On dams, superwomen, and a hole in the wall...

Debating the divide:
People, networks and their capabilities[1]

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[1] This is a summary article reflecting papers and commentaries on the issue of capacity building for equitable access to ICT infrastructure. It is part of a series commissioned by APC for an event on equitable access which took place in Rio de Janeiro in November 2007. The papers and commentaries can be found at: www.apc.org/en/pubs/research

Policy-makers and regulators "cannot be supermen and superwomen," says African information and communications technology (ICT) policy analyst Professor F.F. Tusubira. Instead, he says, they need to create an environment where "savvy" entrepreneurs can bring value to customers.

While there are many points of agreement on how to understand the key challenges facing policy activists who want to unlock the potential of ICTs more vigorously for the poor, exchanges between experts often raise quite straightforward yet intriguing questions, such as: Do those with entrepreneurial spirit and energy need to be taught, or are they self-taught? Is it patronising for an outsider to intervene? When it comes to ICTs, who are the outsiders? And do remedies for the digital divide ignore similar divide debates that have gone on in other sectors decades ago?

Some of these questions are raised in an issue paper by UK-based ICT for development consultant David Souter, entitled *Equitable Access: People, networks and capabilities*. Souter's paper is one of a series of four on aspects of equitable access to ICT infrastructure commissioned by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC).

Both Souter and Tusubira agree that policy only goes half-way to impacting on the growth of ICTs. However, there does not appear to be a shared consensus on whether policy-makers should leave the underserved communities to the market or intervene with support initiatives in providing affordable access.

For Souter, policy-makers and regulators should ideally take care of the supply side, or infrastructure, *and* the demand side. The latter can be done by building capacity – what he refers to as "capabilities" – at the grassroots level. Not so, counters Tusubira in a commentary on his issue paper: "Communities have demonstrated that they have the capacity to develop these skills *independently,* so long as there is easy access to technology. The hole in the wall computer experiments; the illiterate women of Grameen phone fame: all have demonstrated this. Poverty is about a lack of opportunity..."

"I also subscribe to the more cautious interpretation," he adds, "that [ICTs] will enhance what is going on in developing countries rather than displace this with the brave, new 'knowledge society'... [K]nowledge creates competitive advantage and can indeed drive innovation, but does not replace goods and services."

Yet such forthright views often succeed in raising more questions than they answer. If policy-makers can't be superwomen, can society expect the poor, on their own, to repair the broken bridges dangling across the digital divide?

While it is clear that not all capacity interventions need be patronising – and equally clear that some are – for ICT activist Steve Buckley, these sorts of debates are missing the point. In his commentary, Buckley argues that many of the current debates dealing with the digital

divide are guilty of their own kind of knowledge divide. The ICT for development sector, he says, could learn a lot from similar divide debates that occurred decades ago in the water and energy sectors: "[D]ebate on equitable access is very much alive in these [other] areas too, but it differs in having already gone through several generations of development thinking."

Buckley's point is to try to wrestle the issue of access to ICTs away from a sector-specific focus, and to try to look at the bigger picture. The digital divide, he contends, is a symptom of a greater "'communications divide' that characterises the unequal access of people living in poverty to the means and the freedoms of expression and access to information."

A top-down approach to ICT policy and regulatory thinking has an analogy in approaches to water management: "From the 1940s through the 1960s…the building of large dams was very much central to development strategies both for water management and hydroelectric energy supply. In the 1960s and 1970s such strategies came up against a trenchant critique of both their efficiency and effectiveness… This led to a much greater emphasis in recent years on bottom-up and community-level approaches to water management, such as well-building, rainwater harvesting and small, localised storage facilities."

Buckley says a comparative analysis could "assist in exposing the development assumptions that underpin both the conventional ICT paradigm and its alternatives."

While a bird's-eye view may prove invaluable, Souter argues that it is precisely the lack of *specific* knowledge that inhibits good policy-making. The rapid changes in the technological revolution, sometimes quantum shifts in global markets, and changing user behaviour make a heady mix that is often difficult to understand or predict; and these make ICTs different to many other sectors.

Policy-makers and regulators "sit at the centre of this massive change," Souter says. Yet their capacity is constrained by a "lack of knowledge of market developments, the unpredictability of new technology, the potential impact of different regulatory approaches, and (sometimes) weak relationships with powerful actors in government and business." On the other hand, Tusubira would like to understand more about the "powerful actors" and appeals for a "power analysis" to determine who exactly are pulling the policy strings.

While Souter feels that skills do need to be developed to maximise the potential of new technologies at the community level, he also argues that "equity" is not necessarily the same as "equality". What is important, he says, is affordability, saliency or relevance, and ease of use, the latter referring to "the extent to which the benefits of services can be unlocked with existing skills or skills that can be easily acquired." In short, what matters to one person or community – a telephone, for instance – may not be what matters to another person or community (say, whether or not Amazon.com can deliver books to your country).

Raw equality may not even be possible. As Buckley points out, the World Bank has calculated that the subsidy needed for those living on USD 1 a day to get just one hour of internet access a week could be as high as USD 75 billion. This, he says, is more than the annual global total of aid flows. Policy geared to equitable access does not mean giving everyone a Blackberry, just as dealing with the "transport divide" does not mean giving everyone a car – a matatu, rickshaw, or bicycle might, in some instances, do**.**

But how best to create a policy and regulatory environment so that the market, or the community, can at least find its feet? For Souter, "the ground is constantly shifting beneath the assumptions made by policy-makers, regulators and investors." Traditional regulatory models of extending large-scale networks outwards from the centre appear ill-equipped to deal with these sorts of changes. Moreover, the traditional model does not respect the "savvy" of the consumer and citizen: "Building large-scale networks outwards from the centre means that communities are offered a common and average service type and standard, which may over- or under-provide for their specific needs," he says.

Souter suggests that a reverse paradigm is necessary in some cases: building inwards from the periphery rather than extending large-scale networks out from the centre. That is, a demand-driven, user-centred policy for network provision. A community network "built around local demand and alternative technologies" might at least save on the "common costs of centralised infrastructure," he says.

But Tusubira remains sceptical of the current status of ICT policies in developing countries: "[M]ost ICT policies are more of a wish list than a coherent framework and realistic plan of action." What is needed is to take on the "bigger challenge" and note the "flaws inherent in the policies themselves – the conception, the framework, and implementation strategies," he says.

For both, the capabilities of policy-makers and regulators is an issue. "Policy-makers and regulators need more knowledge of the circumstances of the communities with which they deal, more understanding of the relationship between infrastructure networks and development outcomes, and more sharing of expertise across international borders," argues Souter.

For Buckley, the challenge is more general. ICTs are not necessarily the issue, but communication rights, broadly, are. The task is to "consider what strategies are most likely to lead to improvements in the communication capabilities of those people most at risk of social and economic exclusion."

Understanding these drivers is not always a case of more studies or research, insists Tusubira: "South Africa, for example, is easily one of the best-researched economies as far as the ICT sector is concerned, but this has not yet translated to exemplary policy and

regulation." Rather, it is about challenging a "lack of awareness (at the political level) about the importance of evidence-based policy."

Regulators, in the end, also need to be "savvy" – in the real sense of keeping an open mind, he says: "It is a human trait to become more conservative with age, and to resist rather than change with change. This means that, as a matter of policy, regulatory staff should have a 'use by' date to permit new people with fresh ideas and more dynamic thinking to take charge."