

# Introduction

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The contrast between the countries covered by the 22 reports included here is striking. No fewer than four regions are represented: Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, with one report from a Western European country. The countries are diverse linguistically (only six have English as an official language; five of these reports were translated from Spanish, and one from Portuguese), geographically (Brazil's gargantuan 8.5 million square km compared to Bosnia Herzegovina's 51,000 square km) and demographically (Pakistan's population of 160 million versus South Africa's 47 million). While countries like India can boast a rapidly developing information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, post-war countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) or Bosnia and Herzegovina begin from a very low infrastructural base. As OneWorld South East Europe (Bosnia and Herzegovina) says, this "[affects] ordinary life."

But these reports show that despite these differences, when it comes to ICTs for development, there are some striking similarities between the countries. Most immediately, and putting Spain aside, they are "developing" countries, each showing obvious evidence of the "digital divide" which impacts on the majority of the people negatively. In India only parts of the country are benefiting from the perhaps unprecedented growth in the country's ICT sector. And, as RITS puts it, the absence of a people-orientated policy framework in Brazil runs the risk of "condemn[ing]" the vast majority of people to "eternal disconnection."

What all of these countries also have in common is their rapid emergence into a global information society that is driven by myriad, interconnected, and often competing factors. As Alternatives (DRC) shows, even war-ravaged countries are potential markets for multinational corporations. Brazil, among other Latin American countries, suggests that markets that are opened up to international competition (the "policy factor") are not necessarily acting in the best interests of the country. Liberalisation, some of these reports contend, can come at a cost; it is not simply a *prima facie* good.

The reports suggest several other commonalities between the countries represented here that can perhaps be taken as typical of the ICT policy-development environment in many developing countries.

## The lack of a clear ICT vision

Many of the countries lack a clear ICT vision for their future. This can play havoc with any attempt to forge a cogent approach to infrastructural development (such as building a broadband backbone in a country) or developing a coherent regulatory framework to govern markets effectively.

The absence of a clear vision impacts immediately on ICT issues that are often perceived as the "soft" ICT issues – such as language, gender, local content, citizens' rights, and support for differently abled people. These are issues that are, as Pangea (Spain) suggests, "difficult to measure," but that should form an integral part of any long-

term ICT strategy in a country right from the start. For RITS, this does not happen by accident, but begins with accepting that "public policy expenditures in leveraging ICTs for human development are not costs, but *essential investments*."

## A lack of capacity, skills and awareness in government and civil society

One contributing factor to this lack of vision is a lack of institutional capacity in a country (whether in civil society, the government or even the private sector). While Nodo TAU (Argentina) finds that civil society organisations have far greater awareness and know-how and a more sophisticated perspective on ICTs than the government, they lack the coordination necessary to have a meaningful impact on policy development. For Bytes for All, Pakistan shows a "serious lack of capacity" in a range of fields that needs to be attended to in order to impact on inequalities in access to ICTs. Alternatives found that the recent (mis)management of ICANN requirements in the DRC shows a clear lack of capacity in the government and the national operator to cope effectively with important national ICT resources.

For some countries, such as South Africa, civil society participation in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was erratic, often attributed to a lack of awareness among social advocates of the importance of ICTs, and the ICT policy environment, to their work. WOUNET found that although the political will existed in Uganda, there is also a lack of awareness of the advantages of ICTs, coupled with a low level of skills. With the lack of skills, awareness and capacity, the ability to act is hamstrung.

## An unsettled legislative and regulatory environment

The lack of a coherent ICT vision for a country inevitably means a haphazard ICT policy environment. The reports show that the development of the legislative and policy environment can be steadied by regional agreements. While some suggest that the WSIS acted as a catalyst for a fresh interest in ICT policy development at the national level (and spurred new interest from civil society), other regional agreements, such as the Regional Action Plan for an Information Society in Latin America and the Caribbean (eLAC2007), have also had a positive impact on policy development.

However, the impact of these regional processes depends on the level of buy-in from affected countries. While there is a sense that some of the binding force behind the WSIS was the "moral" momentum behind the Summit (governments that were not part of it joined the process, those that did not initially include civil society came to recognise the value in a multi-stakeholder approach, etc.), it can also be said that a regional plan such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) *lacks* the comparable presence to guide and direct ICT development in Africa. Certainly, in countries like Uganda, civil society actors appear to have rallied behind the WSIS Action Plan, and not behind NEPAD's vision for ICT roll-out.

Conversely, for Romania, Croatia and Bulgaria, EU accession requirements have been significantly more important than any commitments made at the WSIS.

A policy vacuum means fragmented implementation. Despite the burgeoning ICT sector in the country, India has no independent agency to address all areas of ICT policy. In Colombia there is little cooperation between the ICT programmes in government departments, despite attempts by the government to synergise its implementation efforts. The Kenyan government has lacked political will and leadership in the past, a status quo reflected in the absence of a national ICT policy (until recently) and in the ineffective coordination between government departments.

When a policy framework has been developed, it often lacks a developmental perspective. Colombia, for instance, lacks a telecommunications law that ensures access to the information society for all citizens. Ecuador's *White Paper on the Information Society* holds great hope for civil society activists in that country. It has been, according to the Association for Progressive Communications' LAC Policy Monitor, developed in an inclusive, democratic and transparent way, reflecting the diverse approaches in the different sectors in that country. Despite this, a "common strategic development perspective" is still lacking, as are mechanisms to ensure that engagement happens under "equal conditions."

For LaNeta, ICT policies in Mexico offer a leg up for business – and even help to strengthen monopolies – at the expense of the needs of the country's citizens. Instead of a people-centred approach, the state "auctioned off the nation's wealth without taking communities into account."

Brazil's privatisation process did not take into account global shifts in the ICT landscape, and may have increased monopolistic practices in the country. Even ICTs directly related to national security are dependent on commercial satellite connections operated by multinationals.

These reports suggest that achieving universal access is a deliberate step that needs to be taken: it can rarely be left to market forces alone. According to IT for Change, the ICT industry in India has not improved the poor distribution of ICT resources across different social and linguistic groups, geographic regions and classes. The failure to develop policy which responds to these concerns has resulted in a situation where some enjoy "first-world" ICT services, while most "subsist" with little or no ICT access to speak of. Access for women and differently abled people remains a problem.

The reports show that a change in government, while providing an advocacy opportunity for some, can often contribute to a fragmented policy space. ZaMirNet (Croatia) puts it bluntly: "National strategies are not well coordinated and strategic documents often get tossed in the garbage bin with a change of government."

Developing and sustaining a clear people-focused vision is not always easy. While South Africa has a history of vibrant civil society engagement in politics and social development, it is frequently chided for its lack of policy coherence. As the Link Centre suggests, the closest it comes to an overall national ICT policy framework is a now ten-year-old document, the 1996 *White Paper on Telecommunications Policy*.

### **An immature relationship between civil society, business and the state**

Pangea notes that a necessary condition for citizens to feel a part of the "construction" of the information society is their "participation as subjects" and not "merely as objects of development measures." The irony of launching an e-government initiative in order to bring the people closer to the administration of the day, while not creating

mechanisms for proper civil society (or private sector) participation in policy development or infrastructural roll-out, should not be lost.

While KICTANet (Kenya) shows an active and constructive relationship between government, civil society and the private sector is possible, in many instances the relationship is imbalanced, or immature. In both Romania and India, the lack of civil society participation means that a technocratic or industry-driven policy perspective prevails. This comes at a price. StrawberryNet (Romania) has found that issues such as gender rights and free and open source software (FOSS) are absent from public discourse on ICTs. And as ZaMirNet has found: "Most citizens are reduced to mere consumers of telecommunication services."

Colnodo (Colombia) suggests that a fragmented strategic vision for ICTs, which leads to a "disconnect" between government departments, makes civil society engagement with the state difficult. At the same time, transparency is lacking in a post-conflict country such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although it participated in the WSIS, the outcomes remained "invisible" to the general population.

While the LAC Policy Monitor feels that the WSIS has played a significant role in convincing the government in Ecuador of the potential of multi-stakeholder participation in the policy environment, this has not been true for all countries. Civil society and private sector participation was absent in Pakistan's participation in the WSIS, and the results show: the country is described as a "graveyard of many failed and unsuccessful projects" which the government "seems committed to implementing...on its own."

ArabDev says Egypt lacks public consultation forums and mechanisms that ensure public participation in ICT policy development. Ways to contest regulatory decisions are unclear. While "important spaces" have been opened up in Peru, these have yet to become inclusive, and continue to relegate citizens to the role of "spectators and not protagonists." Nigeria is described as "deprived...of much-needed robust consultation and discussions." Only recently has civil society begun to make its presence felt.

Alternative civil society spaces are being formed out of necessity. In Bangladesh, "CSOs are networking and re-grouping among themselves to project a single voice to the decision-makers." In Brazil it is rare for civil society to be invited to participate in policy processes. However, its National Digital Inclusion Workshop, held annually since 2002, is a forum where "human-centred" ICT policy can be articulated.

### **The responsibility of civil society**

"We cannot content ourselves with the limitations of underdeveloped countries," writes RITS. "While we have different levels of resources available to us compared to developed countries, our ability to do much better is indisputable."

Civil society, as the Foundation for Media Alternatives (FMA, Philippines) reminds us, is opportunistic in the best sense of the word. The WSIS has impacted positively on that country's policy "ecosystem", and civil society organisations "took advantage" of the Summit's processes, "advancing multi-stakeholder approaches locally."

These reports show that key areas of concern for civil society include FOSS and open standards, gender issues, rural access, intellectual property, localisation, local content, and community access to ICTs and media, among others. Each of these requires specific knowledge, expertise and strategies for engagement, often with regional implications. Experiences in Argentina and Kenya, among other countries, show that civil society needs clear goals and specific strategies to impact on the policy process and, as Nodo TAU puts it, to "promote breakthrough legislation."

Even when this breakthrough legislation is achieved, Colnodo finds that important issues, such as promoting a gender perspective, remain elusive. Colombia's three ICT programmes do not have affirmative action policies that favour vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, the elderly or the country's ethnic populations. These are specific areas of intervention for civil society.

The LAC Policy Monitor feels that civil society can take on a regional monitoring role, while improving its capacity for direct engagement. It needs to advocate for policies independent of the government of the day. These policies, as RITS puts it, should be "future proof".

TIC.pe (Peru) poses several questions for non-governmental actors: What, it asks, is our responsibility? And how can we move from reflection to direct action? The information society is a global resource. It calls for a "deepening political dialogue" so that it can be safeguarded for future generations.

### **A tool for leveraging change**

The 22 contributors to this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISW) report were encouraged to develop their reports in line with their own advocacy work. While they were given guidelines, their approaches were often different. Bytes for All (Bangladesh), for exam-

ple, has created a "living and collaborative document", even publishing it as a wiki. IT for Change interviewed key civil society stakeholders in order to offer a civil society "voice". Pangea has elected to interrogate the WSIS stocktaking database, and to ask: Does it say anything useful? For the FMA, its report reflects the perspective of "advocates-in-action".

For some contributors this was the first opportunity they have had to develop an overview of the ICT environment in their country – and to articulate ways in which civil society can engage this environment. The process of writing the report opened new vistas for them. For others, ICT policy advocacy has formed the mainstay of their civil society activism.

Most contributions were informed by the awareness that the GISW report will be an annual publication. Future reports will build on and clarify what has been developed here.

These reports occur in the wake of important global processes such as the WSIS, and the advent of others, such as the Internet Governance Forum. We hope that they offer a perspective that many working in the local, regional and global ICT policy arenas can begin to call home, a way of deepening understanding and a tool for leveraging change. ■