The publication of a special issue on the politics of information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) is the culmination of a long journey. The idea came up when we discussed with colleagues in academia, and practitioners in the field, about what we perceived as the unintended consequences of ICT4D initiatives, and the often unspoken political dimensions of development.

There is consensus that these initiatives aim at bringing development to people in a vulnerable situation – generally, the poor living in the Global South. However, to view ICTD uncritically is to avoid large issues of who development is for. The continuum of views on development is broad. It goes from the traditional notion of material progress, rooted in the Enlightenment philosophy and realized by industrialism and capitalism, to the enrichment of individual capabilities to allow individuals to be the authors of their own lives within the social groups they belong to, as maintained by Sen (1999). That said, the traditional notion of material progress prevails in development discourse.

In this context, we recognize that the idea of development is inherently political as it juxtaposes privileged and deprived societies and ties them together in a relationship. Alas, the political issues surrounding ICT4D has not received enough attention in the literature. We believe this special issue contributes a more critical view of the process of ICT4D at both the macro and micro levels. In this issue, we have papers that address the politics of ICT4D at all levels.

We had a large number of submissions from different countries and disciplines. The three papers included in this special issue cover different geographical regions from India and South Africa to Peru and Zimbabwe. Each of them represents how the political aspects of ICT4D can be analyzed from different theoretical perspectives.

The first paper, by Braathen, Attwood, and May, addresses the politics of community telecenters in South Africa. It examines, at a micro level, the empowerment of individu-
als necessary for successful implementation of telecenters at the community level. It also considers the technical, social functionality of the telecenters, and considers the projects from the background of depoliticized international discourse that has accompanied ICT4D policies. Four telecenters in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, were studied over a two-year period using repeated visits of intensive fieldwork of participatory observation and interviews. The research finds that there were big differences between the telecenters in terms of empowerment. The article concludes by reflecting on the analytical-theoretical framework for power relations.

The second paper, by Scarf, analyzes the political value of ICT4D initiatives promoting the creation and exchange of local content in poor communities. While the generalized assumption is that ICT tools are the vehicles for reducing the information asymmetries between prosperous societies and disadvantaged communities, the author argues that the political value of ICT4D initiatives is limited if the focus is on the generation of local content while not addressing the question of demand. Scarf, whose work spanned three continents (a New Delhi slum in India, a farming community in Peru and a peri-urban farming area in Zimbabwe), concludes with a cautionary call against the overstated transformative potential of locally-produced-content led ICT4D initiatives.

The third paper in this issue, by Takavarasha Jr. and Makumbe, examines the obstacles a private telecommunications initiative faced in the context of a rather politically contaminated environment in Zimbabwe. The authors combine conceptual elements of Hobbes’ (1968) political theory with Sen’s (1999) capability approach for the analysis. The framework they propose allows for a more nuanced understanding of how the erosion of political freedoms does not only hold back telecommunication investments but also puts at risk the use of ICT tools.

We conclude the issue with an interview with Prof. Subhash Bhatnagar, who has worked extensively with the World Bank in development projects. He is also the founding chair of the International Federation for Information Procession (IFIP) Working Group 9.4 – Social Implications of Computers in Developing Countries. Prof. Bhatnagar has huge international standing in the field of development. The interview is remarkable – and controversial. Prof Bhatnagar is of the view that indeed, ICT4D is inherently political and that the best type of ICT4D is one based in communities, rather than what development agencies think a community might need. He also points out that literacy is still a major barrier when it comes to ICT4D – a reminder that ICT tools have no magical answer when it comes to issues of poverty and emancipation.

We have enjoyed putting this special issue together, and we thank the authors, reviewers and Dr. Celia Romm Livermore for offering us the opportunity to discuss the politics of ICT4D in this journal. We urge all our research colleagues to consider the inherently political nature of development, that is often ignored in a largely determinist status quo. We look forward to continuing the debate on the politics of ICT4D.

**REFERENCES**


