

**Notes on Trends and Niches in the
ICT4D/K4D debate
2004**

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International Institute for Sustainable Development
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Notes on Trends and Niches in the ICT4D/K4D debate: 2004

These notes were compiled in 2004 as a contribution to the work of the Global Knowledge Partnership. They briefly explore the status of the debate in 2004 on the role of information and communications technologies in the development process, and the emergence of niche areas of opportunity in information and communications technologies for development (ICT4D), knowledge for development (K4D) and multistakeholder partnerships.

ICT4D / K4D Timeline

1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2005
Information Society Conference (G7/EU Brussels)	Information Society and Development Conference (South Africa) Launch of the African Information Society Initiative at ECA Conference of Ministers	World Bank/CIDA and others convene Global Knowledge 97 Partnership for ICTs in Africa formed	World Bank Development Report: Knowledge for Development ITU proposes a summit on the Information Society		Global Knowledge 2000 G8 Meeting Okinawa: Charter on the Global Information Society established DOTForce	Downturn in IT sector impacts IT companies and on private foundations G8 Meeting Genoa : DOTForce plan of action UN ICT Task Force established	G8 Kananaskis meeting: presentation of DOTForce report and conclusion of mandate WSSD endorsement of partnership modality in all fields; Swiss promote GKP as the 1st ICT multistakeholder partnership	WSIS Phase I	WSIS Phase II

Emerging issues and challenges in the field of ICT4D/K4D

Some of the following signals may appear to be contradictory; but they reflect the ongoing diversity of interests in this field.

1. Continuing lack of clarity on what is meant by ICT4D

Confusion over the terminology of ICT4D and K4D has undermined the power of the debate. The field of mobilizing knowledge and information using new technologies has emerged from a convergence of influences over the past twenty years or more. Influences include private sector experience with knowledge management, social science experiments with social network analysis, shifts in international development assistance from technology transfer to capacity development, and the emergence of transnational or "networked" governance through multistakeholder processes¹. Exciting as this convergence is, it has also led to lack of clarity as people appropriate terminology to apply to their own particular objectives, without necessarily developing a shared understanding of concepts and practices. Consequently, people continue to debate what is meant

¹ Creech, H.

by an "information society", what the role of knowledge is in development, whether the concept of K4D is fundamentally different from ICT4D, whether a "partnership" is the same as a "network" or a "community of practice" and so forth. Even within the Global Knowledge Partnership, use of terms such as "governance" can range from the application of ICT tools for strengthening open and transparent international governance to the governance of the Internet. It is difficult to gain collective momentum on an issue when the issue itself continues to suffer from a wide variety of definitions, interpretations and approaches.

2. Loss of relevance and a shift to mainstreaming

Some practitioners believe that the ICT4D debate has lost relevance on the international development agenda, especially in the context of the Millennium Development Goals. UNDP has closed down its ICT group with a view to mainstreaming ICT across all its work; Swedish SIDA is no longer engaging on this issue; Canadian CIDA has completed a review of its "knowledge fund" that supported many ICT4D actions, including GKP, but has given no indication that it intends to reinstate it with new funding. Attention has shifted from a focus on particular tools like ICT to a focus on goals – on what needs to be changed in the world -- and timelines to achieve those changes. The argument therefore is that ICT tools need to be mainstreamed into other activities, as one of many ways to achieve the MDGs.

3. Lack of rigorously validated research

In part, the loss of relevance is seen to be a result of the lack of serious, independent research into whether and how ICTs contribute to the economic and social development of nations. In our discussions with GKP stakeholders, we have heard repeatedly that "success stories" are simply not rigorous enough, not validated or quantified to present any kind of realistic picture on the role of ICT in development. A practitioner we talked with commented on reading some 6,000 pages of documents from a wide variety of agencies as background for preparation of a report on ICT4D for WSIS, only to find that very little of it was particularly good, or demonstrated conclusively how ICTs are uniquely transformational. Consequently, as developing countries prepare their PRSPs, there is no justification available to promote ICTs as part of the poverty reduction strategy.

4. Less than successful experiences with knowledge management initiatives

Many development assistance agencies tried to adopt ICT tools and related knowledge management practices as means to improve their own internal efficiencies, at the same time as they were promoting the value of ICTs for development. We know that many of these internal initiatives have not lived up to their initial promise, and we speculate that this experience is casting a pall over support for funding projects in the field of ICT4D and K4D. Many of those we interviewed were familiar with the recent review of the World Bank knowledge

sharing initiatives², and the view that these initiatives did not have the transformative effect on operations that had been hoped for.

5. The shaky promise of WSIS

Many stakeholders believed that the preparatory processes for WSIS were highly significant, in that they brought many new interests to the table, and that WSIS itself revealed real energy and progress in the application of ICTs to global change. WSIS, more than any other process up to this point, demonstrated that ICT4D is a “hot field” right now. But as a negotiating process to mobilize political action among nations, WSIS was deemed inefficient and weak at best. WSIS confirmed in some respects the trend first noted at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, that negotiated outcomes are of less importance than “type 2 outcomes” – partnerships, on the ground projects, knowledge sharing, and so forth. WSIS-I has left open the question of what the focus should be after WSIS-II in Tunis; and where the leadership is in the ICT4D field, if there is limited political interest among governments to act collectively.

6. The DOTForce Interventions

Much of the momentum on ICT is being carried out within the context of DOTForce commitments, at national and regional levels. However, some practitioners observe that DOTForce operated from older development paradigms:

That poverty is a result of a gap – a gap in food production; a gap in education; a gap in health care, or in this case, a gap in access to ICT infrastructure and services – and that poverty could be significantly reduced by filling the gap (or bridging the divide).

That only by mobilizing the trillions of dollars available through private sector investment can real change in economic and social development be effected.

It is not clear to some that this large scale, large partner approach to ICT4D is in fact either appropriate or successful.

7. Lifecycle of ICT adoption and the shift to project partnerships

A cycle of ICT adoption has been posited by IDRC, and that we are actually in the late stages of this debate, in terms of innovation, attracting new levels of funding, new actors, new partnerships, and so forth. The emphasis is moving to implementation. Building infrastructure and capacity through major project partnerships is where the action is now: Private sector firms like CISCO and Microsoft are running ICT training centres with the support and investment of national governments; civil society groups like Development Alternatives are working with bilateral and international agencies to build rural access and capacity. For example, the International Youth Foundation in Washington DC has teamed up with USAID and Palestinian territories to invest millions in youth ICT training centres in communities. While some of the actors in these multistakeholder partnership projects may have crossed paths through GKP, their focus now is specific actions with a very limited number of partners.

² World Bank. Operations and Evaluation Department. *Sharing Knowledge to Achieve Development Goals*: [http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/oed/oeddoelib.nsf/DocPgNmViewForJavaSearch/KSPrecis/\\$file/Precis234.pdf](http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/oed/oeddoelib.nsf/DocPgNmViewForJavaSearch/KSPrecis/$file/Precis234.pdf)

There is no question that the partnerships modality continues to have currency; but there is growing demand for assistance in understanding how to make partnerships much more effective at the implementation level.

Niche opportunities for 2005 and beyond

We are observing a shift in the ICT4D field towards:

major implementation projects among the community involved in DOTForce and other major stakeholders

“mainstreaming” [or disbanding] ICT focal points in international and bilateral agencies, with renewed focus on broader goals and timelines within the framework of the MDGs.

growing demand for independent research and validation of the role and value added of ICTs in the sustainable development paradigm.

There are two niche opportunities for organizations and networks working in ICT4D:

1. The need for a knowledge base of the south on ICT4D/K4D

There has been a strong trend in this field towards inclusion of the voices of the south.

There is a niche for a strong multistakeholder partnership of the south, following the model of the Global Development Network, which is structured to bring together, support and promote southern development researchers and networks. Such a partnership could:

Identify one or two key issues or themes in ICT4D (and possibly the broader context of K4D) per year, and fund and publish real research into these areas by the members of the partnership (ie, research done in the south, by the south).

Provide a hub for research demands from members, much like the UNDP SURF/Global Hub system, where requests for research and expertise are channeled first to experts within regions and then to a central facility.

Ground advocacy work in research: Members can take the research findings back to their national strategies and regions in order to influence how ICTs, local knowledge and other knowledge and information tools and processes are deployed to support PRSPs and MDG processes.

Focus on the gaps in the MDGs: security, peace building, corruption, governance systems. This would require investigation of how societies make decisions and the application of ICTs to enhance and support transparent and open governance.

Provide valuable input to the UNICT Taskforce and groups like InfoDev, by advising development agencies and governments on what works, and by

acting as an independent avenue for the south to advocate on ICT and related K4D issues.

Such an approach may eventually open doors for the partnership to also influence multinational ICT companies, who can become clients of the partnership as they look for advice on best approaches to developing ICT sectors in the south, and mobilizing ICTs for sustainable development in the south.

2. The need for a monitor of Multistakeholder Partnerships for ICT4D

There is a narrow but extremely important niche not being filled by other agencies at present. To the best of our knowledge, no one is currently identifying and tracking all major ICT multistakeholder partnerships. There is a real need to monitor and evaluation how such partnerships work, what their outcomes are, whether they can be replicated, what tools can be developed to help others initiate and manage such partnerships.