ICTs, Development, disciplines and acronyms

By Ismael Peña-López (@ictlogist), 29 August 2009

The increasing interest in the relationship of Development and Information and Communication Technologies, and the need to make things simple — and write quick — have spread a couple of acronyms: ICTD and ICT4D. There are people that find them perfect synonyms. There are others that state that ICTD stands for Information and Communication Technologies *and* Development, while ICT4D stands for Information and Communication Technologies *for* Development, and that they have slight connotations that make them different.

Chris Coward puts it this way:

In order to accommodate a broader scope many people have turned to the term "ICTD," or ICT and development, to place the emphasis on the phenomenon of ICT use in developing countries, irrespective of whether there is a "developmental" goal or not [which would be the goal of ICT4D].

I find this difference interesting, but I would like to go one step beyond, in part because I agree with Coward on wondering whether it [is] meaningful to continue to lump countries into developing or developed buckets.

The two main drivers behind ICTD and ICT4D have usually been:

1. Information and Communication Technologies with a "developmental" goal

2. Information and Communication Technologies applied in developing or lesser-developed countries

The problem with the second one is that e.g. a network of telecenters in a rich country to foster Internet access in rural communities is, arguably, a perfect match in the field of development. But, although having a clear "developmental" goal, it is not happening in the poorest parts of the World, so it fails on the second part of the definition.

On the other hand, e.g. an e-Commerce or e-Administration project in a developing country does not necessarily has to have a "developmental" goal — provided we don't understand "development" in the broadest sense possible and think of it as any kind of improvement on how things work.

Indeed, the concept of development has many definitions (based on Economics, on Freedom, on Well-being, etc.) as countries (developing and developed) have many realities and things that do not work (and need being "developed") and things that do.
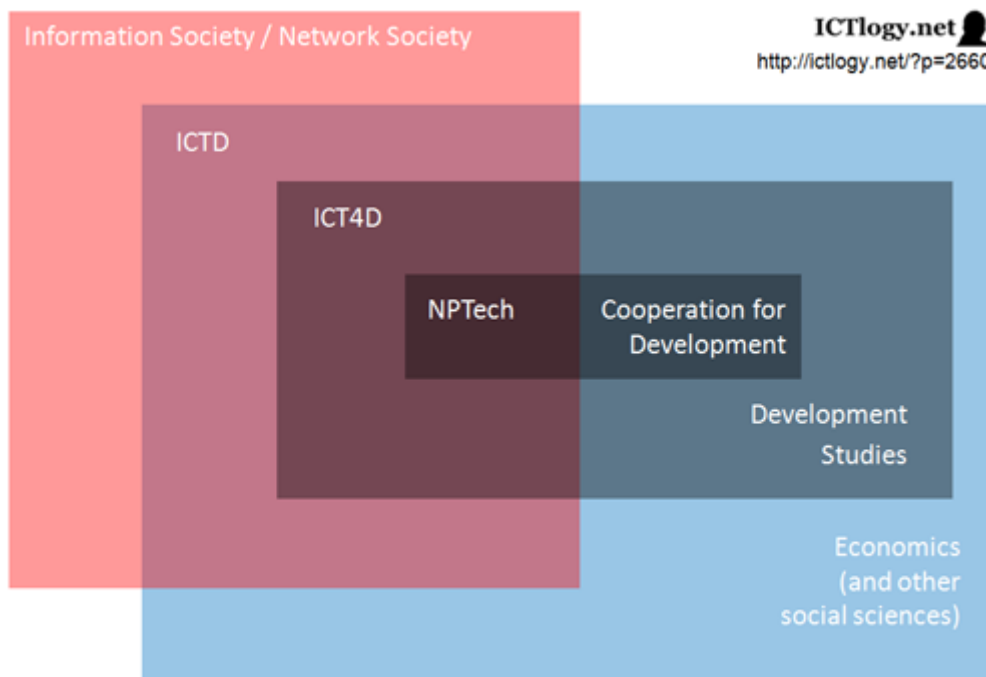
In fact, when talking about ICTD and ICT4D we are mixing two similar but completely different things:

- **Development as progress, as improving one's or a community's capability to perform an objective choice, a subjective choice and effective choice**; or, in other words, the fostering of socioeconomic development by increasing individual resources, the fostering of value change by enabling emancipating values, and the fostering of democratization by promoting freedom rights. This is a vertical approach to development: we are more or less developed in relationship with our past stages of development.

- **Development as equality and inclusion**, a completely horizontal approach to development: we are more or less developed in relationship with our peers or our neighbours.

With that in mind, my proposal would be the following:

- **ICT *and* Development (ICTD): The crossroads between ICTs and development as progress**, with 4 main drivers: Health (which includes nutrition — a necessary stage to speak of development), Economics (objective choice), Education (subjective choice) and Freedom (effective choice). In this sense, ICTD would deal about the future by understanding the past, about the impact of ICTs in these four aspects but always in the sense of achieving higher stages of well-being.

- **ICT *for* Development (ICT4D): or how ICTs can fight inequality and (social) exclusion**. This is neither dealing with the past nor with the future, but just dealing with the present. It's about levelling the playing ground — wherever this ground is placed: in lesser developed countries or in suburban slums.

Graphically, it could be pictured this way:

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[click to enlarge]

The graphic is based on the intersection of two main fields: the traditional disciplines that we call Social Sciences (with a predominant role of Economics) and the new interdisciplinar approach to the impact of ICTs on the society: the Information Society, the Knowledge Based Society, the Network Society and other similar labels.

ICTD would be the broader intersection area of these two main fields, while ICT4D would be the intersection of ICTD and a subset of Social Sciences: Development Studies.

I couldn't stop myself from also adding NGOs in the picture and see how Cooperation for Development — understood as the discipline that studies aid agencies, NGOs, volunteering and other non-for-profit initiatives — has also its ICT-driven counterpart, **nptech** (non-profit technology), also a most flourishing field.

Two final caveats about this whole digression:

1. This is my point of view and it is not based, in any way, in any kind of consensus or majority point of view. Indeed, precisely because there does not seem to be any majority point of view that I tried to put in order my own mind.

2. It's not names that matter, it's concepts. Whether we call it ICTD or ICT4D — or whatever new name that might come along — the important thing (to me) is that e.g. the analysis of the impact ICTs on productivity and competitiveness (and jobs and people) is similar but different to the analysis on how to avoid, by means of ICTs, poor people to starve or to be marginalized.

And this last point is, actually, *the* point I'm trying to put clear here: **the debate on ICTs and poverty should also take place in rich countries, as should the debate on ICTs and productivity and competitiveness in poor countries**. There are no developed countries with inequality problems and no poor problems with development problems: it's a continuum where we all share the same goals and problems, though we're on different stages. And I believe that to think otherwise will damage the speed at which we reach the "solution(s)".

See also:

- **Research in ICT4D: the convergence of social sciences and technology**, by Ismael Peña-López

More info:

- Fostering the Information Society for Development in the Web 2.0 framework: from push to pull strategies — the case of Spain, by Ismael Peña-López

- Gurumurthy, A. & Singh, P. J. (2009). *ICTD – Is it a New Species of Development?*. IT for Change Perspective Paper. Bangalore: IT for Change.

- A (growing) list of ICT4D/ICTD definitions on delicious