

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, WSIS, AND EMERGING USES OF ICTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“In the evolution of the Information Society, particular attention must be given to the special situation of Indigenous peoples, as well as to the preservation of their heritage and their cultural legacy” (WSIS Declaration of Principles, 2003, Article 15)

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1. Introduction

During the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Indigenous Peoples called for their full and effective participation in the Information Age on their own terms. While implementation of the WSIS Plan of Action has been limited, there are many examples of Indigenous Peoples creatively engaging Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) independently, or in partnership with NGOs, private sector, governments and intergovernmental organizations, and other Indigenous Peoples. Innovative software, hardware, and existing technologies are being employed to, among other things: defend their human rights, and preserve, manage, and promote their unique cultural heritage. Nevertheless, political will, cooperation, and comprehensive, multi-stakeholder strategies are essential to promote, attain, and sustain a more equitable Information Society, with the full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples.

This report summarizes Indigenous Peoples' engagement with the Information Society and provides an overview of their participation during the WSIS process. Particular attention is given to the relevance of "knowledge societies" and the WSIS Plan of Action's C8 Action line on "Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content." Drawing on Indigenous Peoples' Declarations, statements, and interviews, as well as intergovernmental and academic reports, this review also samples innovations and emerging trends with a view toward guiding strategies, projects, and policy-making, in the post-WSIS environment.

Indigenous Peoples and ICTs: the gaps

Many Indigenous Peoples, whether in developed or in developing countries, are distinctly disadvantaged with regard to access to and distribution of digital information (Samaras 2005, p.84). Additionally, Indigenous Peoples, and others, are often disadvantaged in terms of literacy or the skills-based capabilities required for effective utilization of ICTs (Samaras, 2005; Helsper 2010, p. 27). Commenting on the barriers many Innu children experience with

regard to ICTs, Jack Penashue, an Innu from Sheshatshiu, Labrador stated, "In order for our children to participate on an equal level with leaders of the future, they need to have the same access and training with computers and the internet as children from all cultures" (Brown & Tidwell Cullen, 2005). Considering the diversity of Indigenous Peoples, however, digital disadvantage is not always simply a question of lack of access.

For some Indigenous Peoples, ICTs represent a vulnerability to further colonization and a threat to the vitality of their cultures, languages and religions. There is also concern over a lack of protections for traditional knowledge, intellectual property, and collective guardianship (Kamira 2002, p.5). Affecting attitudinal barriers toward ICTs requires more than innovative and creative approaches; it requires a level of trust attainable with the adequate protections and safeguards of Indigenous Peoples rights, including the full and effective participation of the communities involved in projects that affect them. Implementing international instruments and processes, including the WSIS outcomes, can play an important role in promoting protections, safeguards and standards.

Indigenous Peoples and the WSIS process

During the WSIS process Indigenous Peoples clearly articulated their positions on ICTs in various statements including the *Geneva Declaration of the Global Forum of Indigenous Peoples and the Information Society*, which, along with WSIS outcome documents, provide guidance to all stakeholders interested in using ICTs to help improve Indigenous Peoples' quality of life. Additionally, renewed focus on the WSIS Action Plan's C8 Action line and including the concept of "knowledge societies" within the emerging dialog could provide new opportunities for partnership.

Indigenous Peoples and ICT innovation

This study proposes that there is a need to assess ICT projects in Indigenous Peoples' communities with a view toward understanding who is driving and guiding the innovation. A useful model for doing so can be derived from Heeks' (2009, pp.13-15) assessment of

different innovation perspectives: “laboratory” (pro-poor), “collaborative” (para-poor), and “grassroots” (per-poor) efforts. Heeks’ model is easily adapted to:

- a) **Pro-indigenous** (for Indigenous Peoples): initiatives which derive from outside of the targeted communities, but are undertaken on behalf of Indigenous Peoples;
- b) **Para-indigenous** (with Indigenous Peoples): initiatives which are undertaken alongside Indigenous Peoples’ communities;
- c) **Per-indigenous** (by Indigenous Peoples): innovations around processes, new products and business models which are devised by Indigenous Peoples in relation to their own self-defined needs and wants.

Viewing innovation and emerging trends through this lens will assist in the ongoing development and much needed evaluation of ICT related projects and policies that seek to benefit Indigenous Peoples around the world. Indeed, while there are examples of innovative practices across a wide range of themes, the report’s case studies fall within the following thematic areas: 1) Indigenous media including television broadcasting, film and video making, community radio, and journalism; 2) Indigenous community mapping; 3) mobile technologies; 4) language vitality and maintenance. Education is also an important theme for Indigenous Peoples, but it has recently been reviewed elsewhere (Resta 2011), and therefore not analysed in detail in this report.

The case studies were chosen to highlight innovation and demonstrate the potential for empowerment of well-designed per- and para-indigenous ICT initiatives. In Central India, for instance, the innovative mobile news service CGnet Swara is changing how Tribal Peoples in remote areas receive and share independent news. This freely accessible, interactive, voice-based mobile platform allows users to send and listen to audio reports in their local language. CGNet Swara’s focus on local content, Indigenous languages, gender balance, and equitable knowledge transfer should be of interest to potential multi-sector partners.

In an example of a per-indigenous initiative, Thornton Media, Inc. (TMI) creates custom hi-tech tools to help preserve endangered Indigenous languages. The company has

developed applications for over 160 American Indian Tribes and Canadian First Nations including Apple Apps, Android Apps, Nintendo Apps, handheld translators and Smart-Toys. Importantly, clients retain ownership of all of their cultural property. The implications of these applications are significant when considering the increasing accessibility of mobile telephony and the state of Indigenous languages worldwide.

Some case studies highlight gaps and shortcomings in the implementation of initiatives. For instance, while film and video initiatives have the potential to empower Indigenous communities, facilitate intercultural dialogue, and expand knowledge societies, many projects lack sustainability as a result of their short duration or the need for comprehensive participant training.

Recommendations

The following recommendations, congruent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)¹ and supported by other international instruments, are offered for the consideration of governments, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and Indigenous Peoples. The overarching principle of these recommendations is premised on the full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples at all stages of strategy and programme development, as well as in implementation, evaluation, and monitoring.

1. *Foster policies and projects that enable para and per-indigenous approaches to ICTs*
Emerging programmes and policies should move toward para and per-indigenous initiatives that enable Indigenous Peoples to develop, control, and maintain culturally appropriate approaches to ICT usage, on their own, or in partnership with other stakeholders.

¹ The UNDRIP sets out the principles of partnership and mutual respect that should guide relationships between Indigenous Peoples and other parties.

2. *Consideration of all types of ICTs, including radio, TV and mobile telephony, in service design development could increase engagement of some Indigenous Peoples*

Policies and programmes should emphasise assessing and scaling applications that are already benefiting Indigenous communities.

3. *E-government and E-community initiatives should be expanded*

National and international e-strategies should have a specific Indigenous Peoples focus when these strategies are being developed in areas where they reside. Providing alternative ways for Indigenous Peoples to access e-services should be a priority.

4. *Expansion of wireless capacity to increase quantity and quality of access for Indigenous People is critical*

A strategy to develop appropriate Universal Indigenous Connectivity² was a central theme promoted by Indigenous Peoples during the WSIS process. Within this framework, the expansion of wireless capacity employing new wireless standard for Wireless Regional Area Networks (WRAN) should be a priority.

5. *Foster policies and programmes that promote media pluralism with a focus on Indigenous media*

Develop programmes and policies that: support sustainable Indigenous Media development; ensure adequate protection of traditional knowledge and the safety of Indigenous journalists; remove policies denying Indigenous Peoples access and control of communications networks and frequencies; and support to Indigenous-to-Indigenous media initiatives.

6. *Long-term goals need to include long-term support strategies*

² In this context basic infrastructure, affordability, literacy skills, and relevant content are identified as key barriers and enablers.

Long-term support for capacity building, secure sustainable funding resources, as well as on-going monitoring and evaluation need to be prioritized.

7. *Encourage research to address the lack of disaggregated data concerning Indigenous Peoples and ICTs*

Accurate measurements of ICT adoption, usage, and impacts among Indigenous Peoples are needed to aid policymakers and programme developers make well-informed decisions. Strategies to mainstream findings across sectors should include consultations, deployment policies, and programmes inclusive of Indigenous Peoples.

References

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