

WUF: Report of the IRFD Networking Event (Thursday, September 16 2004)

Theme: The Role of Cities in an Information Age: ICT Application for Urban Development

This event highlighted a fundamental issue of the digital divide brought about by the information revolution and its reflection on urban space as an integral part of the inequality structure of the world at all levels: international, regional, national, and local. The Digital Divide tends to reproduce the basic elements of the structure of inequality along the lines of traditional patterns of socio-economic and political stratification, the major challenge is a growing paradox of the information society, which is mirrored in the process of the digital divide and the unfolding rift of social-spatial spectrum. IRFD emphasizes the following paradoxical tendencies: 1. Global integration and technological peripheralization; 2. Global corporate economic conglomeration and small and medium entrepreneurial marginalization; 3. e-Governance and non-articulation of public preferences; and 4. Hegemonic universalism and cultural particularism.

The existing pattern of technological diffusion accelerates uneven global economic integration further marginalizing vast segment of the world population. Therefore, people living in peripheral regions are trapped in a vicious cycle and face severe constraints for development. Underdeveloped markets, and the lack of infrastructure such as energy grids, international bandwidth, and high costs of access to equipment are the main constraints to providing communication technology to the rural masses and deprived urban communities. Multinational/transnational corporate investment behavior deprives small/medium businesses and the urban informal sector, particularly in developing economies. Backward and forward linkages are virtually non-existent

The Essex University research team highlighted futuristically possible paradoxical tendencies of the application of Pervasive Intelligent Computer Technology and its impact on urban landscape. The forces that led to the development of urban centers are undermined by the development of cyberspace, and thereby raise a question of how to balance the need for physical versus virtual interaction in their lives. Possible polarization between virtual, gated and physical communities is very much on their mind. They have the fear that physical communities may become impoverished and more brutal places to live. This virtual and real world may mirror the contemporary distinctions between rich and poor, the ruling class and the working class, the first and the third, or the inner city and the suburbs (Jeannette Chin, Vic Callaghan, Graham Clarke, Hani Hagra, Martin Colley, 2004)

There is a growing awareness that cyberspace has become a venue for cultural and linguistic diversity. However, there are two dialectical tendencies in ICT application with regard to cultural domain and development: on one hand, there is a tendency for hegemonic domination in cultural accommodation; on the other hand, there is an opposing trend to hegemonic domination, which will result in the resurgence of the cultural and religious fundamentalism, and thereby using cyberspace as a new breeding ground for race, caste, creed, religion, gender, and negative tribal elements, which will renew old animosities, and eruptions in urban planetary space. Some of us may have questions about these dialectic tendencies and emerging responses. Does urban landscape provide the fertile ground for innovative hybridization with diverse cultural enrichment that promotes equality and human dignity, or are we near experiencing 'cyber tribalism'? Will the emerging concept and approach of 'glocalization' resolve this paradox?

Despite the potential for e-Governance, technology penetration in the government sectors, reform of the governmental institutional structure, and human resource development are still low in many parts of the world. In the absence of organizational innovation and policy guidance, ICTs may lead to the supremacy of the traditional political and commercial forces, instead of following people true preferences, which recognize the supremacy of the societal context (UN) The media neither articulate true preferences nor produce accurate information. Danilo Yanich (2004) argues that because the way news is presented it is very difficult to practice citizenship, audience is treated as subjects, and the constructed reality of the city is reflected in images that are often pejorative.

Contemporary cities need to play a significant role in order to launch a structural transformation, which is necessary to break the vicious cycle of infrastructural deprivation, and marginalization in social-spatial spectrum. Urban social integration, eradication of poverty, creation of employment, improving urban health and sanitation, provision of urban infrastructure and affordable housing, creating democratic urban governance and empowerment of citizens, creating a balanced rural-urban growth, establishing sustainable rural-urban linkages, and creating a sustainable environment compatible with advanced capitalism are the prime challenges of our time.

Knowledge is power. ICT is a tool for knowledge and urban development. The right application of ICT to empower urban citizens will enhance a positive role of cities, which will have a chain effect on the social-spatial-virtual dimensions of the development spectrum. As the digital economy is a consequence of demographic and economic agglomeration (William H. Gray, 2004), a correct assessment of local determinants of growth in the urban environ is the first step for appropriate ICT application. The role of each city (urban unit) must be viewed not in isolation but in relation to the total spectrum of development scale (global, national, regional, local). However, it is necessary take precautionary measures to avoid negative elements of ICT application and to protect citizens' privacy, give broad based and decentralized ownership of information and its controlling power. To this effect IRFD has developed an e-community development strategy model (<http://www.irfd.org>) as an integrated approach, which will aspire to contribute to the millennium goals in partnership with other development organizations. This approach will reduce the gap between Technology-People-Organizations (Ariwa Ezendu, 2004) replicating best practices and establishing a credible mentoring network (European Union of Tele cottage Association, 2004).

Prepared by
Dr. Neville S. Arachchige Don
President/CEO
International Research Foundation for Development

Presenters at the IRFD Networking Event: Neville S. Arachchige Don, International Research Foundation for Development; Jeannette Chin, Vic Callaghan, Graham Clarke, Hani Hagra, Martin Colley, Inhabited Intelligent Environments Group, Essex University, UK; Danilo Yanich, Center for Community Research & Service, Graduate School of Urban Affairs & Public Policy, University of Delaware-Newark, USA; Bernát Éva, European Union of Telecottage Associations; Matias Enchanove, Center on Organizational Innovation, Columbia University, New York, USA, & Institute of Socio-Information and Communication Studies, University of Tokyo, Japan; Ezendu Ariwa, Strategic Information Systems, Department of Accounting, Banking & Financial System, London Metropolitan University, United Kingdom; William H. Gray, Professor, Department of Community and Rural Sociology, Washington State University, USA (visit IRFD website: <http://www.irfd.org>)