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New Communication Technologies, Women & Democracy

By

Delia Torrijos
NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES,
WOMEN & DEMOCRACY

By Delia Torrijos

One of the greatest, most profound, changes affecting the world since the last 5 decades is the dizzying development of means of communication. Television, radio, telephone, fax, satellite links, video conferencing, computerized databases, multi-media, etc. are all technological tools that are now fundamentally transforming our access to information and knowledge. They are changing the way we work, study, do research, and educate our children and ourselves. They are influencing the way we do our banking, pay our bills, entertain ourselves and do business.

New applications are being provided for us in the field of health care, education, environmental protection, culture and business. A more direct and open rapport between private individuals and public administrators is becoming increasingly possible.

For the politicians, the estimated 60 million jobs to be provided by the information and communications sector by the turn of the century as compared to today’s 13 million, signals a vision that may eliminate the greatest problem of unemployment facing industrial society.

NCT as Tool

To illustrate how NCT has pervasively entered our lives, let us imagine flashes of these profound changes as we go through our daily life today:

1. Latest world news with vivid images of events as they occur elsewhere are flashed at virtually the same instant anywhere and everywhere, e.g. broadcasts by CNN, BBC, ABC, ITN, NHK, and more recently Australia and Germany are broadcasting news in the region.

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1Keynote address delivered on 19 October 1995 by Miss Delia E. Torrijos, UNESCO/PGI Regional Adviser for Asia/Pacific, at the seminar organized by AMIC and Bangkok University.
2. Our work or even our route to go elsewhere can now be plotted differently, guided by a 24-hour broadcast of traffic conditions in Bangkok’s major thoroughfares. Not that it makes much difference most of the time, but it does sometimes.

3. Some already live in a multi-media society, with radios, televisions, computers, games, videos, mobile phones and the Internet and many other networks constantly finding their applications in the way we live and work and even in what we do for entertainment. We can be connected by ISDN and satellite to every other point on the globe.

4. Interactive video technology links cameras, computers, networks, software and speech. It enables the student to combine graphics, animation, sound, video, text and numerical data in a customized learning tool.

5. Educational programmes are broadcast by radio and television, enabling those who live in the most remote areas to learn free of charge, and the poorest countries to save on several hundred teachers while providing their population opportunities for learning music, languages, pick up ideas on how to improve their livelihood, learning at their own pace, learning without frontiers.

6. Electronic libraries are coming of age, where everything is in digitized format giving us a glimpse of the long announced coming of the paperless society. We now have books and technical journals in CD-ROM, databases with full-text documents, and other information carriers that are now accessible by computers.

7. The ubiquitous microcomputers and word-processing softwares are now in almost everybody’s office, either for the secretaries or the bosses to handle themselves. Laptops are carried around, in planes, trains, everywhere,
enabling rapid reporting, providing opportunities to receive and send messages, or even to be in constant contact with one's office even while on the road, at home or abroad.

8. The mobile phones provide instant access wherever the person is. It has also linked remote areas, where before it needed enormous investment to do so.

9. Others are now given the opportunity of working at home, either to avoid traffic like here in Bangkok, or to save office space which is getting very costly, or altogether as an alternative way of running a business.

And the list will continue to get longer, as we find ourselves more and more pushed to go high-tech to remain competitive.

Ladies & gentlemen,

The images I tried to walk you through are scenes of today. They are not happening in all the nooks and corners of the world, that is true, but they are realities in major cities and urban centers of the world and here in the region, too.

Picture a system where every citizen would have on-line access, via individual workstations, to terabytes of information directly available within a community learning utility (CLU) or via a network, on a pay-as-you-use basis. The CLU will give access to teaching and study programmes, multi-media training software, reports from news agencies, electronic technical journals, network access to distant data-bases and electronic tools, such as E-mail, bulletin boards, etc.

Experiments have been reported, which aimed to make Singapore an "intelligent island"; or some buildings constructed recently being called "intelligent buildings". It has also been reported that living in an "intelligent" home will be a reality by the end of the century. Home systems are being developed aimed at mass markets.
To illustrate this concept, imagine being able to control all the equipment in your home at any time, while watching your favourite TV programme. If the doorbell rings, you could view your visitor immediately on your TV set or personal computer. Without leaving your armchair, or from any other spot (office, car, etc.) you could set heating (or aircon) in each room, close the shutters or windows, check your electricity, gas and water bills, look into the baby’s bedroom, check how your dinner is doing, programme your washing machine to start at off-peak times, etc. All these chronicle a domestic revolution to come.

Points for Reflection

All these are exciting developments that provide us excellent opportunities to address the problems in our midst and the issues we should face for a better tomorrow.

The challenge is to identify those problems and issues that will deny some of us the use of NCT and mount programmes that will eliminate whatever obstacles. For example, is the mass media still in the hands of a few large press agencies and radio/TV moguls who dictate what we see or from whom national and local media depend entirely? How do we democratize the media? How do we democratize access to IT, when huge investments are involved in their development and market forces demand a return to such investments? I leave the details of problems/issues identification to your panel discussions as you will then have more time to do so.

Development as Primary Goal

Now that we have gone through a gamut of applications and potentials of NCT, allow me to turn the discussion around and place the theme of your seminar within the framework of development and see how NCT or ICT as a tool will impact on it and women as
Key players or participants in the development process will be able to effectively contribute to that process, using ICT as a tool.

If we aim at development as the main goal, it is important that we recognize its triangular relationship and interdependence with peace and democracy to ensure its sustainability. This means, development will not occur, if there is no peace, and peace will not prosper if it is not anchored in a system where the principles of justice, equity, solidarity and freedom, which is democracy, are present so that human beings can participate in the life of their communities. When this happens, human beings can act like fully committed citizens and contribute to an enhanced security at the personal level and at local, national and international levels.

The key therefore is to enable ICT applications to promote true understanding and promotion of these concepts (development, democracy and peace), and with IT provide vivid applications and demonstrations to be able to reach out to all segments of society.
Points for Reflection

When reflecting on sustainable development, the coldness and impersonality of our high-tech world, or our equally disturbing highly materialistic and consumption-conscious world, we can flash images of poverty and exclusion, of suffering and violence to reach us all in "real time", to evoke in us the human touch that inspires authenticity, sincerity and passion, which must play the central role in our lives. It means thinking not only of ourselves today alone, but thinking ahead about the children we will raise and the world they will inherit. It means questioning, disagreeing, asking always the "reason why", but refusing violence always. It means understanding that tolerance is neither indifference nor concession nor condescension; it means openness, respect, solidarity and acceptance of our diversity as human beings. Tolerance is facilitated through direct contacts, communication and education. The end results of such reflection should be the "development" we should aim for, and for which we should use NCT as a tool.

Women as Key Players and Active Participants

Let us now turn to the key player and participants we wish to engage fully in bringing about sustainable development of our society - the women and girls. Women make up almost half of the world population which if developed and harnessed fully will certainly be able to contribute significantly to the development of our world.

It is absolutely incomprehensible why, with all our collective experience in management of resources and business, we continue to fail in harnessing the full potential of that great number of women and girls as active participants and equal partners in development. That women’s full participation is not happening is because of lack of gender sensitivity in our policies, lack of equal opportunities given to women in education, in the home and work place, and in government. The gender-based stereotyping that can be found in public and private, local, national and international sectors must be eliminated.
The continued projection of negative and degrading images of women in media - electronic, print, visual and audio - must be changed. Instead print and electronic media must provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world.

Women must be empowered by enhancing their skills, knowledge and access to information and technology. Here, I would like to refer you to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, because it does provide a comprehensive set of recommendations addressing the gender issues that had been highlighted during the women's conference held in Beijing last month. There is no time for me to repeat them here, but I suggest that you take steps implementable in your own country situation and with that step you will be able to achieve something.

Points for Reflection

Some of the obstacles that impede women participation and proper assessment of the true value, including economic, of women's contribution are culture-based. Societies where women are held in such deplorable status need to change, and such change require a lot of time, which may take even generations. More concerted actions at all levels need to be directed to those societies to achieve significant success within a reasonable period.

It is not to minimize or simplify problems in other countries, but they are not as crucial, because their conditions have improved, their women are more skilled, educated and articulate, and can thus do things on their own, or with some nominal intervention from other key players within the country or outside.

We all have our own agenda, but there are times when we are called upon to give way to the poorest of the poor, the most deprived and disadvantaged, the hopeless and those who have long remained in darkness, seeing no light at the end of the tunnel. And that call is now. The world community must take action and in this region, we can do a lot and provide good examples.
In closing, let me share with you a strategy for resource mobilization, because indeed whatever you do, you will need funds and support. One sure way is to identify key areas which are attractive to donors and key players, and try to link your activity to them. In other words try to ride with marketable, bankable, saleable projects. You can even use their buzz words.

With that note, let me tell you that you have exciting possibilities in NCT. For your information, please note that reports indicate that progress towards the information society has gained momentum and that 3 key driving forces are all pushing in the same direction, namely:

- the industrial motor is finally in gear and this means real investment is being made in infrastructure, in applications, in content and in new services of many kinds.

- political will is now behind the information society. The issue has been placed at the top of the political agenda of the G-7 and other countries.

- new policies are being formulated. Policy makers are beginning to examine the information society, the issues it raises and the obstacles that must be overcome, in a coherent and coordinated way.

This means opportunities for pushing your own agenda on promoting women status and participation and more importantly that this evolving information society is made more gender-sensitive and more gender democratic. With these words, I am closing this keynote address on a high note of optimism and hope that we shall all be alert and vigilant in making NCT a powerful and magical tool, not for oppression and exclusion, but towards creating a better tomorrow for every human being on earth, irrespective of race, sex, language or religion. Thank you.