Chapter V

Social Structures for Access, Use, and Development

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the importance of social structures in enabling equitable access opportunities and useful applications of ICTs. It further argues for the importance of community involvement and organizational learning in designing ICT policy and projects with access and development-related objectives. Funders and policy makers have tended to overlook these and overemphasized technical dimensions of projects and accountability at the expense of social aspects and flexibility required to incorporate learning back into projects. After reviewing the literature, the chapter presents an example of a program in Uganda and a short project in Ghana which both used organizational partnerships and created strong community links to facilitate ICT-enabled development. This underscores the need for policy makers to create a climate in which not-for-profit organizations are able to create these kinds of partnerships and create meaningful community links.
Introduction

The importance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and equitable access to such technologies in promoting development is now widely accepted. ICTs are central to global social and economic transformations taking place within the global knowledge society. They are versatile tools that have implications for development because they allow for increased access to a wide variety of information and communication at low cost, once the infrastructure is in place. Yet the development of ICTs is mainly driven by the needs of those who are perceived as most profitable to serve, who live within a technically developed infrastructure, are well-educated, and speak English. Those who do not fit within these parameters may therefore face a range of social, cultural, economic, and technical barriers when attempting to use these technologies.

The types of development benefits that ICTs allow are varied and often tied to other trends in labor and politics. For example, ICTs have proven to be versatile organizing tools for politically marginalized groups (although this may not always be a socially desirable benefit since such groups include organized criminals); have improved communications and transmission of remittances between migrant workers and their families; have improved the flow and accessibility of health information, educational exchanges, improved access to government benefits, and market prices; and have opened access to international niche markets.

In this chapter, the term social structures refers broadly to the non-technical aspects of ICT access and includes institutional and organizational structures and the links of these to community structures and processes. The key arguments of this chapter are that social structure is important, community participation is important, and organizational learning is important. In order to succeed, ICT for development projects should both build up and build upon existing organizational structures and community linkages using participatory methods that allow for organizational learning. Two case studies, one based in Uganda and one in Ghana, serve to exemplify and illustrate these key points, teasing out some of the challenges and complexities typically encountered in implementation. Before presenting the case studies, the chapter reviews the literature to argue that demand side characteristics of access must be addressed if ICTs are going to be relevant to local development, especially amongst socially marginalized populations — and that this is essentially a social, rather than a technical, issue.
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