

Concept Note
on the Role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)
in the Global Development Agendas

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ICTs as a Dual Edged Swords; Prometheus' Legacy

It has become a long standing practice since time immemorial that technology will always be jealously guarded by those who had already possessed it, while at the same time, vigorously sought after by those aspiring to have it. Venerated by many, detested by others, yet craved by all.

The Hellenic Promethean myth told generations after generations only signifies one thing. That technology has always been, is, and will always be a contested territory in humankind's anthropological landscape.

In light of that, it is therefore not an exaggeration if one said that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as one of its branches, is not an exception.

Rapid advancements of ICT's in the last half century has truly empowered one to listen, see, transmit, and communicate over a previously unthinkable long distances. It is considered to be one of the paramount achievements of humankind's civilization, as it -figuratively speaking- shrinks down the globe, and narrows down distances.

ICT truly creates a vast horizon of opportunities. It foster the creation, transmission, and dissemination of information, which in turn may translates into broadening the access toward knowledge, enabling inclusive growth and equal prosperity for all segments of global society.

On the other hand, ICT requires a highly advanced and complex infrastructures and a plethora of other technological requirements, not easily attainable by a vast number of developing societies, let alone by the least developed ones. This reality is precisely captured by the most recent statistics published by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in 2013, which displays that of all 6 billion world population, only 2,7 billions of them, or roughly 40 percent of the total world population, are connected to the global ICT grid through internet. That leaves us with 60 percent disconnected population numbering no less than 3,3 billion people, that constitutes the dark "digital gap".

It is perhaps at this critical juncture why it has become quite difficult for various parties to explicitly include ICTs in the contemporary discourses on global development agendas, namely in both the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as the Post-2015 Development Agenda, since any direct mentioning of ICTs under that particular context, will inevitably be linked and entailed by the moral obligation to rectify the gap.

Narrowing the gap, is indeed not an easy task. It is, among others, financially costly. One would have to invest, build, maintain, and operate ICTs infrastructure under non-commercial mode in remotely underdeveloped areas.

Digital Equality; Equal Connectivity, Equal Access of Knowledge, Equal Benefit

Furthermore, the discourse on how ICTs may be harnessed to support global development agendas should not only be narrowly focused on the issue of infrastructure, since it only covers half part of the ICTs equations, namely the connectivity. While infrastructure indeed enables the connectivity to take place, but it could not guarantee its use for benevolent goals aimed to serve public interests. Content of the ICTs flow is therefore equally critically important.

Priority should be focused on developing ICTs content that corresponds to the aims of narrowing the opportunity gap, disseminating knowledge, as well as educating and empowering all segments within the digitally isolated societies.

In light of this, we must welcome and support the initiatives which have been taken by some ICTs stakeholders in providing ICTs services on *pro bono* basis to serve that ends, such the ones maintaining e-learning websites in partnering with the world's major universities, to name but a few. Furthermore, ICTs contents (and applications) specifically designed to empower minority groups, most particularly those with disabilities, are also of critical importance, to empower them in securing their place in the society, as well as enabling them to contribute positively to the development of their society.

ICTs as Development Tools; Bridging, Enlightening, Benefitting

To serve that cause, ICTs may only become a strategic tool for development if it may be harnessed to meet the following conditionalities.

Firstly, it has to be able to serve as bridges to reach the currently isolated societies and to connect them to the digitized world.

Secondly, the connection itself should enable the flow of contents which empowers and enlightens the under-developed societies through free flow of scientific knowledge.

Thirdly, it has to be utilized in a way where the conditions above may be translated into positive vertical social mobility among the less fortunate societies, and elevate themselves from the abyss of disconnectivity and despair.

Translating Ideals into Actions; Practical Way Forward

In coherence to the Group's *raison d'être* to foster mutually benefitting cooperation among the community of nations for the causes of development, the Group is therefore called upon to take real actions in the real world to serve that end, within the Group's sphere of ability, resources, and limitations. In light of this, the Group may proceed with the following:

Firstly, establishing a close cooperation with relevant stakeholders, namely International Telecommunication Union (ITU), in particular is Directorate for Development (ITU-D), and Cooperation for Science and Technology Development (CSTD) to name but a few, to provide regular briefing for the Group in regular basis, on the latest developments -both in hardware as well as software aspects- in the field of ICT.

Secondly, initiating a consultative process with the ITU in probing the possibility for the Group to deliver its statement in the ICT-related forum, such as the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS), Internet Governance Forum (IGF), and World Telecommunication Development Conference (WTDC). In that connection, the forthcoming convening of WSIS+10 and WTDC Conference to be held in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, in April 2014, may be among the best opportunities that the Group needs to seize.

Thirdly, establishing the Group's own ICT mapping and statistics, as the standard reference of ICT situation among the Group's member countries. The statistics needs to include, among others, the level of internet penetrations, technological modalities and constraints, as well as other ICT-related variables in the respective countries.

Fourthly, probing for ways to empower the Group's member countries' young ICT innovators both by granting them the necessary entrepreneurial skills, as well as by providing access to the ICT market.

In conclusion, the measurement of success in any efforts toward ICT empowerment in developing countries is, actually, quite simple. They are being judged by their ability to translate their progress through the quantitative effects it managed to reflect in the demographic side of the equation. The more people are being connected, and empowered through it, the more success it has achieved.

After all, ICTs and development is about connecting, enlightening, and prospering human, as the venerated subject of development, and not a mere passive objects helplessly wanting and waiting for stolen fire from the Olympus as tragically depicted in the Prometheus' mythical world.
