

CONCEPT NOTE

ICT4D IN ASIA: THE WAY FORWARD

Background/ Rationale

As the international development assistance community marks the midpoint of the Millennium Development Goals timeframe, critical questions are being raised on the impact of information and communication technology for development. The correlation between ICT infrastructure and the Gini coefficients/ poverty indices in many Asian countries has been established early on at the macro level (Flor, 2001). Furthermore, anecdotal evidence on the successes of ICT4D at the project level abound. However, two questions have yet to be answered satisfactorily: “Has ICT4D contributed significantly to poverty alleviation?” “What has been the overall impact of ICT4D in agriculture, in education, in health, in governance, in natural resources management?”

Since the 2000 Okinawa Summit of G8 nations, ICT4D has been associated with the social promise of poverty alleviation. Since then, however, many remain unconvinced that it can bring about large-scale societal impacts on poverty and the development process. For instance, there is now a marked hesitance from among key players within regional financial institutions to invest in ICT4D loan projects in Asia, particularly those that are non-infrastructure related. The return on investments of ICT4D projects is being questioned. For instance, in a recently concluded ICT4D conference, a joint secretary in the Indian Ministry of Panchayati Raj likened survey evidence of telecentre contributions to economic development to that of survey evidence of the number of tigers in India, (i.e. conclusions are based on sightings of tigers’ paw marks rather than the sightings of tigers). In the same conference, a member of a keynote panel diplomatically stated that “the impact of ICT on development has not been very clear.”

These indictments may have been brought about by three factors: unsound assumptions and, thus, unrealistic expectations on ICT4D; the lack of solid evidence and limited use of the evidence-based approach (EBA) or results-based management (RBM) approach in ICT4D undertakings; and the use of defective models of ICT4D.

ICT4D proponents passionately argue that evidence of positive developmental changes are observable on the ground. Clearly, however, there is a need for soul searching among ICT4D practitioners. There is a need to revisit the basic assumptions and foundations of the ICT4D discourse and to chart its future course, particularly in Asia, where the evidence issue is particularly relevant. Midpoint towards the MDGs, there is a need to draft a “way-forward” paper for ICT4D in Asia.

Research Questions

The “way forward” paper will be based on a research study that will attempt to answer the following questions:

- How did the ICT4D discourse evolve and where is it heading?
- What are the current assumptions and perspectives of the international development assistance community on ICT4D?
- How can ICT4D best be situated within the regional development assistance agenda: as a discipline; as a sector; and/or as a theme? What are its implications?
- What are the observable economic and social impacts of ICT4D in Asia?
- What are the technological, economic and social trends in Asia that would influence ICT4D?

- What adjustments and modifications are required in ICT4D models, strategic thrusts and programs in Asia?

Objectives

This research study will have the following objectives:

- To deconstruct the ICT4D discourse including its basic assumptions and foundations
- To reconstruct ICT4D models and strategies
- To enumerate the key and critical issues on ICT4D in Asia, relate these to the global ICT4D discourse and recommend options to address these issues
- To establish technological and social trends that may influence ongoing and future ICT4D strategic thrusts in Asia
- To propose a strategic framework for ICT4D in Asia

Methodology

Design

The research study will adopt a two-pronged design: discourse analysis; and trends analysis. It shall utilize both retrospective and anticipatory approaches, both qualitative and quantitative data.

Methods

The following methods will be employed: documents analysis; secondary data (inclusive of costs, ROIs, survey data, etc); key informant interviews; and the Delphi Technique with ICT4D experts representing different institutions in Asia as participants.

Deliverables:

The deliverables will be:

1. The researcher's workplan to be submitted two weeks after contract signing.
2. A Midterm Progress Report.
3. A draft "Way Forward Paper" containing the following sections:
 - 3.1. Introduction
 - 3.1.1. Background and Rationale
 - 3.1.2. Statement of the Problem/ Objectives
 - 3.1.3. Methodology
 - 3.2. Deconstructing the ICT4D Discourse
 - 3.2.1. Historical Background, Assumptions and Premises
 - 3.2.2. Limitations in the Discourse
 - 3.3. Reconstructing ICT4D
 - 3.3.1. Observable Impacts
 - 3.3.2. Situating ICT4D in the Development Assistance Agenda
 - 3.3.3. Technological, Economic and Social Trends
 - 3.4. Conclusion: A Strategic Framework for ICT4D in Asia
- 3 A final "Way Forward Paper"

Study period

Six months (October 2008 to March 2009)