

The habitant's association and the ICTs, proposals for an international research-action

by Cesare Ottolini

Do we know how to measure an elephant?

"Suppose I hire you to measure an elephant. That may sound like a pretty straightforward job description, but think about it for a minute. Do you measure its weight? Height? Length? Volume? Intensity of its grey colour? ... In order to measure this creature, you need to select one or a few characteristics from many possibilities. That choice will be determined by your purpose of measuring." The problem becomes more complex if the elephant moves, changes position and grows. It becomes perhaps unsolvable if the elephant evolves, transforming itself in another animal species. How can I measure something that no longer is there, in other words, something that has become something else?

Extending this metaphor, if we consider the issue of the indicators, we can't avoid considering their great variety, the differences in their sources and the different goals underlying the collection and elaboration of data. From the OCSE to the IMF, from the World Bank to the UNESCO, from the various other agencies of the UN to the databases of the governments themselves, and also including those indicators adopted to measure the implementation of Agenda 21 and of the Habitat Agenda, we can note that a growing number of institutions at the transnational level, are weaving a web of numerical output that can be neither easily interpreted nor utilised. This issue becomes more complicated if we examine the introduction of the Information Technologies (ICTs). The technological innovation in the information fields is in fact provoking a real revolution in the relationships between production and exchange, and is thereby accelerating the globalization processes. We are dealing with an unprecedented revolution whose influence permeates as far as the families and the city quarters. But regardless of this influence, the use of the ICTs is not included among the indicators of urban development, even though precise and update statistics are available.

The unequal distribution of the ICTs

Lets us see what we can understand from an interpretation of the data that regards the symbol - instrument of the ITC, that is, the distribution of the Internet hosts and users in the various countries and regions of the world. In July 1997 there were about 19,5 million hosts on the Internet. For a long time, the number of hosts has doubled every year, yet the distribution of hosts, according countries and regions, hasn't changed much in this period. The Third World is still participating with a mere three per cent, while the United States accounts for about 60 per cent of all the Internet hosts. About 81,5 % of world-wide Internet hosts are in the G7-countries, which make up only about ten per cent of world population. On the other hand, the most populated countries of the Third World, China, India, Brazil and Nigeria, all together make up only 0,6 % of all hosts, even though they possess about one third of the world population. In many countries there are only a few Internet connections and there are still some blank areas in Africa and Asia on the Internet map. In January 1997 Nigeria, a country with a population of 100 million, possessed only four Internet hosts. In developing countries full Internet connections, with all services, are present only in the capital cities. Outside the cities the use of e-mail only is sometimes available. In Africa, with the exception of the Republic of South Africa and Senegal, there are no direct Internet connections in rural areas.

This gap can be explained if we examine the three prerequisites for using Internet. First you need a phone connection, second a computer and a modem and third electricity. Such prerequisites are the exception, rather than the norm, in Third World. With regard to electricity, this is in many cases, a first insurmountable obstacle. A characteristic of many developing countries is an unstable power supply system resulting in frequent power failures in cities, and the total lack of power

supply in rural areas. This means that 70 % of all Africans living in rural areas have no power supply.

On the Indian subcontinent as well, more than half of all houses in rural areas lack any power supply. The other prerequisite for an Internet connection via PC is a telephone line. But 80 % of world population doesn't have one. In 49 countries there is less than one telephone mainline per one hundred inhabitants and 35 of these countries are in Africa. On the other hand, in the USA and in Germany there is one telephone for every two inhabitants. The ten richest countries with twenty per cent of world population have three quarters of all telephone mainlines. The average density of telephone mainlines in developing countries is 5,2 per 100 persons while in industrialised countries it is 52,3. In Third World regions most telephone lines are in city areas. In rural Africa, with 78 % of the population, there is a total of only 228 000 lines. This means that 1700 person should share one telephone.

Last, but not least, there is the cost obstacle. For countries without direct access to Internet the costs of being connected to the net are especially prohibitive, since the costs they have to pay are based on an international call rate. Monthly fees for an Internet account are often unreachable for common people in developing countries. Considering the average income of ordinary people, it results prohibitive for the majority. The average cost of a low volume Internet account in Africa is about 65 dollars a month, nearly equivalent to the per capita income of Mozambique. Beside these costs and fees, acquiring a computer and a modem is much more expensive in the Third World than in the First World. The average cost of a PC and a modem, 2,000, US \$, is clearly an astronomical amount of money to most people in developing countries, which have an average GNP per capita of 970 US \$, compared to 16,394 US \$ in the industrialised world.

This data tells us something about the existing gap also present in this realm between the southern and northern countries. The situation is continuously evolving, and this is reflected in the fact that up to today 78.792 million world-wide hosts have been certified. But it seems that this gap is still destined to increase if we consider the costs of cabling, which are insurmountable for countries that are risking bankruptcy due to their foreign debt. In other words, rather than laying out the foundation for a new civilisation, the information revolution seems to be introducing a new and more dangerous form of exclusion resulting from the erection of formidable obstacles that further impede the reduction of the North-South gaps. On the other hand, given the presence of wars, famine unemployment and pollution, it is difficult to state that connecting developing countries to Internet is a priority even if now this question is unavoidable.

A Possible interpretation of the Social Use of ICTs

From these data we are unable to understand how and if the ICTs are being used by the various interested subjects, public authorities, private sectors, Ngos, and habitant associations to promote a sustainable development of the city. Let us anyway try verify if the information revolution has a prominent role in consolidating democracy, citizenship and in rethinking the production of the city. We know that certain transnational institutions have introduced specific programs concerning the development of ICTs use. For example, the World Bank has created a project named Regional Environment Information Management Project (REIMP) that seeks to offer full Internet services to membership countries. The same World Bank has created in 1995 its program INFODEV for information and development. Likewise, UNESCO has created the Intergovernmental Informatics Program (IIP) whose goal revolves around the principle of developing human resources through informatics in the context of comprehensive, sustainable development in developing countries.

The use of ICTs received a strong push, starting from the summit of the United Nations and in particular since they followed the general and implementation programs of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. The states present at the conference adopted Agenda 21, that in mentions the issues of collecting and using information for sustainable development and for monitoring the Agenda 21 implementation,

Chapter 40 requests as well, that the United Nations subsidiary organisations render accessible all their information by means of computer networks.

We know that even the Ngos are increasingly making use of the ICTs. Among these we recall the Association for Progressive Communication (APC), which since 1984 is a real pioneer in this sector. It is a global federation composed of 24 non-profit providers that presently count over 50.000 members in 133 countries. The APC favours the exchange of experience and the projection and carrying out of development programs, managing at the same time hundreds of e-conferences concerning topics ranging from AIDS to Zimbabwe.

For the first time these associations were able to coordinate themselves and to intervene in an international summit, the 1992 RIO summit, by means of computer networks. Similar actions occurred in the 1993 Vienna Human Rights Summit, in the 1994 Cairo World Conference on Population, in the Copenhagen World Summit of Social Affairs, in the 1995 Peking World Summit on Women and in the 1996 Istanbul World Habitat II.

Recently, at the end of 1999, the association networks were able to globally coordinate themselves during Seattle's WTO Summit.

Throughout these public events the Ngos and grassroots associations have weaved a network of relations and exchanges, while showing an awareness of the risks and limits of the ICTs with the adoption of Declaration of New Delhi in 1994. In the latter declaration the signatories refer to the UN Declaration on the Right to Development, the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the UN Declaration on Human Rights, the declarations of the Mac Bride Round Table and the Quito Declaration. They emphasise the ever more increasing monopolisation and commercialisation of information and the expansion of a global economy, which has led to a subversion of democratic processes and reduced popular participation. In this context, it is further apparent that as new technologies are introduced, human dignity is diminished. Therefore, the signatories of the declaration demand a global democratisation, instead of the creation of a global supermarket. All people have the right to be informed and to inform other people. So the new media involved in the flow of information should principally serve the public interest and the community. By taxation of commercial use, the non-commercial information exchange should be subsidised and by means of a decentralised organisation, cultural diversity should be guaranteed.

ICTs and urban development: some paths

The present dynamics indicate some paths to follow in considering the role played by the ICTs within the activity of the associations involved in promoting a sustainable urban development. In this specific field the paths are becoming clearer beginning from Habitat II, when Habitat International Coalition (HIC) assumed the role of preparing and coordinating the participation of the associations and the Ngos. On that occasion HIC carried out an international research action utilising for the first time Internet as a principal tool for acquiring knowledge and exchanging and evaluating the new experiences developed by the inhabitants in the city's construction. It is during this period that the Dialogues et documents pour le Progrès de l'Humanité (DPH), evolves. The latter network by favoured the mutual exchange of experience and produced thousand of computerised summary cards regarding urban, social and environmental issues. In Istanbul it promoted a Forum of the Habitants. This same database itself became a reason of mutual exchange and subsequently was included on the web.

Still proceeding along these and other paths, we find some interesting examples that underline, even among the associations, a considerable disparity between the North and South of the planet. In the USA by now there are hundreds of local, national and federal associations that make use of internet, ranging from the National Coalition for the Homeless, to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, from the National Low Income Housing Coalition to the Habitat for Humanity. We note for example, Neighbourhoods Online, a virtual centre created in 1995 in Philadelphia, aimed at subjects involved in the construction and development of the city quarters across the USA. The goal of this server is to furnish a rapid access to information regarding the various aspects life

in the quarters, as well as to create a national network of activists that work together by exchanging experiences. The three sections of the site (building community, the Neighbourhoods, Neighbourhood Online National) give access to the network not only the associations, but potentially also the single citizens. Another example is the Homeless People Network, a site which is reserved to the homeless: homeless but connected to Internet, being hence able to use the services of the associations or the Internet points.

In the South the situation is much more difficult, even if well grounded and interesting sights aren't at all lacking. Among these we underline ENDA - Tiers Monde, an international Ngo based in Dakar, Senegal that focuses on sustainable development in Africa and the developing world. Membership with the APC is held by their Networking Department. Since the early 1990s, this extended IT department has provided connectivity to the larger organisations, for its projects and to Ngo partners in Senegal and other French-phone West African countries. Between 1992 and 1996 ENDA acted as a local hub for e-mail, which was networked over phone lines and Fidonet to GreenNet in the UK. By 1996 ENDA began to provide full Internet services including e-mail, mailing lists, and WWW. Its activity follows the hypothesis that the exchanges of South to South experience promotes development and, according to this perspective, is aimed at developing the use of ICTs present in the quarter associations promoting, in such manner, projects of action - research - training.

Along the same lines, we find Fedevivienda, the Federación Nacional de Organizaciones de Vivienda Popular, established in 1982 by five organisations involved in Columbia in the construction of welfare housing.

Being among the first to use Internet, Fedevivienda has formed, along with other associations, Colnodo, a Colombian communications network serving non-governmental organisations dedicated to community development. In 1999 Colnodo was awarded the first Columbia Internet Prize by the Cámara Colombiana de Informática y Telecomunicaciones. Colnodo participates in the transnational project, Telecentro, financed by the International Development Research Centre, that aims at furnishing four city quarters of Bogotá access to Internet, as well as training courses ICT use.

A Knowledge and analysis deficit

In 1994 the Declaration of New Delhi laid out a firm line between the diametrically opposed viewpoints of the Zealots of the information technology, that suggest that information technology has the capacity to totally transform society and to redeem society from its social ills, and of the information technology Luddites that argue that the new technology has the capacity to enslave society. The associations as far as possible, have pragmatically tried to utilise the ICTs.

Up to today there is a lack of, or a strong deficit of knowledge and evaluations concerning the impact that the ICTs have on the activity of the same associations, the nature of the relationship with groups lacking telecommunication connections, and the ICT's effective usefulness in facing the challenge posed by the globalization and in promoting of the sustainable development.

Among the few analysis carried out on these points we note the research on "Gender and technology of information" developed by an ad hoc APC program which individualises some of the general tendencies. In Europe and in the Southern countries there is predominant use of e-mail and of e-groups forums, with more attention paid to diffusing the information collected in the aforementioned manners to the public by the use of other media (photocopies, fax, telephone, radio etc.) In the North, and in some countries of Latin America, there is instead a predominant use of the web and of the search engines.

A consequence of this deficit in knowledge could be, not only a parallel academic and scientific deficit, but also a mistaken approach to the whole question. Paradoxically, even if a massive development of ICTs occurred in the developing countries, one of the potential outcomes, consumerist or mere virtual use of the ICTs, would have no positive reflections towards the achievement of a sustainable development. The diffusion of TV as a new opium of the people, even

considering the fact that the nature of this media makes it fit for this role, is a warning for us and should make us reflect.

Towards a bottom-up and participative approach to ICTs knowledge and development

For these reasons, referring back to the elephant measuring paradox, it seems, above all, useful to develop ICT research that isn't limited to the measurement of the North - South gap but that also, at the same time, considers the viewpoints and opinions of the subjects directly interested in the use of ICTs. In other words, the aim should be to realise a type of research - action that is capable of involving the direct actors of the urban changes, in order to: facilitate the use of ICTs in the exchange of experiences, favour the change of certain paradigms, and strengthen the capacity building. This type of research should determine specific needs in terms of availability of instruments and necessary training for their utilization. To this end, the introduction of a new indicator is probably necessary. However, the most important things that these studies ought to accomplish is an analysis of the economic, political and cultural blocks, and an individuation of the new trends present in the communities' initiatives and of the alternative uses of the ICTs.

This bottom-up approach, once it would involve persons and associations, it could probably offer more chances in passing from the simple awareness of the problems to their possible solutions. In other words, the dynamic that could be activated, also thanks to this type of approach, could favour those popular strategies of the habitants that are necessary to realise the balanced, ecologically and socially sustainable urban policies that have, up to now, been almost totally denied at the local level.

In the final analysis, we are dealing with fields of research entirely to be explored - and not only on the web - that could offer to the governments, to the trans-national institutions, and to the foundations, new ideas usual for adapting and improving the approach assumed by the international cooperation itself towards urban development.

International Alliance of Inhabitants



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