

Chapter 7.16

From Information Society to Global Village of Wisdom? The Role of ICT in Realizing Social Justice in the Developing World

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is about the role of ICT in global justice. It will analyze, firstly, the epistemological relationship between new information, knowledge and wisdom. Secondly, it examines the ethical relationship between information technology and the values and ideals that are attached to its use and applications. Thirdly, the chapter studies theoretical and practical obstacles that have prevented the developing countries, particularly in Africa, from fully benefiting from the enormous possibilities provided by the new ICT in relation to realizing human capabilities, well-being and better standards of living and social justice. The analysis applies Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capability approach to the distribution and use of the ICT in global context. Finally the chapter examines how global and the local inequality is maintained

by the international information and technology markets, and how the distorted international markets as well as misguided local policies tend to create further division between "information rich" and "information poor."

INTRODUCTION

Globalization is the catchword of the day, and the worldwide requirement for more direct democracy, good governance and respect for human rights is at the core of the new millennium's development strategies. In order to fulfill these goals in global social, economic and political cooperation and development, access to information, knowledge and channels of reciprocal communication are of critical importance. Globalization of economy has been made possible and further expands through

the business applications of the Internet and other information and communication technologies. The latest information and communication technology (ICT), which can be used for fast creation, acquisition, storage, dissemination, retrieval, manipulation and transmission of information, could greatly help the marginalized, less affluent countries to benefit from the positive side of globalization and to help them promote local and global democracy and participate more efficiently in the global economy. ICT could provide us powerful means for sharing our global prosperity. However, presently the trends of economic globalization have not led to either to more equal local and global access either to ICT or to the information it transfers. Instead, the Information Age has led to what has come to be called the digital divide between the affluent and the poor, the connected and disconnected, the developed and less developed (Sarrocchio, 2002; Warschauer, 2003; Young, 2003).¹

Despite the fact that new telecommunication technology undeniably has advanced rapidly and more and more people around the globe have today direct access to it and to the information it conveys, there are still vast regions in the world which have either no access or very limited access to these new means of communication and information exchange. The limited access is due to various structural, distributive, economic and political problems that have prevented the equal spread of modern technology, as well as its efficient implementation across the world. Some of these obstacles can be overcome through better and fairly planned distributive and implementation policies. Many of these places without access to the latest ICT may, in fact, have very restricted means for even local, let alone global, connections through more traditional information channels such as mail, newspapers and books, telephone, television, and radio. On the other hand, in many parts of the third world even those affluent and materially well developed countries, which now have access to the ICT, have not succeeded in us-

ing new technology internally and internationally to consistently promote national benefit, human well-being and the common good. Instead the technology available and the information it provides are still mostly shared by elites, the already influential, affluent and educated sections of the population. The poor and illiterate, and those in acute need, tend to remain beyond the information reach; local, and particularly rural, development and quality of life gain very little from the new technology.

This chapter focuses on two interrelated issues: firstly, it analyzes the relationship between new information technology and the values and ideals that are attached to its use and application. In this context, this chapter will study the relationship between information, knowledge and power in relation to the ideals of the “knowledge society” and what could be called the “global village of wisdom.” It argues that in global ICT policies there is a need to pay more attention to the realization of human resources and well-being in the development, use and distribution of ICT. In the existing politico-philosophical frameworks, this would mean a shift from the neo-liberal market economy towards the promotion and realization of human capabilities as presented by the capability approach to human well-being constructed by Amartya Sen (1985, 1993, 2001) and Martha Nussbaum (1987, 1992, 1993).

Secondly, the chapter takes a look at the theoretical and practical obstacles that have prevented the developing countries, particularly in Africa, from fully benefiting from the enormous possibilities provided by the new ICT in relation to human capabilities and better standards of living. It will examine how the local and global digital divide between the information-rich and information-poor is created and maintained by international information and technology markets, as well as by political ambitions. Finally the chapter considers the role of culture and tradition in adoption, allocation and use of new technology.

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