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# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2016

*Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet*

Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
and International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

# Global Information Society Watch

## 2016

Global Information Society Watch 2016
Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

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# Introduction

Alan Finlay

The 45 country reports gathered here illustrate the link between the internet and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs). As in previous years, authors were asked to select what they considered an important issue to discuss in their reports – and, as a result, the topics covered here can be thought of as indicative of at least some of the key possibilities and challenges facing countries when it comes to using the internet as an enabler of ESCRs. Some of these will be familiar to information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) activists: the right to health, education and culture; the socioeconomic empowerment of women using the internet; the inclusion of rural and indigenous communities in the information society; and using ICT to combat the marginalisation of local languages. Others deal with relatively new areas of exploration, such as participatory community mapping of services, institutions and landmarks in Spain, the negative impact of algorithms on calculating social benefits in Poland, crowdfunding, or the use of 3D printing technology to preserve cultural heritage. Workers' rights receive some attention, as does the use of the internet during natural disasters. The reports also suggest that in many instances – whether in mapping their immediate surroundings, starting an online TV station, or resuscitating a national museum – individuals, groups and communities are using the internet to enact their socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of disinterest, inaction or even censure by the state.

An anxiety around the fate of local and indigenous languages – an issue that is both political and practical – can be felt in countries such as Nigeria, Peru and Argentina. In Nigeria, where "[u]p to 400 minority Nigerian languages are considered endangered, with 152 of them at risk of extinction," the official language is English – both the language of colonisation and, in that country, predominantly of the internet. As Fantsuam Foundation writes: "The level of internet access available to communities who speak marginalised languages is not reported on in Nigeria's access statistics. However, if we consider the sizes of the population groups that speak endangered languages, and that many of these groups live in rural areas and cannot speak English, we can guess that internet access is low."

The Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú describes the structural exclusion of indigenous groups as "linguistic discrimination" – a discrimination that Peru's online phonetics project Mapa Sonoro, literally a "Sound Map", tries to challenge. The project is an attempt to give visibility (or "audiobility") to marginalised languages for educational purposes – there are 47 indigenous languages spoken by as little as 14% of the population today. However, as the authors suggest, it is one thing providing access to a knowledge base of languages online, but another if people actually end up using the resources – only some 5,000 visitors have used the site in over a year (go there now, it is excellent: www.mapasonoro.cultura.pe).

In a useful first-hand analysis of the Qom indigenous people living in Los Pumitas outside Rosario in Argentina, Nodo TAU finds that 8.5% of this urbanised community cannot read or write in Spanish. This requires sensitive facilitation in community e-literacy workshops: "Those who do not use the computer as a tool, who can't recognise letters or form words, can easily be ashamed by those who do, and who work faster." As the authors also found, visibility is one thing, but sustained visibility that results in ongoing socioeconomic agency for indigenous communities is another. "Everything always costs us more and more," says Oscar Talero, a Qom living in Los Pumitas. "The culture is here, in the territory, the language, our customs; we have shamans, healers, midwives in the community. We have all that. We want to work with the state and they have to give us sustainability. If they do not, what we propose cannot be done and cannot be seen."

The issue of local languages is picked up in Macedonia's country report, which points to the absence of a local-language curriculum in the state's e-education programme. Country assessments of state programmes in schools are largely critical, and in some respects despairing. They are described as "slow" (Kenya) or in the case of Kosovo, a "story of lost opportunities". While KICTANet

suggests a more upbeat perspective is necessary – "the country's youth are not sitting around waiting for laptops to arrive in the classrooms... they have [already] colonised devices" – in Macedonia, the Computer for Every Child programme is a "prime example that shows that simply adding computers and internet to an outdated curriculum does not result in a modern teaching practice and curriculum – it just results in an outdated curriculum with computers and internet."

One exception is Uruguay's Ceibal programme which, despite the obstacles it faces, has managed to connect over 50% of the country's poorest households to the internet. The programme offers an interesting example of how an e-education initiative can be used to enable the socioeconomic rights of communities generally, and how education policies can speak more broadly to social inclusion.

Several country reports focus on the right to health. In the Philippines, although the Aquino government "recognised public health as a key measure of good governance," challenges in its e-health interventions persist, including "data manipulation by healthcare workers, system compatibility between agencies, and data portability." It is unclear if these will be remedied under the country's new regime, preoccupied with its war on illegal drugs and encouraging vigilantism against addicts rather than building rehabilitation centres. "Public health," writes the Foundation for Media Alternatives, "does not appear to be a major concern."

In Venezuela, a country wracked by food and medicine shortages, stories have emerged of citizens forced to barter medicines using social media in a desperate attempt to secure critical drugs (as one commentator put it, "social networks are the new pharmacy in Venezuela"). EsLaRed reports that shortages in medicines are as high as 85%, and costs for some drugs have risen 75%. In its response, the government – which has largely denied that a crisis exists – has set up centralised database systems linking supermarkets and pharmacies in order to monitor and control the supply and purchase of medicines and to limit hoarding.

An interesting programme has been launched in Uganda with the aim of providing rural communities a voice when it comes to their sexual and reproductive health rights. So-called community health advocates are recruited, equipped with smartphones, and trained in the country's legal and policy health rights framework, as well as in the effective use of social media. According to the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, government community forums (Barazas) are ineffective in providing a platform for health concerns. The community health advocates offer some measure of accountability in a context where "Ugandans, especially those in rural communities, rarely challenge the status quo."

Gender rights are reflected in a number of country reports. In South Africa, a capabilities survey by Research ICT Africa suggests that "women are showing more inclination towards becoming economically empowered and seem to identify the internet as a medium that can allow them to achieve this." Cooperativa Sulá Batsú usefully identifies key success factors in establishing a rural tech hub in the northeast of Costa Rica. While benefiting the community as a whole, the author suggests it has specific value in empowering rural women socioeconomically. In Yemen, two women – Safa'a and Afnan – have managed to keep their online cake business going despite the war in that country which forced many others to shut down their businesses: "The war has impacted on our business severely. Exported material we used for our products has doubled in price... [L]eaving the house to get decoration items... has become difficult given the state of insecurity." As a counterpoint, the authors of the report from Turkey ask whether the oft-cited idea that the internet empowers women through the employment and entrepreneurial opportunities it offers is in fact an "illusion", and the new ways of working opened up by the internet serve to "trivialise significant principles such as 'affirmative action'."

The rights of workers and rights in the workplace also receive some attention. In Cambodia, the plight of women garment factory workers has received international recognition because of the internet campaigning by human rights organisations: "More and more consumers are critically rethinking the consequences of fast and cheap fashion." This has placed significant pressure on the government and the industry in the country – the minimum wage for garment factory workers has more than doubled over the past five years, and, the author argues, social media has played an important part in that.

While Panama suggests how a lack of regulation of the telework sector allows for the exploitation of teleworkers, in the Democratic Republic of Congo outsourcing in the telecommunications sector has had a negative effect on workers' rights, allowing service providers to exploit the labour force. In the words of one telecoms employee, who was given the ultimatum of being re-employed by an outsourcing company or losing his job, "There was no choice. I needed a salary to sustain my family. So I continue doing the same job, with the same uniform, but receiving less money overnight."

The Seychelles offers an example of how many unions are underutilising the internet to secure workers' rights and boost their own visibility. The Seychelles Federation of Workers' Unions is "thinking about starting a Facebook page," but this is tentative – social media, as one unionist suggested, is "3.5 million HR accidents waiting to happen."

Some country reports explore relatively new areas of technology and its application. In Syria, large-scale 3D printing and digital imaging are being used to document and replicate cultural heritage destroyed in the war. An open content approach underpins several of the heritage projects in the country: "By releasing these artefacts under permissive licences... the space for innovation is significantly widened. This openness will also assist the efforts to restore and reconstruct the actual [heritage] sites in Syria when the war ends." In an interesting report, Panoptykon Foundation discusses how algorithms used to calculate social benefits in Poland – in a system ironically named Emp@thy – disempower the beneficiaries. Exactly how the benefits are calculated remains opaque, even to civil servants, and beneficiaries are strictly limited in their opportunities to ask for a recalculation or to challenge the results:

> The criteria according to which a certain profile of assistance is attributed to a person remains unknown to the unemployed throughout the whole process of profiling. They remain unclear even to the staff involved in this process. The unemployed are also deprived of the right to obtain information about the logic behind profiling; in particular, they cannot verify how certain features affected the profile of assistance that was attributed to them.

A striking thread runs through many of the reports: how the internet enables citizen-led initiatives that claim socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of state disinterest, inactivity or even repression. Community networks set up as part of the CitizenSqKm project in Spain, for example, allow citizens to map an "inventory of the 'things' in their neighbourhood, including institutions, services, historical landmarks and natural surroundings." It is a political-participatory process of reclaiming public data, information, and knowledge and increasing civic engagement in a context of growing austerity and state control. In Ukraine, crowdfunding ensures the sustainability of Hromadske.TV, an independent internet TV station started by "15 young Ukrainian journalists", while in Lebanon, the crowdfunding of social projects by the Lebanese diaspora "can give Lebanese a way around official government dysfunction and corruption":

> It also shifts the power dynamics – not just to wealthy Lebanese abroad, but to ordinary Lebanese citizens who can put their own hard-earned money towards causes they believe in rather than through government channels or those offered by big financial institutions. Crowdfunding can instill important liberal values like individual initiative, transparency, accountability and entrepreneurship.

The internet is a rich enabler of these forms of non-institutional processes, interventions and action – whether by consumers appalled by the working conditions of women in factories in Asia, or indigenous people opening a telecentre in their community. Even the cultural heritage reclamation in Palmyra was the result of the frustration of "archaeological experts, volunteers and activists" who saw the heritage being destroyed.

The internet, as the country reports show, has the potential to turn the latent need for participation and social inclusion into a kinetic enactment of rights.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina – a "society in perennial conflict over the recent past, and feverishly busy re-writing history to better serve ethnic divisions" – citizen volunteers re-opened the National Museum following state disinterest in allocating resources for its ongoing operation, a result of the "divisive framing of what 'national' means, and reflecting the tensions between the dominant ethnic groups." One World Platform argues this experience gave citizens a tangible sense of what it means to have rights:

> In terms of the definition of state as "duty bearer" we can say that the revitalisation of the museum exposed the state for its incapacity and unwillingness to mobilise resources to protect the cultural rights of people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The people working on the project experienced what it meant to be "rights holders" and were empowered to engage as individuals with rights in order to protect and promote their access to culture. The internet enabled their empowerment, and helped to expose the state's lack of political will.

It is with this in mind that we hope you find the following country reports – whether they offer cause for optimism or sound a cautionary note – thought provoking, challenging and a catalyst to action.

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Ten thematic reports frame the country reports. These deal both with overarching concerns when it comes to ESCRs and the internet – such as institutional frameworks and policy considerations – as well as more specific issues that impact on our rights: the legal justification for online education resources, the plight of migrant domestic workers, the use of digital databases to protect traditional knowledge from biopiracy, digital archiving, and the impact of multilateral trade deals on the international human rights framework.

The reports highlight the institutional and country-level possibilities and challenges that civil society faces in using the internet to enable ESCRs. They also suggest that in a number of instances, individuals, groups and communities are using the internet to enact their socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of disinterest, inaction or censure by the state.

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