Chapter X
ICT as a Public Good: Community Building and Expanding U.S. Self-Sufficiency Policy

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ABSTRACT

The presence of information and communication technologies, in particular the Internet, has the potential to be leveraged to address some of society’s most persistent social challenges. This chapter, through the case study of Internet use at Camfield Estates, a low-income housing development in Boston, Massachusetts, argues that public policy should view information and communication technology access as a public good for community building and self-sufficiency. The chapter examines U.S. historical policy efforts to assist low-income individuals and families. It takes on the social–antisocial debate and effects of Internet use for community building. It also presents some of the findings from the Camfield Estates–MIT Creating Community Connections Project and analyzes its meaning for nearly 40 low-income families that were equipped with a personal computer and two years of high-speed Internet connectivity.

INTRODUCTION

Community development should be a much broader idea and have a more comprehensive agenda than any one class of institutions can manage (or lead) alone. (Ferguson & Dickens, 1999, p. 3)

The 21st century requires and demands that our technological advances such as information and communication technology (ICT) be leveraged to address some of life’s most persistent social challenges such as poverty, inadequate education, an under-prepared workforce, and low civic participation. U.S. policymakers have grappled for years, some would say unsuccessfully, with the challenge of assisting low-income individuals, families, and communities toward improving their socioeconomic condition. Many methods of urban and community development have been employed...
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with varying degrees of success. After more than 70 years of federal social programs from the New Deal of 1933 to the Personal Responsibility and Work Act of 1996, the consensus is that low-income individuals, families, and communities must do more for themselves. The Internet and other ICTs must be included in strategies to connect the most marginalized members of society to critical information, valuable and necessary resources, and useful social and political networks vital to making informed life decisions.

The time has come for policymakers to move on public policy that recognizes ICTs—in particular Internet access—like telephone access, as a public good.

A two-year study conducted in a low-income community in the city of Boston, Massachusetts, explored “Internet access as a public good” and other very timely issues. This chapter briefly examines the U.S. policy path that led to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, also known as welfare reform. Although it has been more than 10 years since the welfare reform of 1996 or public policy focused on self-sufficiency, it is clear in the 21st century that being self-sufficient has a new meaning. Additionally, this chapter briefly examines relevant literature and looks at knowledge-based and e-development in the context of contemporary self-sufficiency models. Furthermore, this chapter also engages the social—antisocial debate in relation to community development. This chapter also presents findings and analysis from the Camfield Estates–MIT Creating Community Connections Project to support the argument that making low-income individuals, families, and inner-city communities more self-sufficient must include in-home Internet access. Finally, the residents of Camfield Estates, a low-income housing development in Boston, Massachusetts, were equipped with personal computers and high-speed Internet access. One of the many goals of the study was to observe if in-home ICT or personal computing and Internet access can contribute to low-income families’ ability to become more self-sufficient. The findings showed promise and why U.S. and other policymakers should give strong consideration to information access via ICTs or the Internet as a public good, specifically in regard to low-income and underserved individuals, families, and communities.

BACKGROUND

ICT is generally conceptualized in broad terms regionally, statewide, or even with regard to local governments. The parameters of its role on the interpersonal level seem to change as the times change and meaning of social capital gets redefined. Very little effort or policy is devoted to understanding ICT’s role in addressing persistent social problems on the most personal level. Much of ICT’s role, particularly urban ICT, focuses on supporting pre-existing public service processes—how to make government efficient and effective. The questions burgeoning their way to the fore are: How is ICT improving citizens’ ability to be better contributing members of society? Is there a need for policymakers to change their focus on how to make low-income and disadvantaged individuals and families more self-sufficient? Also, is ICT use in particular increasing or decreasing the strength of society’s social fabric?

U.S. Policymakers’ Path to Self-Sufficiency as a Solution

The U.S. federal government’s historical approach taken to assist low-income communities and America’s urban areas has been defined by policy. Based on my analysis these efforts were an attempt to maintain continuity in the midst of constant change. Unfortunately, it would appear that maintaining that continuity was more theoretical than actual. History tells us that community development efforts have a sordid past
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