

Position Paper

**Turning Information into Knowledge.
By Assisting Independent and Critical Thought
by Means of ICT's.**

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One of the first speakers at the conference was the Director of the United Nations University Office in New York. Dr. Jean-Marc Coicaud underlined the difference between information and knowledge in his speech and attracted quite some discussion with this matter. The question of the difference and how to overcome the gap repeatedly came up in the course of the following days and shall thus be the focus of the following.

In the past decades ICT's have reached even the remotest corners of our planet, usually demonstrated by ostentatious satellite dishes perched on top of even the most basic homes. It is not television alone but also the number of radio stations, mobile phones and of course computers and the Internet, which are receiving, processing and spreading information at an ever faster pace. In developed as in developing countries the necessity to re-process these countless messages through our own minds is increasing constantly. Whether one has to make decisions as a consumer between products or as a citizen between political parties or even just to have an own opinion on different matters becomes increasingly difficult by the sheer overwhelming amount of choices we get sent through the media. The results of not recognizing the difference between information and knowledge can in the worst-case scenario lead to radicalization, manipulation and large-scale misunderstanding. Between cultures and religions these developments are fatal as we can see today on a global scale.

With the means of ICT's there is a possibility to work against these tendencies by developing the foundation of democracy: independent and critical thinking. Specially developed software programs, more specifically games, for mobile phones and computers, accessible also over the Internet, which teach and enhance the abilities to question and analyze information can be effective in educating people on a large scale in this aspect.

There are maybe three main criticisms against this proposal. The first one being, there are more fundamental problems faced by developing, particularly land-locked developing countries

such as basic material needs. Widespread regions of the world would never have access to these programs as they do not have the infrastructures.

Another counterclaim is the usefulness of ICT's in this question. ICT's also have negative effects on societies and how can a program/game affect somebody's thought patterns?

The third main argument against such an idea is western imperialism. Who is responsible for these programs and ensures that they are not indoctrinating western idea-machines?

Without denying other severe problems such as poverty and hunger, this proposal is directed towards the development of the ICT sector. Also considering that millions of people who do not have access to ICT's will not have access to these programs it is still sensible to educate those who are already in touch with it to fully integrate them into the information society as active and critical users and not just passive receptors, thus contributing to the closing of the digital divide.

Growth of some ICT's in Developing Countries

	2000	2005
Mobile phone users Per 1000 people	46	258
Internet users Per 1000 people	15	67

Source: 2006 Overview: Information & Communication for Development WB Report¹

As demonstrated in the table above, the growth of ICT's in developing countries has been considerable in the last few years and prospectively shall continue to be so in the coming years, meaning more and more people will be reached by these programs in the future. Naturally these

¹<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTINFORMATIONANDCOMMUNICATIONANDTECHNOLOGIES/Resources/282822-1141851022286/IC4DOverview.pdf>

programs should not be isolated but embedded into a number of other projects in this sphere of development, preferably of the national strategies of the countries.

Secondly, ICT's are already employed in manners of this sort by governments, political movements, and even brands to achieve certain goals. Just to give some contemporary examples of common knowledge, part of the U.S. Pentagon Media Strategy includes motions to develop computer games, which have Arabic looking people as the enemy. Similarly Al-Manar a Lebanese TV-station regularly depicts George W. Bush as the devil. There is also however, an online game called "Power of Politics"², involving the users in a playful way of dealing with current news and democratic methods of governing a country – this was by the way developed in the private sector and is aimed more towards developed country's societies. So, the potential to use or misuse ICT's in this manner is definitely there and already being exploited. The UNDP can and should get more involved in this sphere to actively and successfully transmit their messages and values.

The third criticism seems to be the most vigorous. As described above ICT's can be employed in exactly the opposite manner of what is the goal of this proposition. This underlines the necessity of strong involvement of national or regional specialists as well as the civil society in the design of these programs to avoid imposing western culture. Examples can be found in previous IT projects, such as were described by the Indian Ambassador to Armenia at the Symposium, e.g. local market structures were used as the base for an online pricing system for primary goods.

The importance of ICT's as a means to learn how to deal with ICT's on a sophisticated level can no longer be ignored and would also be step in the right direction for the UN to reach out to its people all over the world. The potential in ICT's to develop independent thought and

² www.powerofpolitics.com

critical acclaim to information, a pillar of democracy and development is immense. As relevant as ICT's are in developing e-governance, e-business, education, health systems etc. they cannot function without the active engagement of the peoples of this globe. Awareness programs that enable people to choose between information and make it to knowledge are the first vital step.

(Short) Plan of Action

- Formulate the key criteria all games should include with specialists in education, psychology, programming, development, etc. in the framework of the UNDP.
- Highlight the importance of the gaming aspect, as it should reflect the success of ICT development in the same industry. Looking at ICT innovations, these are mainly coming out of the entertainment sector; this industry knows what is popular and what will work on a large scale.
- Find international specialists to cooperate with national/regional specialists to develop programs adequate for local needs and specialities (e.g. more focus on mobile phone games or on internet, incorporating local traditions/names/ideas/places/concepts etc.)

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