

The ICT revolution is lending old technologies new relevance. In many parts of the world, mobile telephones are transforming people's quality of life. New digital radio stations are reaching a wide public in an interactive way through call-in programmes. Moreover, when

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