

THE END OF DIVERSITY?

Knowledge, ICTs and the Development Gateway

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Abstract. An analysis of the World Bank's 'Knowledge for Development' indicates that this new development paradigm may adversely affect the validity and diversity of the knowledge needed for equitable and sustainable development. The deployment of knowledge management and ICTs, most notably through the implementation of the Development Gateway, is based on a narrow understanding of knowledge, often indistinguishable from 'information', and on the separation of knowledge, people, and power. The proposed alternative requires appropriate communication systems, knowledge creation in the South, and the cultivation of knowledge diversity through a focus on the knowers, the people who hold, use and create knowledge.

1. Knowledge for Development

"Knowledge is like light. Weightless and intangible, it can easily travel the world, enlightening the lives of people everywhere. Yet billions of people still live in the darkness of poverty – unnecessarily. Knowledge about how to treat such a simple ailment as diarrhoea has existed for centuries – but millions of children continue to die because their parents do not know how to save them." – World Bank (1999).

In its 1998/1999 World Development Report, the World Bank proposed "that we look at the problems of poverty in a new way – from the perspective of knowledge" (World Bank 1999:1). The report, entitled *Knowledge for Development*, framed poverty as a lack of knowledge, positioned its poverty alleviation objectives in an analysis of the knowledge economy, and introduced the development sector to a corporate approach to managing and sharing knowledge.

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The World Bank's new approach to development is based on the assumption that "[p]oor countries – and poor people – differ from rich ones not only because they have less capital but because they have less knowledge" (World Bank 1999:1). Thus, a lack of knowledge causes markets to collapse and children to die of diarrhoea (ibid). When poverty is the result of a lack of knowledge or the right kind of information, "knowledge *is* development" (ibid:19). In other words, development is the result of economic growth, which requires a solution to the problem of the lack of knowledge.

This focus on the role of knowledge in development processes is the result of new understandings about the relationship between economic growth and the application of knowledge. It assumes that knowledge is a neutral, manageable commodity that can be shared freely and easily, and that information and communication technologies (ICTs) can provide the appropriate tools for accessing, archiving, transferring and communicating information and knowledge. In this approach, the onus is on the timely transfer of knowledge from where it is available to where it is needed, hence a focus on the sharing and management of knowledge.

Knowledge for Development builds forth on corporate sector experiences in Knowledge Management (KM). The World Bank introduced this organisational management tool to the development sector after it had gained experience with KM internally. The World Bank's KM model has influenced the internal knowledge strategies of many bi- and multilateral organisations, aid agencies and large international NGOs² (King, 2000, McGrath, 2001) and has led to an explosive growth in information and knowledge projects (Ballantyne, 2001; King and McGrath, 2001). Now that KM has entered the implementation phase *within* organisations in the North, it has been introduced to organisations in the South as a tool to improve knowledge sharing *between* organisations, using the more politically correct term of 'knowledge sharing'. To this end, the Development Gateway has been introduced as the development sector's own 'corporate portal'.

1.1 KNOWLEDGE DIVERSITY

A narrow understanding of knowledge for development has led to an interchangeable use of the concepts of 'information' and 'knowledge' in the Knowledge for Development discourse and a disconnection between knowledge, people, and power. Knowledge is perceived in a similar manner as the

² Bellanet hosts two online discussions on this issue: Knowledge Management for International Development Organisations (see URL http://www.bellanet.org/km/index.cfm?fuseaction=about_discussion) and Knowledge Sharing for International Development (see URL <http://www.bellanet.org/km/km3/index.cfm?fuseaction=community>).

development processes it informs: it is linear, measurable, instrumental, and absolute. It is based on the notion that poor people lack the right kind of knowledge, or that their information is imperfect, and that the 'right' kind of knowledge is available to all of us. Development has become the transfer of information and knowledge from places where it is available to where it is needed, with knowledge presented as a rootless commodity that can be bought from online educational institutions, shared in knowledge networks and gateways, and exclusively owned as intellectual property. In this approach, knowledge can be separated from the knowers, the people who hold knowledge, and become independent from the context in which it was created. ICTs can free knowledge from its locality, from its geographic position, and transfer it with just-in-time efficiency. This explains why new knowledge for development initiatives favour the exchange of transferable, explicit knowledge over knowledge with large tacit components, such as skills and indigenous knowledge³.

This understanding of knowledge as neutral and a commodity has serious consequences for the diversity of knowledge, in particular for indigenous knowledge. It is within this line of thinking that "the race to claim knowledge" takes place (UNDP, 1999). The resulting patent laws ignore indigenous knowledge rights and biodiversity and "[c]enturies of collective innovation by farmers and peasants are being hijacked as corporations claim intellectual-property rights on seeds and plants" (Gari, n.d.; Shiva, 2000:9).⁴

Critics of the new knowledge-based development paradigm argue that this approach to development is a convenient vehicle to promote a neo-liberal agenda (Coraggio; 2001; Goldman, n.d.; Mehta, 2001; Wilkes, 2001). These critics argue that neutral knowledge does not exist. As shown by Foucault (1972), knowledge accepted in society is the result of a negotiation of the intertwined relationships embedded in power and knowledge. Therefore, the new development paradigm is likely to be shaped by the institutions and experts positioned to exert the greatest influence and control. It is their knowledge and their understanding of the role of knowledge in development that informs the new development discourse.

Nustad and Sending (2001) argue that it is the relationship between knowledge and policy-making that frames the Knowledge for Development debate. They perceive the "instrumentalisation of development knowledge" – understanding knowledge as a neutral tool - as the problem that is central to

³ Some argue that all knowledge is tacit: explicit knowledge is knowledge stripped of its unique voice and face and has therefore become information (Weinberger, 1998). According to Baumard (1999), tacit knowledge does not survive outside the knower and is often not adaptable to different situations, cultures, and social contexts. See also Brown and Duguid (2000).

⁴ This also explains the reluctance of some indigenous people to participate in public knowledge initiatives such as the Development Gateway (GDG, 2001e; UNDP, 2001).

failed development projects. Following Habermas (1971), they argue that development knowledge embeds the cognitive interests of policy-makers. Thus development knowledge is “causal knowledge, which identifies variables open to manipulation by the policy tools available to policy makers” (Nustad and Sending, 2001:45). In other words, policy makers tend to perceive knowledge and development as a-political and neutral processes.

McGrath (2001) argues that Knowledge for Development is based on a specific reading of corporate sector Knowledge Management rather than an understanding of knowledge as a “social construction of reality” (Berger and Luckman, 1966). Knowledge Management was developed for competitive organisations. It assumes a common vision and shared values in order to negotiate the knowledge-power relationship, it is based on ‘western’ concepts of efficiencies and rationality, and its function is to help an organisation to use knowledge to create a competitive advantage over other organisations. The development sector is not a multinational corporation with an agreed set of goals and strategies, but KM has been introduced to this sector with its corporate assumptions unchallenged (King, 2000; King and McGrath, 2001; van der Velden, 2002). King (2001) suggests that this misplaced focus is the result of development agencies regarding themselves as multinational organisations instead of organisations mandated to develop something other than themselves.

The knowledge assumptions underlying the new development paradigm seem inappropriate for sharing and creating knowledge among people and organisations in the diverse and politicised development sector. Knowledge is linked to power, and the acquisition, absorption, and communication of knowledge cannot be separated from its political and socio-economic contexts. While social theorists argue that all knowledge is situated, and as such is local knowledge, new initiatives such as the World Bank-initiated Development Gateway assume that knowledge can be freed from its location and context – with the use of ICTs - and in the process become global knowledge. The global Development Gateway is the most comprehensive initiative so far. Surrounded by its satellite Country Gateways, this portal proposes to become the global centre for Knowledge for Development among governments, the private sector, and civil society.

2. The Development Gateway

The global Development Gateway (GDG) is a portal website offering services and tools to access, share, and discuss development-related information and knowledge. The Gateway was initiated by the World Bank but has been governed

since July 2001 by the Development Gateway Foundation (DGF).⁵ The GDG is partnered to independent Country Gateways (CGs) that use the same software platform and approach as the global gateway. All developing countries will be able to apply for funding to establish national gateways. At the moment 18 country gateways are up and running and many more have received InfoDev⁶ grants to plan the establishment of a national gateway.

The GDG proposes to offer a wide variety of services tailored to the needs of its key constituencies, governments, private sector and civil society. The GDG's civil society engagement strategy (GDG, 2001c) mentions that a) civil society is a key audience and the one in greatest need of using Internet connectivity to promote development and combat poverty; and b) that civil society is expected to become the GDG's largest audience.

Content on the GDG website is divided over four main categories: *Exchange ideas and knowledge*; *Find development projects*; *Explore business opportunities*; and *Access country gateways*. The *Exchange ideas and knowledge* section is where the bulk of the gateway's content management takes place. 'Development knowledge' is organised in 'topics'. These are the areas where the GDG currently concentrates its knowledge-sharing efforts and where online community-building takes place (GDG, 2002). Large amounts of documents, links, comments, messages, and discussions are processed within each topic area. One or more topic guides manage each topic page and serve as the representatives of the topic community. Guides are selected by the Gateway on the basis of their knowledge of the subject matter (GDG, 2001f). Their work is carried out in collaboration with content partners, an advisory panel, and members of the Gateway Editorial Team.⁷

Each topic is framed by three to six statements or questions and the management of the topic's content is a combination of actively identifying "the best available" information and knowledge resources, initiating and facilitating discussions, and highlighting quality resources or significant developments (GDG, 2001f). The user community can submit resources to the topic area. The

⁵ The Foundation has entered into a technical services contract with the World Bank Group to enable the latter to continue to provide services associated with the Development Gateway portal (DGF, 2002).

⁶ InfoDev is a global grant program managed by the World Bank to promote innovative projects on the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for economic and social development, with a special emphasis on the needs of the poor in developing countries. By the end of October 2001, infoDev had received 84 proposals from 54 countries and 37 proposals were awarded Country Gateway Planning Grants. There are currently fifteen countries that have completed their planning phase and seven of them are receiving Country Gateway Implementation Grants (InfoDev, 2002).

⁷ On February 6, 2002, of the 23 'topic guides', 13 were employed by the World Bank and 3 were working for organizations linked to the World Bank (e.g. Infodev). See URL <http://www.developmentgateway.org/all-topics> [Accessed 6 Feb., 2002]

topic guide will choose the best of the submissions for the main listing, and the remainder will be available through an archiving process.

The editorial policy of the GDG is implemented by an editorial team that will be selected by the members of the board⁸ of the Development Gateway Foundation (DGF, 2002). This committee will consist of six to eight members and its main responsibilities will be the development of guiding principles for content contributions and quality assurance for the portal. It will also ensure that the project is independent of any special influence, and that it serves all areas of the development community in an open, transparent, and effective manner (GDG, 2001f).

The current draft Editorial Policy (*ibid*) is based on the “deferred publishing” approach, that is, content submitted by users will be subjected to prior review by the topic guides who will judge the contributions on relevance, suitability, and the perceived needs of the GDG’s audience.

2.1. CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE DEVELOPMENT GATEWAY

Civil society’s information and knowledge needs were analysed by the World Bank on the basis of the Bank’s assumptions that the Internet was largely underused as a civil society tool to address development issues and that there was a need to increase the effectiveness of development assistance (GDG, 2001a). Consequently, the consultations with civil society organisations were based on a proposal for an Internet-based knowledge sharing system rather than a more general concept of facilitating knowledge sharing for development.

The World Bank commissioned several reports to assess the potential value of a global development gateway for civil society. Bellanet (2000) conducted a preliminary user demand survey of development professionals in several dozen development agencies, NGOs, and private sector development organisations in the North and South. Acceso (2000) assessed Internet needs among civil society organisations in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Central Europe. Civil society’s initial support for the initiative came with an extensive set of

⁸ The Development Gateway Foundation’s Board of Directors is representative of its public and major private donors and eminent persons in civil society, as well as representatives of developing countries. It is expected that each Founding Member of the Foundation’s Board of Directors or their organizations will contribute the equivalent of at least \$5 million, spread over the first three years. The World Bank has three seats on the Board -- James Wolfensohn (President, World Bank), Mamphela Ramphela (Managing Director, World Bank), and Mohamed Muhsin (Vice President and CIO, World Bank). Dr. Ramphela was elected President of the Foundation’s Board, and Mohamed Muhsin will serve as Treasurer during the first term. (DGF, 2002).

recommendations based on their information and knowledge needs. Several important recommendations have been incorporated in the GDG (GDG, 2001c):

- The use of open-source software such as the XML protocol
- The adoption of an institutional topic guide model
- The establishment of an independent Editorial Advisory Committee
- The establishment of an independent body, the Development Gateway Foundation, to govern the Gateway

In its Draft Business Plan, the GDG summarises civil society's information and knowledge for development needs as tools to access and organise "inaccessible, fragmented development knowledge of unknown quality" and to increase the "limited capacity to participate in development policy decisions and processes" (GDG, 2001a). It proposed to meet these needs with an array of solutions with a focus on access and exchange. A crucial issue was the value and reliability of the information and knowledge shared via the GDG. In response to this, the gatekeeper function was created, based on its editorial policy and implemented by the topic guides. Concerns about control and censorship soon arose. The GDG acknowledged that value and reliability of knowledge cannot be established on the basis of a universal truth and proposed instead to provide a high level of transparency, community building, and other measures to enhance trust.

Even though the GDG addressed some key civil society concerns, criticism grew during Phase I of the implementation of the project. The proposed Civil Society Interim Steering Committee, a proposal of CSOs to represent civil society interests and to help formulate an appropriate strategy to implement the civil society components of the GDG, was never established (OneWorld, 2000a). A proposal for a distributed global gateway (see section 4.1 below) was rejected. The call for an independent GDG, i.e. truly independent of the Bank, national governments and big business, was ignored. And by July 2000 the Gateway was being built prior to consultation with Asian and African CSOs (GDG, 2001b).¹⁰

Although the World Bank and the GDG have dedicated considerable resources to consult civil society, this effort has not led to broad civil society support for the initiative. An unfortunate split has now become visible between CSOs supporting the Gateway – or at least giving it the benefit of the doubt - and

⁹ The Education Development Center conducted a seven-week discussion of the Development Gateway. The final report includes Development Gateway responses and proposals to address civil society concerns (EDC, 2001).

¹⁰ In the summer of 2000, CSOs requested a halt to the building of the Gateway because there was not yet a consultation process in place for Asia and Africa (Oneworld, 2000a). The Gateway was already midway through the second half of its 'Start-up Phase' when consultations started with Indigenous peoples leaders of the Caribbean and Latin America (GDG, 2001e).

CSOs boycotting the Gateway. In September 2000, more than 300 civil society representatives signed a letter addressed to World Bank President James Wolfensohn, expressing their concern with the Gateway (Bretton Woods Project, 2000). In July 2001, a group of knowledge workers - ICT/ISP providers, information networking and knowledge creating organisations, media organisations, researchers and academics - started another petition. This time the signatories did not lobby the GDG but pledged to “avoid any contact with the Bank's development gateway, and to push forward with their own diverse research and publication agendas, including independent internet schemes” (Voice of the Turtle, 2001).

3. Development Gateway: Strategy for Hegemony?

“I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about as freely as possible, but I refuse to be blown off my feet by any” – Gandhi (quoted in Shiva, 1997)

Organisations and individuals critical of the Development Gateway have questioned the validity of the basic assumptions of the GDG, its governance structure, its large-scale, centralised model, its gatekeeper aspects, the partnerships it offers, and the hegemonic potential of Knowledge for Development. In consultation meetings they have made clear that they seek a partnership based on shared power and ownership as well as clear criteria for representation and participatory governance in the GDG's and CGs' boards and committees (Acceso, 2000; Bretton Woods Project, 2000; Development Gateway, 2001b and 2001c; EDC, 2001; OneWorld, 2000a)¹¹. The GDG's governance structure and gatekeeper aspects sparked concerns about control and censorship. Civil society expresses its information and knowledge sharing needs not only in terms of local and regional development concepts and needs (GDG, 2001b, 2001c; IDS, 2000; Yusef, 2000), but also in terms of critiques of obstacles to development. There is a need to discuss and highlight issues such as racism, neo-liberalism, conflict, gender inequity, and the World Bank itself (GDG, 2001b; Voice of the Turtle, 2001). The concern is that this will be especially problematic at the level of country gateways where issues of inclusion and representation are more directly connected with conflict and survival.¹²

¹¹ At the moment the GDG and the DGF do not have criteria to secure inclusiveness or participatory governance.

¹² This paper does not discuss in detail the country gateways but during research for this paper several questions arose, for example: Will China's gateway include dissident Tibetan voices? The West Bank and Gaza Strip, with a population of 3 million people, already have ten ISPs. Will the Palestinian country gateway with its well-funded development budget 'crowd out' these providers?

At its roots, the differences between the opposing positions vis-à-vis the Development Gateway are grounded in a fundamental difference in the understanding of development. The GDG is founded on a model that perceives development as the diffusion of ideas, knowledge, and technology from where it is available (developed societies) to where it is needed (less developed societies). Critics of the GDG dispute the neutrality and linearity of development assumed by the GDG. Vandana Shiva (1997) analyses development in the context of diversity and argues that the survival and development of sustainable communities is based on local diversity, self-organisation, decentralisation, and local democratic control. The knowledge for development paradigm creates homogeneity and uniformity instead of cultivating diversity based on conserving local community rights to resources, knowledge, and production systems.

Table 1. Approaches to Development: Global Knowledge, Local Diversity¹³

	Global Knowledge for Development / Development Gateway	Diversity for Development / Critical Civil Society
Development	Diffusion of knowledge from more developed to less developed societies. Linear/evolutionary development paradigm.	Transformation and emancipation through deconstruction of power and cultivation of diversity. Diversity of interpretations and meanings.
Knowledge	Knowledge is an object, a commodity.	Knowledge is situated Knowledge is in process
Empowerment	Empowerment as acquiring knowledge to take control	Transformation: empowerment through breaking the silence, critiques of obstacles, development of alternatives
Participation Rationale	Instrumental for implementation. Participation occurs as transaction.	Transformation Participation occurs as inclusion and accountability.
Communication	Closing of knowledge gaps. Encourage organisational and socio-cultural change. Influence public policy.	Negotiate fair representation and equity of access. Production of alternative meanings Tolerating difference

¹³ Adapted from Riaño's (1994) typology of women's participation in communication, Tehranian's (1999) operational models for social change and White's (2000) analyses of interests in participation.

		Naming oppression
Organisation	Hegemonic, centralised	Self-organisation, decentralised
ICT	Centralises access and archives (portals) Neutrality of instruments	Decentralises and distributes (networks) Cultural specificity

The two approaches to development result in two frameworks that address the different sets of goals and assumptions, different interpretations of partnership and empowerment, as well as a different understanding about what type of communication system is needed to support the sharing of knowledge for development (see Table 1).

The needs assessments and consultations that took place within the context of the development of the GDG confirm that civil society attached great importance to local systems to access, maintain, and create local knowledge. CSOs stressed the diversity of messages and meanings and therefore promoted equally diverse knowledge and communication systems. The GDG promotes a centralised, large-scale system, based on exclusive technology and governance, to organise a global knowledge flow. This raises concerns about the legitimacy, validity, and diversity of information and knowledge for development. The well-funded global and country gateways with their compatible technical, editorial, and content management applications will promote a standardisation of development information and knowledge. Their content management systems will fit only certain types of information and knowledge, produced in certain languages and formats, and in ways that fit the topic taxonomy. The effect will be that development-related information and knowledge will be produced and presented to fit the emerging standard while information and knowledge that cannot be made to fit will disappear from the Gateways' 'radar screen'. This may be especially true for indigenous knowledge that cannot be organised and managed as 'western' knowledge (Agrawal, n.d., Panday, n.d.).

3.1 ICT AND DEVELOPMENT

The World Bank's 1998/1999 World Development Report stresses the opportunities available to poor countries in the use of ICTs to access and share knowledge, thus 'leap-frogging' out of poverty. This optimism is in sharp contrast with the 1999 Human Development Report of the UNDP (1999) which asserts that the Internet and associated technologies have become an invisible barrier that "true to its name, is like a world wide web, embracing the connected and silently, almost imperceptibly, excluding the rest".

The digital divide, the unequal diffusion of ICTs around the world, is a growing concern. "Development without the Internet", says Castells (2001), "is like the industrial revolution without electricity". He argues that the Internet

possesses great potential for developing economies. But he warns against a simplistic understanding of the digital divide, insisting it can only be measured by the consequences of both connection and lack of connection. For example, ICT infrastructure still reflects historical and colonial relationships and Internet connectivity tends to strengthen existing inequalities within countries and regions, favouring educated urban elites over the rural populations (Castells, 2001; UNDP, 2001).

“Yet neither in Brazil or Mexico will a successful incorporation in the new, informational economy guarantee the integration of their people, many of whom could become (...) not even considered worth the trouble of exploitation; they will become inconsequential, of no interest to the developing globalized economy” (Castells, 1996).

The ICT-based revolution may not only bypass many of the poor, it may adversely affect the legitimacy and availability of poor people’s knowledge and information systems (Heeks, 1999). Madon (2000) argues that research on indigenous communication has concentrated on using indigenous channels to promote exogenous (increasingly ICT-based) innovations rather than on the dissemination of indigenous knowledge among communities. This has led to neglect of local initiatives in the design of development efforts and threatens the erosion of indigenous and informal systems due to the influence of formal, ICT-based, western-oriented information systems. Coraggio (2001) and Shiva (2000) express concerns about the globalisation of the knowledge market, which allows corporations to access new cultures and to extend the commodification of knowledge. The GDG can be understood in the context of this approach as it furthers corporate access to the development market in general and to local cultures in particular via its CGs. Until now, concerns about the ethical use of local public knowledge have been addressed only through market-based solutions such as branding (GDG, 2001a), which do not address indigenous peoples’ concerns about sharing public indigenous knowledge.

Critics of the GDG therefore maintain that this global website will contribute to the digital divide by focussing on those¹⁴ who already have access to the Internet and they strongly criticise the GDG’s apparent refusal to build on the accomplishments of existing local projects (EDC, 2001). The GDG’s Draft Business Plan (2001a) states that its success will depend in part on the capacity of the portal to complement or “*replace existing sources of information on the Web*” (emphasis added). This approach is particularly problematic given that a needs assessment for GDG, undertaken by Bellanet (2000), found that “*closed attitudes and a culture of competition*” (emphasis added) have caused a lack of information sharing between international development agencies. The GDG has

¹⁴ According to the World Bank, only about 1% of the population in the developing countries has Internet access (GDG, 2001a).

replicated these pathologies by opting for a business plan based on an *exclusive technology* and on *competition* with similar initiatives. It counters concerns about duplication of efforts in market terminology. It is “attempting to find its niche” market, re-packaging “knowledge and content already on the Internet”, and it will prove to be “quite innovative” in its approach (GDG, 2001d). It is precisely this combination of the commodification of development knowledge, the focus on the transfer of information and knowledge, and the GDG’s alleged role as a neutral knowledge broker that will, if kept unchecked, substitute ‘old’ knowledge with ‘new’ knowledge, the global, disembodied, neutral knowledge that fits the content management systems based on western logic and efficiency standards. The focus on the transfer of this ‘new’ knowledge will not only affect the visibility, validity and diversity of knowledge needed for development. “Supplying knowledge as though it is a neutral and uniformly transferable commodity package is unlikely to resolve the essential problems of absorption and learning” and may even lead to a loss of previous learning (Chataway and Wield, 2000:816-817).

4. Alternative Strategies: Riding the Tiger

“In the final analysis, Information Technology is like a tiger. You can either ride it or be eaten up by it. You may be eaten up anyway, but at least you get to ride it for a while.” – Kunda Dixit (1999).

Many grassroots and civil society organisations around the world use the Internet to facilitate a variety of their activities such as advocacy, mobilisation, collaboration and research. Overcoming the gender and culture biases of the technology, they have been able to use this new technology to help design, network, and implement their own, diverse agendas (AIS-GWG, 1999; Ess, 2001; Menzies, 1996; Spender, 1995). NGOs that operate as intermediaries and ICT/services providers play a pivotal role by establishing and maintaining the links between the online and offline civil society. They repackage online information for offline distribution, using other communication media such as print, radio, and community meetings, and they facilitate the online communication of information that is produced offline.

Beyond these adaptations to ICT, the drive for a new knowledge-based development paradigm, and the assumptions that underpin it, suggest grassroots organisations, indigenous peoples and CSOs face a significant threat to the diversity of their knowledge and communication systems. A key challenge they face is to use ICT for development *and* as a tool to change the course of the new knowledge-based development paradigm.

How can people and organisations in developing countries use ICTs to empower themselves and their constituencies and advance their community’s

development? A critique, elaborated above, of the assumptions underlying the Knowledge for Development' approach indicate that alternative strategies to facilitate the online and offline sharing and creation of knowledge for development should be based on four assumptions:

- Knowledge is situated: it is accountable to the knower and it acknowledges being located in time and space (Parajuli, 1991).
- The cultivation of the diversity of knowledge is a conscious and creative act, intellectually and in practice (Shiva, 1997).
- The people who hold, create, and use information and knowledge are the designers and owners/managers of the tools to share this information and knowledge.
- The introduction of ICT-based tools is the result of a needs and impact assessment for and by the prospective user community.

In the context of the GDG, two alternative proposals have been developed. The first one is based on a distributed approach to sharing knowledge for development. The second proposal is based on the cultivation of local knowledge diversity and the integration of local and global knowledge.

4.1. ICT FOR DEVELOPMENT: THE DISTRIBUTED APPROACH

The needs assessment studies conducted in preparation of the GDG stress the importance of tools to identify reliable and appropriate development information (Acceso, 2000; Bellanet, 2000). The GDG's response has been identical to other – often smaller scale – initiatives: well-connected and informed topic guides will 'filter' the information for the wider topic community. Besides civil society's concerns, such as ownership and editorial control, this approach is even more problematic when topic guides have to present a comprehensive overview of all aspects and views and practices related to the topic, as is the case of the GDG. Eco (2001:62) suggests that these kinds of practices can lead to *censorship by excess*, "[t]he excess of information leads either to casual criteria of decimation or to discriminating choices granted, once more, to a highly educated elite".

There are alternative approaches to the GDG's topic guide system. During the planning phase of the GDG, OneWorld International (2000b) proposed a design for a distributed global gateway as an alternative to the centralised

gateway platform¹⁵ proposed by the World Bank. The proposal was based on a distributed database design, leaving the content of the distributed gateway at the computers where it is originally published.¹⁶ This design is based on the rationale that the people who own or publish information are in the best position to keep it up to date. Individuals and organisations participating in this gateway would use a set of simple tools to create web pages, to search, index, and file any of these pages, and to choose, combine, and describe the content of any of these pages. This approach would counter several civil society criticisms of the GDG approach (ibid.):

- No major investments involved. Available resources could be used to build Internet capacity in the South through infrastructure projects, tools development, training, and translations.
- Distributed approach will not affect existing or new web initiatives. Information stays with the people who own or publish it.
- The information seeker pulls the information from other sites and can add value to it by prioritising, translating, and adding supplementary comments.
- The information seeker establishes the selection criteria.

For unknown reasons, the proposal for a distributed global gateway was not developed or implemented.¹⁷

4.2. SUPPORTING KNOWLEDGE CREATION IN THE SOUTH

Critics of the World Bank's Knowledge for Development argue that access to information and knowledge itself does not change behaviour. It is the integration of this information and knowledge - the learning process - that will lead to change. Learning for development focuses on people acquiring new skills and integrating new information and knowledge. While knowledge management

¹⁵ Development Gateway content management is based on a central database containing all the information – links, documents, images, and messages – made accessible. The advantage of this solution is that people and organisations do not need to use a specific type of software to access and share information. The web-based interface makes the information accessible for everyone. The disadvantage is the fact that that all information first needs to be added to the database in order to become accessible. Here is where the much-criticized gatekeeping takes place. Only the Development Gateway's topic guides and their helpers can add new information sources to the database.

¹⁶ An interesting variation on this approach is that of Stefan Hüsemann (2001). He proposes an approach based on distributed information sources but with a centralised information exchange platform. As with the distributed gateway approach, it is the information seeker that has to 'pull' the information. There is no information center to 'push' information.

¹⁷ The author was not able to establish contact with the designer of the proposal. It is not clear why the World Bank did not accept this proposal.

forces us to think in terms of systems for the archiving, retrieval and transfer of knowledge, a focus on learning refocuses attention on knowers, learners and the interpretation, integration, and creation of knowledge. It emphasises social learning, how information and knowledge is actually integrated with a community's existing knowledge.

In discussing the 'knowledge gap', Castells (2001) argues that the way we learn needs to change in the informational society:

The critical matter is to shift from learning to learning-how-to-learn, as most information is on-line (...). In other words, the new learning is oriented toward the development of the educational capacity to transform information into knowledge and knowledge into action.

What will this new learning look like? Credé and Mansell (1998) argue that developing countries need appropriate ICT-assisted learning processes and that replication of learning processes in the 'North' need to be avoided. Agre (2002) proposes a closer look at the mediating role of concepts: "[Knowledge] mediates the transfer of ideas back and forth between situations in the real world that might not seem at all comparable on the surface". The idea of mediating concepts is especially valuable in the context of 'development knowledge', which could be understood as what he classifies as "network knowledge" (ibid). Network knowledge is diverse and complex and is created by comparing and contrasting practices and customs.

Agre sees the university as the heart of the knowledge society: it fashions mediating concepts and it disseminates via it graduates. In his appeal for local public universities, Coraggio (2001), too, argues that universities offer an alternative to global knowledge for development initiatives that "open a new style of assistance to developing countries by selecting and centralizing 'development knowledge' for us". Based on the example of his own university, *Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento* in Argentina, he argues that local public universities are a viable alternative to the dominant Knowledge for Development paradigm. As a democratic space, a centre of knowledge as well as a development agent, these universities can become the real 'Knowledge Banks'. Integrating local and global knowledge¹⁸, they are able to cultivate the diversity of local knowledge as well as produce new knowledge in the context of local and regional needs and applications, with its graduates as the "carriers of the spiral of development" (ibid).

Ironically, Coraggio presents his case for public universities in the context of two decades of World Bank-supported privatisation or closure of public

¹⁸ Coraggio (2001) understands global knowledge as local knowledge whose meaning is regenerated as part of every other local knowledge system, not as local knowledge made globally accessible.

universities in the ‘South’ in order to free resources for basic education.¹⁹ King (2001) mentions that funding for Southern universities is starting again after “a very long drought” but points out that national universities now have to compete with universities of the North, which have established franchised courses and local branches. He argues, “in the present competitive era of the international trade in educational services, universities in the richer countries of the world are becoming part of the problem in knowledge sharing, rather than part of the solution.”

4.3 CONCLUSIONS

“We seek a world in which there is room for many worlds” – Subcomandante Marcos (2001)

The current Knowledge for Development debate is characterised by what Shiva (1997) calls the “homogenisation processes of development” that mutates diversity into duality. It starts with the notion that rich people have knowledge and poor people have no knowledge (World Bank, 1999) and expands to include such dualities as centralised/distributed, global/local, Western/Indigenous, North/South, public/private. The Development Gateway and its civil society critics are operating on two opposing models for development: the GDG is operating on the basis of specific set of assumptions about knowledge and ICT, which differs from the one underlying civil society criticism. A closer look at civil society concerns about issues such as ‘partnership’, ‘globalisation of the knowledge market’, and the ‘offline civil society’ leads to the realisation that the Gateway’s strategy may actually result in the de-legitimisation, invalidation and loss of diversity of knowledge relevant to development.

In this paper, I have suggested that when ICTs and global knowledge for development become “the tools of oppression” (Alam, 2000), a re-appropriation of these tools should start with a focus on the knowers. The people and organisations who hold and use knowledge should be the ones to choose, design, manage, or own the tools and institutions to share knowledge. Consequently, the focus of the Knowledge for Development debate should shift, from accessing and transferring global knowledge for development, to the cultivation of knowledge diversity and knowledge creation in the South.

A focus on knowers, knowledge diversity and knowledge creation will lead to a different design and use of ICT tools. In order to be appropriate and effective, these tools could support conversations between knowers as well as facilitate the sharing and manipulation of data and information for knowledge creation. The example of OneWorld’s *Distributed Global Gateway* is one

¹⁹ Coraggio (2001) mentions that as recently as March 2001, World Bank field staff was pushing for the privatisation of public universities in Brazil and Argentina.

example of an approach that leverages the Internet's open and decentralised character, enabling the people who create, use, or publish knowledge to remain responsible for maintaining and updating their information sources on the Internet. People looking for information decide on their own terms what, where and how to search. The example of the *Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento* in Argentina shows that public universities committed to local human development can be the cultivators, producers, consumers and brokers of relevant and meaningful knowledge for local and regional development.

These alternative approaches do not necessarily prioritise poorer people as creators or users of knowledge, nor do they offer better ways to be comprehensive or to organise or share local and indigenous knowledge. They are, however, built on the assumption that participation requires ownership, inclusion, and accountability. It is this re-appropriation of knowledge, through true ownership of its tools and institutions, which may offer civil society the best strategy to protect the diversity of its knowledge and to advance alternative development models.

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