



New roads to development: Youth as the actor, ICT as the enabler

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A demographic analysis might be just enough to understand the significance of the global youth population in the developing world. If one defines youth as those who fall within the age range of 15 to 25 years (following United Nations statistical principles), there are 1.2 billion young people in the world and 724 million youth and children living on less than a \$2 a day, a significant number of whom are illiterate, unemployed and living with HIV/AIDS. This youth population is also a fast-growing group, especially in Africa and most countries of the Middle East. While in Asia, young people constitute over 61% of the world's youth population.²

Nevertheless, the global impact of the youth population goes far beyond its demographic significance. There are many studies explaining the sociological, psychological and biological fundamentals based on which the youth tends to be more proactive and flexible to changes. Such changes have impacts beyond youth and their peers, impacting entire communities where they live. In the past, however, youth used to live in isolation much like other age groups, making any external change less able to permeate their communities and sometime even permeate youth themselves.

Indeed, globalization and one of its most recognizable enablers, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), are gradually changing this rigid landscape. In this context, ICT is not only a tool, but a medium over which social, political and economic transformations occur. Transformations are now *global*, meaning that one change in one community resonates in another community, which initiates a process of simultaneous and continuous change. In this context, ICT is so powerful that we can observe a global dimension of analysis of social interactions, in which the medium ends up affecting and even providing meaning to the content. ICT is definitely an enabler of change.

From a cultural perspective, this phenomenon is usually studied within the so-called new *media culture*. Even though there are many theories on how media culture is socially created and reproduced, it is generally accepted that youth are one of its main producers and consumers and that ICT is one of its main enablers. As a result, the interaction between ICT and Youth provides a useful perspective on analyzing development processes as well as the concomitant changes produced in societies impacted by this new media culture. In effect, ICT is producing important changes at the community level as youth become more important agents of change - not just because they know how to use ICT or

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² "World Youth Report", UNDESA 2003

because they may learn faster than adults (which is the usual explanation), but also because they are (and they have always been) more adaptive to change. The difference, compared with previous generations, is that given the characteristics of the medium, such changes occur at much faster rates and with an often instantaneous global reach.

The realities of the ICT and Youth dynamic have come to the attention of the international community, who recognize the incredible potential for development, that understanding these dynamics may foster. The Global Forum on Youth and ICT for Development (properly titled "Youth and ICT as agents of change") to be held in Geneva from 24 to 26 September 2007, is one of the most current initiatives to highlight this issue. The Forum, jointly organized by the Global Alliance for ICT and Development (GAID) and the International Telecommunication Unit (ITU), has the objective to "*help in harnessing the creativity and dynamism that youth have in exploring and exploiting ICT for their own benefit and for the benefit of their peers and communities in advancement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*"³.

Even though one of the objectives of the forum is to engage youth in debates and discussions with their peers as well as different stakeholders (private sector, global policy makers, civil society actors and others), it also aims to bring the issue into the international community agenda. Sessions during the Forum will highlight the benefits of ICT as tool for development as well as empowerment among youth with the hopes of providing a framework for increased youth participation in the development processes that impact their communities.

In preparation for the Forum, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) held a preparatory event on 12 September to provide a clear understanding of the Forum's objectives and to provide youth and policy makers in New York with the opportunity to participate in an open discussion of the major themes to be covered in the upcoming Forum. The event was organized in collaboration with Intel Corporation, the GAID, TakingITGlobal, and ATHGO International. Participants, many of them youth, participated in a roundtable discussion on bringing youth into the international policy discussion as well as a panel on the four themes of the Global Forum: governance, entrepreneurship/employment, health and education. Each session involved the presentation of innovative case studies of youth utilizing ICT strategies in the field, as well as discussion with experts from the public and private sectors currently engaged with youth initiatives. The purpose was not only to tell successful stories, but also to identify challenges and potential for empowering youth through ICT. Outcomes from the event will be delivered directly to the Global Forum for follow-up by UNITAR and its partners.

All these efforts toward the preparation of the Global Forum, and the Global Forum itself, are built under the belief of a natural symbiosis between youth and ICT. However, things are not as straightforward as it seems to be. Most of the ICT considered structural in our new media culture have less than thirty years old in the developing world (some of them, such as Internet or the cell phone, probably less than ten). This should make us feel a little bit more cautious on judging the impact of ICT on youth in particular and on society in general.

For example, opinions are divided in regards to the role that ICT has in promoting youth participation in public life. While some researchers believe that ICT encourages youth involvement by providing a complete awareness of the global world, some others believe that the media culture just provides alien (i.e. western) messages that cannot be properly decoded and adapted to the needs of local communities, perpetuating existing inequalities into new forms of inequalities, such as the *digital divide*. In fact, the whole concept of youth differs from one country to the other, representing a challenge for the global media culture to come up with a homogenized representation of it.

In a similar sense, as youth are the ICT first-adopters, it creates a radical change in information flow. Before, information was assumed to flow from parents to youth, and eventually among youth

³ Global Forum on Youth and ICT for Development, One Page Note, <http://www.un-gaid.org/gfyouth>

themselves. However, as ICT becomes a more important tool for social and economic change, there is a reversal of the flow of learning which establishes a new dynamic in social and family relations. This, in turn, creates larger change within entire societies. Opinions on the nature of such changes are quite diverse. For example, some psychologists believe that the cell-phone constitutes an extended umbilical cord between youth and their parents (a constant *tele-presence*), while others argue that it diminishes the “productive” conflicts between adolescents and their parents said to help define a clear sense of self during adolescent development. In addition, existing institutions such as schools become affected as well. While the school is considered by some as a closed and unidirectional institution of limited knowledge, Internet offers unlimited information open to everyone and where information is not only translated into knowledge but also where knowledge is translated into information (bidirectional). This is creating contradictions not only in the education field, but also in the professional and the political fields, as society struggles with new information and learning frameworks inherent in a new media culture.

In sum, the new media culture affects social interactions in ways that we are just beginning to understand. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that there exists a potential benefit from fostering development by stimulating the interaction between youth and ICT. As it was said, both seem to be the most important engines of change in our society and, as a matter of fact, development is our contemporary definition of “positive *change*”. In this regards, initiatives such as the Global Forum on Youth and ICT for Development are essential as it places the topic in the international community agenda and promotes research, policy and practices on these interactions. However, we should not forget that this is a work-in-progress and more time and exposure to ICT (and the new media culture) is needed to understand the conditions and mechanisms under which ICT-led youth empowerment helps drive development.

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