Deconstructing the South African Government's ICT for Development Discourse

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INTRODUCTION

The post-apartheid South African government has placed ICTs at the centre of the national agenda for social and economic development (Mbeki, 1996, 2002b; Presidential National Commission on the Information Society and Development (PNC on ISAD), 2003a). The question of whether the application of technologies to improve information and communication access can increase the capabilities of disadvantaged and poor people is central to whether the new ICTs (particularly the Internet) will support or undermine real development. Technology appears in the South African government's ICT for development discourse as a politically neutral force with the power to develop, and without which people are classified as *information-poor*. As Wajcman (2002) cogently argues, "governments everywhere legitimate much of their policy in terms of a technological imperative" (p. 348). One effect of this discourse is to render poor people passive and dependent, as objects to be developed, rather than as active agents of development. Failure to address these assumptions may lead social scientists to become complacent in distracting attention away from the very *real* global economic, social, and cultural inequalities, to *virtual* inequalities, which merely hide an unwillingness to address the core failings of the development paradigm.

The paper attempts to meet the challenge put forth by Robert Wade (2002):

*The current campaign to promote the uptake of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in developing countries and to get aid donors to redirect their aid budgets needs devil's advocates to challenge what John Stuart Mill once called 'the deep slumber of a decided opinion.' (*p. 443)

BACKGROUND

The real test of the success of ICTs in development efforts is whether they ultimately contribute to reducing poverty and inequality, thereby improving the lives and livelihoods of the poor. Two important questions emerge from the debate: (1) Who will have access to ICTs and the networks formed? and (2) Who will have control not only of the technology and its application, but of data gathered and processed, and of information exchanged via different modes?

The paper makes the following assumptions: (1) technology is *socially shaped*; and (2) the direction and nature of technological development does not necessarily follow some inevitable trajectory, but rather is a component of a complex, multi-dimensional system of social, cultural, political, and economic change. Further, the paper is premised on the belief that: (1) technology, in and of itself, is neither positive nor negative (Kranzberg, 1985), what Heidegger (1977) refers to as "the ambiguous essence of technology" (p. 33); and (2) the deployment of ICTs is the consequence of human choices which are themselves constrained and shaped by social context. Simply put, ICTs are context-dependent (i.e., they are contingent on uses and applications in particular contexts).

Developing at the end of the 19th century in an era of rapid capitalist industrial expansion and the rise of powerfully intrusive states, Touraine (1988) maintains that the social sciences have been overly preoccupied with positivistic explanation and unduly shaped by an emphasis on order and control. This has left little room for human agency and on the individual actor in social science theories. To regain relevance and validity in the social sciences, Touraine (1988) urges social scientists to become *participant-observers*.

The author has been a participant-observer in numerous government ICT forums (e.g., the Government Information Technology Officers' Council (GITOC), the knowledge and information management (KIM) sub-committee, the Universal Services Agency (U.S.), the Presidential National Commission on the Information Society and Development (PNC on ISAD), the Department of Communication's electronic commerce discussion process and various discussion colloquia on telecommunications, ICT convergence policy, etc). Collectively, these experiences have been a rich source of data gathering for the paper. By operating as a reflexive critic and a participant-observer, the researcher is well positioned to question the highly problematic set of assumptions underpin-

ning the South African government's ICT for development discourse.

TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

The benefits of ICTs for the poor are seen as intuitively, self-evident, and universally valid by the South African government. It is clear that government has invested a great deal of faith in the power of ICTs to fast-track development (Matsepe-Casaburri, 2002a, 2003; Zuma, 2002). The optimistic view of government focuses heavily on technology potential rather than on adapting appropriate information systems to meet the real needs of poor communities in different environments. Further, this rose-tinted view of technology fails to adequately deal with the constraints for accessing and applying ICTs by the poor. What is urgently needed is a more integrated framework for understanding both information and ICTs in relation to poverty alleviation and development.

The optimistic view of the South African government needs to be tempered in the light of evidence showing that learning is a critical feature of technological change (Bell & Pavitt, 1993; Giuliani & Bell, 2005; Lall, 1992). Further, the importance of ICTs for addressing the real information needs of the poor has tended to be overstated and there is a danger of the policy debate becoming too strongly focused around the capabilities of emerging technologies.

It would appear as if government is underplaying the constraints that make it difficult for the poor to access, assess, and apply information through ICTs. These include lack of human capabilities (i.e., literacy, English language skills, and technical computer competence); urban/rural inequities; gender inequalities; affordability; and lack of relevant information content. Further, it takes time for people to comprehend the potential benefits of ICT-mediated information, or to be willing to trust information that does not derive from personal networks.

The information needs of poor households, communities, and small-scale enterprises should be understood in advance of proposing ICT-based solutions. Significant "financial opportunity costs" for poverty alleviation strategies are likely to arise, since large amounts of limited resources are being diverted to poorly conceived ICT-related investments that might not have a direct impact on the needs of the poor. There is also the risk that introducing digital information systems may supplant existing systems that may be more appropriate and more cost effective in terms of access and coverage. Moreover, over-emphasis on technological solutions can have the effect of drawing attention away from the underlying causes of poverty such as inadequate health and educational facilities.

As part of an integrated development strategy, ICTs can contribute to socio-economic development, but investments in ICTs alone are not sufficient for development to occur. ICT applications are not sufficient to address problems of rural access without adherence to principles of integrated rural development. Unless there is minimal infrastructure development in transport, education, health and social and cultural facilities, it is unlikely that investments from ICTs alone will enable rural areas to cross the threshold from poverty to growth.

Government has over-enthusiastically embraced the application of ICTs to address the pressing needs of the poor (Fraser-Molekete, 2002; Naidoo, 1998a-c). The major problem is that there is a widespread misunderstanding about how substantial benefits can be derived from ICTs for the poor. Persistent poverty, at both an individual and societal level, has deep and systemic roots. Chronic poverty, limited growth, and inequality are primarily the result of uneven access to material and financial resources.

The material deprivations of the poor are compounded by their lack of access to education, information, and knowledge; their lack of voice in the institutions and societal processes that shape their lives; and their inability to communicate effectively their needs, hopes, and expectations to those who have control over them. These deprivations are mirrored at the societal level by institutions and markets that function poorly, that are often unresponsive to the needs of the disadvantaged and disenfranchised, and that are all too frequently captured or are excessively influenced by economic, social, or cultural elites.

Government's discourse on ICTs for development is couched in the upbeat "we will all benefit from this" language (Mbeki, 1996, p. 1). There are times when it would seem as if government regards ICTs as the technical solution for poverty and underdevelopment (Mbeki, 2002a-b). The technological utopianism of government maintains that the digital world of the new ICTs holds the potential for breakthroughs in resolving the social problems of poverty and inequality in South Africa. The isolation of the poor can be ended and radical new approaches to poverty and social inequality can develop directly through the cyber-world (Ministry of Communications, 2001). The digital space holds potentials for conferring enormous economic benefits on society as a whole and its low-income segment in particular. It is for these reasons that government sees exclusion from the digital world as disastrous for those excluded.

There is a distinctive view in government that technology determines the nature of society (Matsepe-Casaburri,