GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2010

Focus on ICTs and environmental sustainability

Global Information Society Watch

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Introduction
(Re)claiming the environment

Climate change is presented as a crisis: by the scientific community, global institutions, governments and the media. Its urgency provokes the need for mainstreaming environmental concerns in the information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) sector. While analysts argue that climate change magnifies development inequalities, it is also likely to magnify political disagreements and fault lines – already the case at global forums such as the recent negotiations in Copenhagen.

Many ICT activists have been active at the interstice of ICTs and environmental sustainability at least for the past three decades. The pioneering role organisations across the globe played in the early internet – such as GreenNet in the United Kingdom, Pegasus Networks in Australia, and SANGONeT in South Africa – meant that they served a critical historical function in linking up social and environmental groups as early as the 1980s. Similarly, BlueLink in Bulgaria, which was founded in 1997, was initiated by several environmental non-profit organisations, linking the internet with environmental activism in that country. Over the years, the fields of interest for ICT4D practitioners have extended to low-cost and sustainable technologies in environments where there is no infrastructure, and the outspoken promotion of refurbished computers and open source technology in areas such as education – the latter leading to early calls for multinational vendors to take responsibility for discarded technology in developing countries. The historical importance – and thematic significance – of environmental issues to the ICT4D sector is shown by the 2003 World Summit on the Information Society Plan of Action, where "e-environment" (C7, 20) is one of the action areas alongside e-government, e-learning and e-health, amongst others.

Fifty-three authors responded to a call for reports on ICTs and environmental sustainability – including GreenNet, BlueLink and EngageMedia (Andrew Garton being one of the people involved in setting up Pegasus Networks). The brief to the authors was broad. This was to give them the leeway to focus on issues that were directly relevant to their work, and with the recognition that the field may be new to a number of them. Within the general field of "ICTs and environmental sustainability" authors were encouraged – although not limited – to write on issues to do with electronic waste (e-waste) and climate change.

Many countries here are grappling with the tangible effects of climate change, such as the melting of the glaciers that make up the Venezuelan Sierra Nevada, the impact of higher temperatures on sensitive rainforest ecosystems and floods and droughts on agriculture, and the regional political consequences of access to the water security of the Nile. In many countries the negative consequences of e-waste have

been felt for some time now, such as in India, where there are 52 million internet users, and 15 million regular mobile users, yet e-waste is processed largely by the informal sector, with few, if any, safety and health considerations. In other countries, which are still struggling to overcome the "digital divide", the challenge of e-waste is still being anticipated. At the other end of the product chain – production – the report on the Republic of Korea is a clear account of the quite frightening challenges facing factory workers who have to deal with the toxins that make e-waste a hazardous waste in the first place. While 47 cancer cases among Samsung workers have been reported, the company has refused responsibility. Min Kyung Jeong from the Korean Progressive Network Jinbonet writes:

> There was no transparent and verifiable process in the investigation [into the death of a Samsung semiconductor factory worker from leukaemia], which can lead some results to be distorted and left out. It is also difficult for the complainants to verify the results in the case when there are usually several years between exposure to the harmful materials and the onset of diseases.

Just under half of these reports deal with e-waste as their core discussion, the rest focusing on climate change, or a combination of climate change and e-waste. Taken together, these reports cover the full range of ICT implications for the environment: from production, to markets and procurement (read Sweden's account of challenges around eco-friendly government tenders, for instance), to use, reuse and disposal.

The tensions provoked by ICTs and their impact on the environment – as well as how they can benefit environmental sustainability – are not all resolved in the same way in these reports. Some see the practical opportunities in e-waste, such as upskilling and employment, or the potential for ICTs to help win the battle against a changing climate. Some engage with the issue at the level of political challenge – governments and powerful stakeholders such as multinational vendors need to be taken on. This whether it involves the disconnect between policy promises at the global level – such as being a signatory to the Basel Convention but having no practical instrument at the country level to honour this commitment – or being alert to the "greenwashing" of big business looking to exploit new markets with the veneer of an eco-conscious agenda:

> As "green" products are proving a successful model for marketing, ICT vendors stress the fact that their newest products are greener and that is why customers should buy them, even if their old equipment satisfies their

needs. This is a business practice that eventually leads to a commodity-driven lifestyle that directly contradicts the logic of green ICTs: saving nature's resources. (Vera Staevska, BlueLink)

In one way or another authors in this GISWatch have shown that the information society has its working class too, and technology is not an escape from social conditions as it is sometimes marketed. The underbelly of the technology we use so freely is the impact it has on the environment, and the knock-on effect consumption has on the most vulnerable people: the life conditions of the waste pickers on the dumps all over the world, and the factory workers in Asia. Technology, and its hunger for natural resources, has real-life consequences on the ground, as in the global demand for coltan and its role in the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

As Sohrab Razzaghi and Hojatollah Modirain (Arseh Sevom) suggest in their report on Iran, "going green" – which is a *systemic* need – requires at least political stability:

Without human rights, sustainable development cannot happen. It should be noted that human rights are not only confined to freedoms, such as freedom of speech and prohibiting torture, but also cover some basic rights such as water, health, food, eliminating poverty, education, as well as freedom of information and access to the internet. (…) The political uncertainty in the country and harsh suppression of civil society have resulted in less attention being given to environmental issues and climate change.

While most see the need to mainstream environmental concerns in ICT4D organisations, it is important to note that there are activists who do not feel that environmental issues should be part of their core mandate which, they feel, should continue to attend to more cross-cutting structural concerns, such as consumerism, or market ideologies. At least one regular GISWatch author did not contribute a report this year for this reason – and the rationale needs to be taken seriously. For many, the most comfortable fit for environmental causes in their advocacy agendas is still being worked out.

These reports capture something of the (re)emerging story of ICTs and environmental activism – and something of its messiness. As usual, the country reports are prefaced by regional reports which contextualise, and add nuance to, the specific considerations at the country level. Together they make a critical intervention from a civil society perspective. As positions are formed in institutions, businesses and governments around the role of ICTs and the environment – most readily felt right now on the issue of climate change – they suggest a need for civil society to enter the debate; to rupture too easily taken positions, some of which might play into the hands of powerful stakeholders. It is the job of the ICT activist to keep the debate open, the tensions apparent, and to surface those things that are kept hidden. ■

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2010 investigates the impact that information and communications technologies (ICTs) have on the environment – both good and bad.

Written from a civil society perspective, **GISWatch 2010** covers some 50 countries and six regions, with the key issues of ICTs and environmental sustainability, including climate change response and electronic waste (e-waste), explored in seven expert thematic reports. It also contains an institutional overview and a consideration of green indicators, as well as a mapping section offering a comparative analysis of "green" media spheres on the web.

While supporting the positive role that technology can play in sustaining the environment, many of these reports challenge the perception that ICTs will automatically be a panacea for critical issues such as climate change – and argue that for technology to really benefit everyone, consumption and production patterns have to change. In order to build a sustainable future, it cannot be "business as usual".

GISWatch 2010 is a rallying cry to electronics producers and consumers, policy makers and development organisations to pay urgent attention to the sustainability of the environment. It spells out the impact that the production, consumption and disposal of computers, mobile phones and other technology are having on the earth's natural resources, on political conflict and social rights, and the massive global carbon footprint produced.

GISWatch 2010 is the fourth in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GISWatch is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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