What Matters Most?
Reflections for the Discussions on Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) for Human Development, Growth and Poverty Reduction

23, 24 September 2009,
Harvard Faculty Club, Harvard, MA, USA

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What matters most in my opinion is for human beings to live a life on this planet that is worthy of human aspiration, to co-create as humanity a world that is conducive to conscious human evolution. And I am not only thinking here of the people for whom we are gathered here, the people who have come to be known as 'the poor', the "Bottom of the Pyramid", etc, I am also thinking of us and people like us. There is no bottom without a top, and the top is just as much part of the problem as the bottom: we define each other; and what is more, we are all connected. Separation is an illusion. The reality, which we are all waking up to in these days of global warming and financial decline, is that we are all connected.

What should thus matter most for us, here, the people who have this beautiful opportunity to reflect together in this beautiful place on questions of Human Development, poverty reduction, growth and the use of Information Communication Technology, is to work with and within concepts that are aligned to this dream: the dream for a world that is worthy of human aspiration and conducive to conscious human evolution. [1]Concepts are powerful tools that once accepted as intricate part of a collective consciousness create the parameters for people's thoughts, emotions, experiences and realities. And once concepts have such power, people may be reluctant to let them go, even in the light of

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[1] In our lunchtime discussion we were reminiscing about Gandhi's advice to become the change we want to see in the world.

new evidence that challenges those concepts. To showcase such power I want to tell you the story I have been told by a Darwin expert whom I met in Cambridge, UK, last week: the biggest problem the church had with Darwin's argument for evolution was not with the idea of time. It seemed that the church in those days had an idea of deep time and did not take the 7 days literal. The point was that they could not let go of the concept of redemption: The reasoning was that if there had been a process of evolution, then maybe there had been no Fall, if there had been no Fall, redemption would not be an issue anymore. And of course, redemption is the corner stone of the function and the power of the church. In hindsight it is clear to see that women would have had a different pilgrimage in their striving towards gender equality, dignity and worthiness if the church (and many church goers no doubt too) would not have been so married to the concept of redemption. Because in all the religions of the book, women are made responsible for The Fall.

Turning the focus back to human development and our efforts to think our way out of poverty into wealth through the use of ICTs, I want to highlight two insights I gained through GRACE (the IDRC supported Gender Research in ICTs for Empowerment Research Networks in Africa and the Middle East), that I think are pertinent to our discussions:

- The dominant economic global mindset (paradigm) on this planet is about separation and hierarchy, divide and rule, about creating competition and scarcity, about exploitation of people and resources, not about partnership and connection, about justice or nurturing. And if no other spaces are created, ICTs become the handmaidens of this system and ICT users perpetuate these divisive characteristics. The Zambia study, that took place within the GRACE research network, reveals how the use of mobile phones created a virtual class system within a group of women who used mobile phones to network with each other for the purpose of advocacy for women's rights. The cost of cell phone use created a group of callers (women who could

afford calling costs) and beepers (women who could not afford the calling costs). The potential for connection and the intent for connection that is so much part of what we expect of mobile phones (and of all ICTs) was thwarted because of the financial, economic parameters in which this use takes place. And power differentials were created where they did not exist before.

- People adapt to their environment. And in doing so they also adapt to the reflection of themselves that the environment gives them. Many people cannot imagine the dreams that would lift them out of their limitations because they do not have the building blocks for these dreams. They do not even have the concepts that match the actual experience of their lived realities. They have adapted their preferences to this power imbalanced world in order to survive in it. This is particularly relevant to women in relationship to development and empowerment efforts. The GRACE Zimbabwe case study I touched on briefly in my paper showcases this dynamic. At the University of Zimbabwe in Harare, access to the free Library computers, was governed on the basis of the Rule of First Come, First Serve. The librarians however noticed that the overwhelming majority of the students using the computers were male. Asking the female students about their perspectives and experiences around access, the female students spoke about their duties as wives and mothers at home, which they had to fulfil exactly during the time in which the computers were free, and about the fact that when they would line up they would run the risk of being pushed out of the line by the male students. And whilst they acknowledged the First Come First Serve Rule as democratic, fair and even empowering, they lamented at the same time that they had to put in extra efforts to get access to computers in other ways. These female students did not have a concept, a way of thinking about this access rule that really matched their experience of this rule, the lived reality that was a consequence of this rule. When the researchers subsequently deepened their research

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efforts, and created opportunities for these women to face their experiences, emotions, reflections and dreams, these female students were able to bring more coherence to their thinking and acknowledge their lack of access as inconvenient and disempowering. The First Come First Serve Rule was very effective in removing female competition from the computer access arena. It also kept in place the stereotypes about women and their non-use of ICTs. And without the researchers' interventions, the female students would not have been able to do the conceptual work that would give them a position from which to question the fairness of this rule.

From these two insights, it becomes obvious that there is no neutral space when it comes to knowledge, knowledge construction, and the tools that give access to knowledge such as ICTs. Ours is a sexist and deeply unjust world and I see a minefield of power dynamics everywhere. And just like a real mine field, if you are not aware and do not take special investigative measures, you only discover the mines by stepping on them.

From this basis I want to speak to the concept of openness that is so much at the heart of this Forum. Although I do not comprehend fully all the conceptual work that has been taking place, what I do comprehend I do appreciate and I have my own hopes and fears in this regard and these I want to share with you.

In the first place I think that behind the practices that are identified as acts of openness, like the development of open source software, open scientific journals and web publishing, there are other dynamics at work. Human motivations, dreams and aspirations and it would be good to keep those in mind.

Yesterday I heard from Matthew that Harvard University has decided to have articles published by Harvard academics immediately loaded on the Harvard website. Being the powerful institution that it is, the journals would have no choice but to comply with that. Harvard's motivation for instigating this web

publishing is probably not guided by the idealism of openness but by strategic insight into the power-knowledge dynamics. More and more immediate access to Harvard articles will enhance the authors' influence in their field, their academic reputation and thus also Harvard's standing: a virtuous cycle indeed.

Another example is open source software. When I listen to open source software designers, I do not hear them speak about their desire for openness as a value in itself. I hear the joy of connection with like minds, the joy of creating freely and releasing genius. I also hear care and concern for their environment and the desire to connect their capacities to this environment in the most useful and beneficial way. I hear a dream for a more egalitarian society where networking is a gesture from the heart and the mind. I hear love at work actually.

The third and last example pertaining to the concept of openness I want to discuss here refers to how I see virtual groups of women and of male and female gender researchers manage openness in virtual environments. Women are being killed for being feminists in this world, for being known to be feminist, for speaking up for their and other women's human rights. In such a world, there cannot be unreserved openness yet. I have my own experiences with GRACE but I have also learnt of other groups that protect their boundaries by deciding very carefully who to admit to the inner circle and what to share with the outside world.
I think that we, humans are meant to share and grow in connection with each other. GRACE is proving this to me on a daily basis. The learning and sharing that emerges is beyond governing or steering. It is living a life of its own now. Yet, its boundaries are protected. And the more the openness to the outside world is governed and protected, the more the internal openness is growing.

So in a world of power dynamics that govern the values we attach to gender, and to wealth and status and class, and that keep so many good people still in their spell, I think that the concept of openness needs continuous and relentless questioning. Where

there is so much potential for the good, there is also the shadow side of great abuse. If openness is the space, what is the purpose and what is the intent behind it? As 'emergence' is becoming our reality more and more especially in the field of ICTs and because of ICTs, we have to complement the questions of purpose: 'What is this openness going to be used for and for what?' With the questions of intent: 'What is the dream you carry in your heart and mind for the openness you want to see?'

Einstein once said that very few people think with their own mind and feel with their own heart. I think actually that in the emerging new open spaces, the new openness measures and business models as we see them emerge in the ICT arena, there is more space for us thinking with our own minds and our own hearts. I also think that these emerging trends of openness are actually indicators that there is a shift taking place away from separation towards more connection. And so I do have the hope that the dream of connection, which is so much in people's minds and hearts and for which ICTs are most appropriate vehicles, will be able to thrive. And I think what matters most for us would be to realise that the opportunity of thinking these issues through brings with it the responsibility of becoming its guardians. What that would mean in actual reality, would probably differ for different people, and I am sure such issues will emerge in our discussions. From my side, I would like to bring to the fore, that apart from investigating emerging openness and doing work towards establishing or creating the opportunity for more openness to emerge, we also have take a stand, a normative stand. It may have become obvious by now that my dream would be connection, genuine connection between people because in that connection can the striving towards a world worthy of human aspiration take place. And the work of connection and towards connection calls us to recognize power dynamics, name them and keep them aligned with a human future that works for us all.

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