



Policy brief

Photo: Rasmus Näsberg, Karolinska University Hospital

Digital Inclusion A Swedish Post-2015 ICT4D Agenda

Information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) plays a critical role in the post-2015 global development agenda.

ICT has now become a critical tool for development, and conversely, the lack of ICT has become a barrier to full inclusion in the global network society. ICT is an enabler for rights-based development, as well as a hindrance. This is why digital inclusion needs to be firmly embedded in the post-2015 agenda, to ensure that all societies and all peoples stand to benefit from ICT. ICT4D is not about the potential of technology, but about the realities of technology-induced social change. ICT4D is about social development in the 21st century.

We remind decision makers in Sweden and around the world of their global commitments as declared during the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005.

"We, the representatives of the peoples of the world...declare our common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society"
(Geneva Declaration of Principles at WSIS 2003)

Sweden a global pioneer in ICT4D

We recognize that Sweden was among the first donor countries to grasp the value of ICT4D, supporting initiatives as early as 1995, mostly through partnerships funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). Swedish support has ranged from Internet access at universities to localization of open source software, Internet supported teacher training, and innovative health applications. The development impact of these initiatives is still paying off in many countries around the world.

We appreciate that Sida has supported The Swedish Program for ICT in Developing Regions (Spider), a resource base for ICT4D since 2004. Over time, Spider has become an internationally recognized ICT4D broker, serving as a node in a network of actors from academia, business, civil society and government. Spider is a unique organization internationally and a testimony to Sweden's commitment to ICT4D.

We hope that Sweden will continue to play a leading role in the global development community by integrating ICT4D in the post-2015 agenda, thus building on past achievements and best practices.

Bridging research and practice

ICT4D is a growing field in development practice, with strong roots in academia. ICT4D includes a variety of technologies, the most significant being the Internet, the engine of globalization. With the remarkable growth in mobile technology, Internet is now becoming more accessible around the world, but significant gaps still remain to be overcome. The Internet was born in universities, in the spirit of knowledge sharing, openness, and collaboration that distinguishes academic practice. This ethos continues to inspire some of the most dynamic technological developments, including Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) and Web 2.0, as well as broader social developments like open access and creative commons.

Researchers should play a more active role in ICT4D. One of the many advantages of academic expertise is that it offers scientifically validated knowledge on what works or does not work, thus contributing to evidence-based rather than politically motivated development. Another bonus is that scholars are not pushing commercial agendas, but can offer technological solutions based on user needs rather than market desires.

Master students from the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) in Sweden have built smart, low-cost broadband solutions in East Africa for many years, as part of their university studies. KTH is now up-scaling this cost-effective approach into an international platform, the Technology Transfer Alliance (TTA). <http://ttaportal.org/>

So far, ICT4D has been dominated by techies, but there is a dire need for interdisciplinary collaboration and cross-breeding, not least with social science like anthropology, political science, and sociology, along with the arts and humanities. It is also time to recognize the many levels of ICT4D where researchers can contribute, from the formulation of national policies to monitoring and evaluation of local community projects.

Since the late 1990s, 52 PhD students from developing countries have conducted their doctoral studies in ICT in Sweden. Most of them now hold high positions in academia, government or business in their home countries, thus putting their advanced academic knowledge in ICT to practical use for development.

Researchers should ideally work with practitioners, to deepen the impact of ICT4D, while ensuring sustainability. No matter how expert they may be, scholars do not always appreciate the complexities of social reality, whether at community level or in the corridors of policy makers. Without social grounding, there is a risk that researchers focus on technological solutions that make for interesting research but have little bearing on the everyday challenges faced by the people who are supposed to benefit from them.

ICT4D and Post-2015 Global Development

When the MDGs were formulated in 2000, the Internet was still in its infancy and the mobile phone revolution had not yet taken off. Even so, the potential benefits of ICT were recognized, although in a rather limited fashion (MDG 8). Nowadays it is quite impossible to attempt development and poverty reduction without ICT. If anything, ICT has proven to be one of the most determinant factors of social and economic development, in rich as well as poor countries. Digitalization goes hand in hand with the dominant trends of globalization and urbanization. It also plays a key role in democratization. These processes are changing the world as we know it.

Openness and transparency are being strengthened by ICT, thus changing the premises of governance. Citizens are now using mobile phones to monitor public service delivery in local communities. Training in citizen journalism and online advocacy is empowering citizens to demand accountability from government, while social media and mobile phones offer innovative platforms for monitoring and reporting of human rights violations. Citizens and civic groups are being mobilized through ICT to engage in anti-corruption efforts and to voice their experiences and concerns. Indeed, Spider-supported projects and research offer plenty of evidence on the powerful impact of ICT, not least in the field of democracy and human rights

Experience shows that ICT plays a key role in strengthening the core of social development.

Democracy. ICT can enhance communication and the right to freedom of expression, as well as the right to seek, receive and impart information. ICT has the potential to increase citizen's participation in decision making processes, thus strengthening democratization.

Education. Education is one of the most fundamental building blocks for social change. ICT can support a number of vital functions including: educational administration and management, student access to quality education, professional development of teachers, and development of locally relevant content.

Health. Improved health and poverty reduction go hand in hand, since good health is a prerequisite for better living conditions. Smart combinations of ICT can be used to improve planning and delivery of health services, as well as awareness raising and preventive measures.

ICT4D building blocks

The basics of ICT4D must be in place if we are to harness the potential of ICT for social development.

ICT4D = infrastructure + capacity + content

Affordable broadband for all! There is no point in talking about ICT4D unless the basic infrastructure is in place. Broadband is the only democratic option for digital inclusion. Free and Open Source Software can help us reach this goal. And why not be smart and go for Green ICT, including green infrastructure for electric power.

Digital literacy! Capacity cannot be over emphasized. Love the techies! Nurture the geeks! But we also need to develop digital skills among all members of society. If not, we risk widening gaps between the elites and the rest. ICT is not a social equalizer, unless we make it so.

Content is king! If Africa's resources were measured in culture, it would be the richest continent in the world. But this wealth of digital heritage is still uncharted. Time to develop more local content, in different languages, and in user-friendly formats!

Stockholm, March 21, 2013

Recommendations

Broadband infrastructure and free and open source software (FOSS), powered by green technology

Digital literacy to ensure equitable access and use, while building ICT capacity at all levels as needed

Digital content that reflects and respects cultural diversity, while promoting creativity and innovation

Education and lifelong learning to build the social basis of the global network society

Multi-stakeholder collaboration to ensure suitability and sustainability of ICT-enhanced development

Openness in development and use of ICT, including open access, open resources, and open standards

Research and interdisciplinary knowledge sharing for evidence-based ICT4D interventions

Women and girls as key drivers of social change, empowered to take the lead in the global ICT4D agenda

Youth empowerment as a guiding principle for building an interconnected world for future generations



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