



Commentary on “Equitable access: People, networks and capabilities”

by David Souter

Steve Buckley, June 2008¹

¹ This is a commentary on the issue paper *Equitable access: People, networks and capabilities*, by David Souter. It is part of a series on equitable access to ICT infrastructure commissioned by APC for an event on equitable access which took place in Rio de Janeiro in November 2007. The papers and commentaries can be found at: www.apc.org/en/pubs/research

Much is promised by new information and communications technologies (ICTs) – improved knowledge for health and education, easier access to public and corporate services and information, strengthened democracy, citizen participation in political decision-making, better functioning markets, global trade and exchange, up to the minute news, and so on.

At the same time, there is long-standing recognition that new ICTs are by no means accessible to all. The danger of exclusion and inequitable access has been called the "digital divide" by those who have framed this debate in terms of telecommunications and the internet.² In reality the digital divide is a symptom of a wider "communications divide" that characterises the unequal access of people living in poverty to the means and the freedoms of expression and access to information. In societies in which wealth is generated from knowledge and information, the communications divide reinforces social and economic inequality.

People living in poverty face multiple barriers to communication that are directly associated with the conditions in which they live.³ These barriers reduce their ability to make informed choices, to draw attention to their needs and concerns, to participate in political life, and to mobilise for improvements in their conditions. They include social barriers such as discrimination in access to services, lack of education and illiteracy, and lack of provision in appropriate languages. They include lack of basic infrastructure such as electricity, transport and telecommunications. They include lack of will of states and corporations to listen to poor and marginalised groups, as well as direct forms of repression, censorship and restrictions on access to information.

The challenge in addressing equitable access to ICTs is to consider what strategies are most likely to lead to improvements in the communication capabilities of those people most at risk of social and economic exclusion. The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) issue paper *Equitable Access: People, networks and capabilities* criticises the supply-side focus of most current policy interventions. It suggests a change of emphasis so as to start with local community needs, and it argues for a more holistic approach, including attention to the demand side and taking into account affordability, relevance and ease of use.

While the paper includes some pointers to a more innovative approach – network building from the bottom up; integrated strategies for communications, energy, water and transport; local communications audits – in other respects, evident in references to "e-readiness" assessments and connecting the "last mile" (first mile?), it struggles to escape from the conventional paradigm of top-down development and trickle-down economics. This is perhaps because the paper does not really resolve to what end it is that equitable access should be really directed – the ICT tools or the communication capabilities? On the demand side the main strategy offered is to build users' skills and capacity to use new ICT tools.

² See, for example: US Chamber of Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration (1999) *Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide*.

³ Bellagio Symposium on Media, Freedom and Poverty, Panos London, October 2003.

In the conventional paradigm the solution to the “digital divide” is simple. It is just a matter of rolling out the network infrastructure so that everyone in the world can have access to the internet. This vision is explicit in the G8 Okinawa Charter on the Global Information Society adopted in July 2000, when the G8 set up a (now defunct) Digital Opportunities Task Force with the objective: "To promote international co-operation with a view to fostering policy, regulatory and network readiness; improving connectivity, increasing access and lowering cost; building human capacity; and encouraging participation in global e-commerce networks."⁴

Drafted at the peak of the dot-com boom, the G8 vision carried a political-economic perspective that gave priority to building the infrastructure and the consumer base for global e-commerce over the public interest in communications for development. Since then, following the dot-com bust, and in the context of the rapid worldwide growth of mobile telephony networks, there has been more sober reflection on the relevance of strategies to achieve universal access to the internet. Charles Kenny, an economist with the World Bank, has estimated that the worldwide subsidy needed for everyone living on USD 1 a day to get one hour of internet access a week might reach USD 75 billion – more than the global total of aid flows each year.⁵ Others have suggested that the outpacing of internet growth by the mobile phone resonates with a natural human preference for oral and immediate communication capabilities.⁶

While people living in poverty face a formidable array of barriers that restrict their capability to communicate, two measures of access to technology stand in particularly sharp contrast. One is the rapid growth in mobile telephony. The other is the static, if not reducing, worldwide level of per capita access to electricity.

According to a report by Portio Research, global mobile phone penetration will this year pass the 50% mark and is set to reach 75% by 2011.⁷ In contrast, according to the Global Network on Energy for Sustainable Development,⁸ about 1.6 billion people worldwide lack access to electricity and about 2.5 billion rely on traditional fuels as their primary sources of energy. Over the last twenty years the rate of increase in electricity supply has barely kept pace with population growth and it is today further squeezed by the rising price of fossil fuels. Hundreds of millions of people, mainly women and girls, spend much of their waking lives gathering

⁴ Okinawa Charter on the Global Information Society, Group of Eight, Okinawa, July 2000.

⁵ Kenny, C. (2003) Development's False Divide. *Foreign Policy*, January-February 2003.

⁶ Nyíri, K. (2006) The mobile telephone as a return to unalienated communication. *Knowledge, Technology and Policy* 19 (1). Springer Netherlands.

⁷ Portio Research (2007) The next billion: strategies for driving growth and making profits in low ARPU markets. Cited in *The Register*, 26 October 2007.

⁸ Global Network on Energy for Sustainable Development (2007) Reaching the Millennium Development Goals and Beyond: Access to modern forms of energy as a prerequisite.

firewood and carrying water to meet their basic household needs. They have little time left for education or for more productive work. What strategies there for equitable access?

For poor people, especially those in rural communities, the most widespread and accessible ICTs remain the traditional media, particularly radio – an oral medium, low cost and receivable by 90% of the world's population. Among the most effective means to increase the communication capabilities of people living in poverty may be to focus on those policies and investments that improve and support community access to local facilities for radio production and broadcast. In this "bottom-up" scenario, the internet perhaps functions best as a second-tier technology, enabling communities to link up, share and exchange – essentially a business-to-business model or a network extension tool – while the mobile phone is an intermediate device used by individuals and businesses or institutions.

Scenarios such as this would suggest a multi-layered approach in which communications infrastructure is widely defined to include local content production and broadcast facilities, as well as telecommunications networks, mobile phone and internet services. Policy, legal, regulatory and investment arrangements, driven by the public interest, would include a diversity of strategies including measures to ensure a plurality and diversity of broadcasting services; incentives and support for a variety of public-service content; fair and equitable access to radio spectrum by different users, including civil society groups; and requirements or incentives to assure universal and affordable access to telecommunications.

The issue paper hints at such an approach, while falling short of articulating either the real political interests at stake or some of the possible ways to advance our understanding. What is apparent, in its somewhat ambivalent consideration of strategies beyond the conventional ICT paradigm, is that the debate on equitable access to information and communication has not yet been developed with the level of seriousness that characterises other areas of critical infrastructure – such as water, energy and transportation.

Debate on equitable access is very much alive in these areas too, but it differs in having already gone through several generations of development thinking. From the 1940s through the 1960s, for example, the building of large dams was very much central to development strategies both for water management and hydroelectric energy supply. In the 1960s and 1970s such strategies came up against a trenchant critique of both their efficiency and effectiveness, particularly when cost-benefit analysis began to take into account the social, environmental and economic damage that such large schemes generate. This led to a much greater emphasis in recent years on bottom-up and community-level approaches to water management, such as well-building, rainwater harvesting and small, localised storage facilities.⁹

⁹ See, for example: United Nations Environment Programme (2007) *Dams and Development: Relevant practices for improved decision-making*.

There are many parallels between the dams versus wells debate, similar controversies in the energy sector, and the strategic choices that are hinted at in the paper on information and communications infrastructure. A comparative analysis could well illuminate the debate on equitable access to ICT infrastructure, particularly if it were to assist in exposing the development assumptions that underpin both the conventional ICT paradigm and its alternatives.