

ICTs, Development and Peace: Spectrum for constructive debate and engagement

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Abstract

In this age of the so-called ICTs and ‘digital revolution’, majority of the world is hungry, thirsty, poor, insecure and conflict-riven. Common mind-boggling questions include: why are large swathes of the world so deprived and insecure? What are the factors mitigating against global equality? How and why are ICTs appropriated by some parts of the world, yet virtually non-existent in others? Are there any prospects for the developing world? These questions frame the focus of this article, and articles and commentaries that follow. While the picture may look gloomy, it is noted that there is scope for hope and change. All contributions in this Volume share this conviction: they are critically diagnostic, yet optimistically prescriptive.

Introduction

Information technology, development and peace, however defined, are some of the most pressing challenges confronting the world today. While some challenges are hallowed in history (e.g. underdevelopment, conflict), others are nascent and unfolding (e.g. ICTs). Together, *existing* problems and *emerging* realities present a cocktail of dilemma which confronts nations and communities. Crucially, they ramify the patterns of global and local inequality and the appropriation of resources and technology by few to the detriment of many! In many parts of the developing world, common ‘luxuries’ and affordable consumables – such as food, portable drinking water, shelter or, more exotically, computers, television, internet and mobile phones – are either in short supply or hard to come by.

This introductory article charts the contours of technology-development-peace debate (the theme of this Special Issue of ISJ), with reference to contributions contained in present volume, and wider discourses and realities. The article is divided into four

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sections. The second part recalls recent experience to examine how we have sought to engage public and intellectual debates through the establishment of the journal. This special volume on ICTs, development and peace is a product of such engagement. The third part recapitulates and engages key discernible themes in the present volume. The final part offer conclusive remarks and recommendation for action.

A novel space for discourse and agency?

This special issue is a product of exchange and collaboration. At ISJ, we have been passionate about creating sustainable and progressive spaces for debate and activism. We engage in intellectual and policy discourses and, occasionally participate in protests and vigils. We contribute to conventional and ‘virtual’ conversations – as exemplified by Shiraz Durrani’s (ISJ’s Coordinating Editor), recent exchange with UNESCO and African development activists on the vexed issue of remembering and documenting African colonial past (an abridged version of this exchange is represented in this volume).

ISJ was born with the slogan “a journal with a message” (Gabriel, 2007, p. 1). Our key aim has been to provide a forum where societal problems could be freely and critically diagnosed and engaged. Since its establishment in December 2007, ISJ has been welcomed with admiration by diverse audiences. An example is worth citing here. In January 2008, we received the following comments: ‘I’d [like] to congratulate you (editors) for publishing the first issue of the new online journal Information, Society & Justice. It has an ambitious mission... Congrats...and wishing ISJ a bright future.’ (Eddie D’Sa, Email correspondence, January 2008). Clearly, D’Sa was equally critical and constructive, but we stand to be criticised much as we are determined to criticise others. We believe that *ideas* are confronted with *ideas*, and when differences are passionately discussed there is greater scope for understanding and constructive engagement (see Tar’s briefing in this Volume).

In building ISJ, we seized the opportunities granted by ICTs to our advantage. We constantly engaged in exchanges, and publicise our activities and output using the organs of ICT. ISJ journal is one of only a few not-for-profit free on-line journals. While we toiled in the establishment of the journal, nothing prepared us for the phenomenal publicity that characterised the birth of ISJ. We were fortunate to be associated with selfless individuals and organisations who granted us the space to flourish. Two of these ‘spaces’ are worth mentioning here: first, the Department of Applied Social Sciences (DASS) at London Metropolitan University graciously hosted ISJ on its website. DASS staff and students not only contributed articles, commentaries and review to ISJ’s inaugural volume, they also contributed to its peer review process (for students, we encourage ‘guided review’ or blind review of fellow students’ work under competent members of staff as a *learning process*). In particular, the Head of Department, Professor John Gabriel not only wrote the first editorial of ISJ, but has always given us unflinching moral and intellectual support whenever we approach him. Gabriel’s statement acknowledges the shared visions of, and synergy between, DASS and ISJ:

In common with its host department, the journal acknowledges the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of social problems. We cannot understand the big issues of our day by restricting ourselves to discrete academic disciplines. Nor can we expect individuals, communities and the wider society to understand problems in accordance with those disciplinary and professional silos (Gabriel, 2007: 1)

Secondly, ISJ has enjoyed tremendous support from numerous professionals and networks across the world. A key example is *Library Juice* – which covers “topics of interest to passionate librarians, from a political Left perspective”², and an organisation that has the vision of bridging and engaging ‘intersection between library, politics and culture.’³ On 23th August 2007, four months before ISJ was born, *Library Juice*, announced thus: “new journal, Information, Society & Justice: an interdisciplinary journal [coming up;] website under construction”, followed by full information on ISJ’s aims, remit and editorial policy (*ibid*). The support of *Library Juice* and others proved pivotal to raising public awareness and gave the Editorial Board a fillip at a time when we were struggling to penetrate the crowded world of journal publication.

ISJ was formally launched on May 1st 2008 during a DASS Debate & Lecture event. The event attracted speakers from across the world and was electronically recorded (available in MP3 format). We hope to place all these recordings on ISJ website but those interested in a copy can contact ISJ’s Coordinating Editor (s.durrani@londonmet.ac.uk). The journal is poised for some unprecedented change. At the time of writing, ISJ’s Editorial Board was in the process of reviewing the founding principles of journal which, we note, needed to be revisited in the light of changing realities and shifting paradigms. Discussion is also been held on future publications plans, and the expansion of editorial board. We are also negotiating with renowned publishers for producing and disseminating the journal in print format. We note that this is no mean challenges in the current atmosphere of journal commercialisation. Nevertheless, we are optimistic, yet principled, on the possibility of producing the journal or selected volumes in a print format.

ICTs, Development and Peace

This special issue is devoted to “ICTs, peace and development.” This section examines the challenges of ICTs, development and peacebuilding in terms of (a) themes explored by contributors to the present volume and, crucially, (b) wider discourses. This volume commences with contributions on ICTs to states and economies, in particular how businesses are coping with the demands of e-commerce and internet-driven universe (Lawrence writing on the UK) and the growth of ICTs, and their contribution to national development (Salawu, writing on Nigeria). Lawrence notes that though “the Internet is portrayed by the media, academia and IT professionals as a new frontier that will transform and revolutionise the way business is conducted globally...the introduction of new technology frequently presents unfamiliar problems as well as immense opportunities”. After a painstaking review of field data, Lawrence concludes that SMEs in the UK “are already experiencing limited success with the use of the Internet in exposing their products or services to global audience and reaching new customers.” Nevertheless, “usage in SME is now widespread and is not confined to particular sectors of industry or business activity.” Lawrence’s contribution has to be seen in critical terms: for instance, why are SMEs experiencing “limited success”? A convincing explanation could perhaps be found in the paradox of capitalism. First, SMEs might be victims of UK’s *Laissez Faire* economy. The state is too beholden to this doctrine and rarely

² *Library Juice*. Available at: http://libraryjuicepress.com/blog/?page_id=2. (Accessed: 16 December 2008).

³ *Library Juice*. Available at: <http://libraryjuicepress.com/blog/?p=306> (accessed 13th December 2008)

intervenes in protecting small business; it only intervenes when big businesses are threatened! Secondly, because capitalist system is inherently unjust, small businesses can be victims of big businesses who appropriate technology to their advantage. Big businesses make it difficult and expensive for small businesses to access utilise the internet and/or compete favourably in the market place.

Salawu's contribution on the ICTs and development in Nigeria (while presented in colourful state-centred terminology, and riven with official statistics and government narratives) is nonetheless revealing, for instance, in terms of the growth of ICTs in an unstable developing economy (Nigeria). Salawu presents a different picture of the "dearth of ICTs" characteristic of the developing world. Much of the recent literature emphasise difficulties in the entrenchment of ICTs in the developing world (e.g. Thomson, 2004; Ya'u, 2004). Salawu's contribution, even though uncritical, reveals that some developing countries like Nigeria are doing well, compared to the many who are still lagging behind in the so-called "digital divide". Nevertheless, the fact that Nigeria is doing well in bridging the digital divide is no excuse to celebrate: it is still the case that majority of the developing world is not wired, and a cocktail of factors stand on the way of achieving any progress – poverty, corruption, violence etc.

In sum, the contributions of both Lawrence and Salawu, while depicting ICTs as a driver of development and business, emphasise the benign ramification of ICTs: like most technologies, ICTs can be instrumental *not* only to development, *but* also underdevelopment (an issue examined by Tijani, albeit more broadly in the context of Nigeria). There is an evident danger in viewing ICTs in optimistic and uncritical terms:

Of course, like all technologies, ICTs have no independent determinative existence. ICTs...have "not risen autonomously". Their key issues, therefore, must be seen as revolving around *who* uses the technology, *how* the technology is used, and to *what end* it is used. Viewed in this way, there is little doubt about who is driving the current prominence of ICTs in global discourse (Cline-Cole and Powell, 2004: 5).

Tijani's contribution offers a more critical and contrasting picture of Nigeria – a country that started well at independence but eventually descended into the abysmal perpetuity of underdevelopment. Tijani notes that "Far from being developed, or developing, Nigeria is underdeveloped, as compared to the developed world...Nigeria was a pearl state, beacon of hope and aspiration for its people on Independence in 1960, but now in ruins". Thereafter Tijani spends significant energy tracing the roots of Nigeria's underdevelopment debacle. In doing, he quite characteristically, offers a cocktail of historical, sociological, political, economic, cultural and moral analyses. This is quite refreshing in an intellectual and policy world that is awash with cut-and-paste research, and where pigeon-holing and linear categorisation are order of the day. Tijani's style of analysis is highly desirable for a more nuanced understanding of the world, and a more proactive resolution of the problems associated with underdevelopment. Importantly, Tijani's bleak and hopeless imagery of Nigeria (applicable to much of the global South) buttresses a pair of mysteries: *a deficit of desirables* – good leadership, democracy, transparency, peace, stability – and *a surplus of undesirables* – bad leadership, autocracy, corruption, conflict, instability. Elsewhere, I have engaged these issues and described Nigeria an "a hollow giant waddling on agile feet" (Tar, 2007: 29-40).

If Nigeria's underdevelopment is partly rooted in the lack of peace and the prevalence of conflict, what is the reality in other developing countries? Shettima and Tar take up this issue by examining farmer-pastoralist *conflict* in West Africa, with a focus on the causes and consequences such conflicts. They argue that the region has a reputation for high- and low-intensity, but Shettima and Tar concentrated on the latter arguing it has so far received scarce intellectual and policy attentions. They identified a number of factors influencing farmer-pastoralist conflict in the region – environmental-geographical, demographic, social and economic. They conclude that these factors work in tandem to perpetuate the conflict.

Shettima and Tar's diagnostic analysis of conflict in West Africa is complemented by prescriptive contribution on peacebuilding in Africa/Nigeria. In this piece, Abdulrahman and Tar make the case for a more creative approach to peacebuilding, in particular, the application of Track-One, Track-Two and Multi-track Diplomacy and advanced by Western scholars. The question is given the nature of conflict in African/Nigeria (e.g. most are resource-induced, sectarian, and politically-motivated), what are the best options for resolving it? Abdulrahman and Tar emphasise the importance of "designing and implementing strategic action for peace" – one that is conscious of a bevy of factors that trigger and sustain conflicts.

Conclusive remarks

The challenges of technology, development and peace continue to bedevil many parts of the world (to be sure, some parts have coped relatively well). But the world is a system – very much like a machine – which needs to function wholly and effectively. A lack of peace or development in one part of the world affects the rest – as exemplified by the collapse of Somalia, and the rise of fundamentalism and piracy, two burning problems currently threatening global order and international peace. For a while, Somali pirates have been attacking merchant ships destined for the West with adverse effect on global trade and movement of comparative value. The collapse of the Somali fishing industry as a result of the global fishing activities of major fishing nations and companies in Somali waters may indeed have led to the growth of "piracy" not only as a national defence mechanism, but also to replace the loss of income.⁴ In addition to piracy, the emergence of Islamist elements in Somali society and their alleged involvement in attacks on Western interests in Kenya and Tanzania compelled some urgent action. If one may ask, what has the world (of course, the developed countries) done to arrest the collapse of the state in Somalia? Not very much! For decades, Somali people were left to their own devices and anarchy was allowed to reign until "fundamentalism" and "piracy" emerged to pose danger to the global imperialist order. Indeed, some have argued that developed Western countries though, disconcerted about bloody civil wars complex political emergencies and, in extreme circumstance, state collapse in the developing world, have not taken serious steps to arrest these catastrophes.

⁴ Another interesting factor is the illegal dumping of toxic waste in Somalian waters by developed country businesses (unaddressed by 'the West') which led directly to the rise in piracy as a response.

Evidently, Western countries are beholden to the idealist view that conflict intervention – for instance, one that will *allow aggrieved groups to secede* - will set dangerous precedents for international stability. So they have been selective and unforthcoming in conflict intervention, whilst also seeking to contain conflicts within specific domains (conflict zones). Yet, in the past few decades the behaviour of the West, in particular, US and its allies, is anything but idealist! Western countries have been largely interventionist, especially where their core interests are at stake. USA and her allies have set more dangerous precedents in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. How can this dangerous precedent and, more generally, the challenges of underdevelopment, be addressed? We have many options at our disposal, but two are worth mentioning here. First, we need to talk and engage in public debates at all levels of society – communities, schools, places of worship, shops, parks, chartrooms, media etc. We are all stakeholders for a humane, peaceful, egalitarian, and prosperous world; we must contribute in influencing policies, and public opinion. Second, and related to above, we need to take part in human agency – fund raising, volunteering, protest, vigils etc – to change the course of humanity for better. We should not hesitate to speak truth to power, and *act* on this very *principle*.

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