

IKM Summaries No. 11

**Power and interests in developing knowledge societies:
exogenous and endogenous discourses in contention**

Over the past few decades, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have proven to be a tremendous accelerator of economic and social progress.
(UNCTAD, 2009: xi).

..a decisive intervention into the very discursivity of the modern sciences in order to craft another space for the production of knowledge – another way of thinking, un paradigm otro, the very possibility of talking about ‘worlds and knowledges otherwise.’
(Escobar, 2002: 1).

The first quotation above shows a belief in the transformative power of technology. This fits in neatly with the strongly Western-centric and universal idea of economic growth and development. The second quote highlights the need to come up with alternatives to the knowledge system that originates mainly, but not exclusively, in the global ‘North’. The arguments of scholars and practitioners who are critical of this predominant paradigm of change are seldom found in discussions about the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in reducing poverty (Hamelink, 2004; Thompson, 2008).

Escobar argues that ‘development has relied exclusively on one knowledge system, namely the modern Western one. The dominance of this knowledge system has resulted in the marginalization of non-Western knowledge systems’ (Escobar, 1995: 13). This paper uses the texts of prominent United Nations and World Bank reports to show how this process of marginalisation is achieved by resorting to social science models of the role of technology in economic and social change.

The first quotation illustrates the persistence of an *exogenous model of development* that lies at the heart of many of the activities carried out by the international development community which use ICTs to reduce poverty. The second shows an *endogenous model of development*; one that focuses more directly on human beings and their resources and aspirations. The endogenous model is greatly overshadowed by the exogenous model in discussions about policy. This has serious consequences – socially, culturally and economically - because the exogenous model (and indeed some versions of the endogenous model), masks the interests of investors in the global ‘North’ whose main goal is to make profits from selling digital technologies and the content that is hosted on - or circulated through - them.



The first section of the paper introduces the exogenous and endogenous models and shows why the former is principally concerned with technology gaps, knowledge gaps and information dissemination, while the second one is more concerned with human beings, decision-making processes, and encouraging the poor to make their own society through participatory and inclusive processes of development. This section also includes a note about the method employed in the analysis which follows. In section three, selected texts from a sample of reports from UN agencies and the World Bank are analysed to illustrate visions of information or knowledge societies that are market- and predominately technology-led. In the fourth section, some of the insights from efforts to bring issues more consistent with the endogenous model to the fore are considered. This sets the stage for a discussion in section five about alternative perspectives that acknowledge the idea of 'multiple knowledges' and 'emergent outcomes' as being central to the way that ICTs contribute to poverty reduction. The final section considers changes in intervention strategies that could encourage knowledge societies that are more responsive to the goals of poverty reduction.

The author concludes that if we are to enable multiple knowledges to influence action in the interests of ICT and poverty reduction, a lot still has to be done to trace the flows of contending ideas and instances where the dominant ones are countered successfully. A research and practice-oriented effort will be needed to document the harm done by the exogenous and endogenous models of change and to encourage greater receptivity to the insights drawn from other more critical perspectives which focus on emergent systems and experiences in the field.

About this IKM Summary

This *IKM Summary* provides an overview of the following *IKM Working Paper*: Robin Mansell (2010) 'Power and Interests in Developing Knowledge Societies: Exogenous and Endogenous Discourses in Contention'. *IKM Working Paper* No. 11, September 2010, 44pp.

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