Interview of Lisa McLaughlin, Advisor, CITIGEN, and Associate Professor, Miami University-Ohio, USA

1. How does the emerging information society context recast issues of women's participation and citizenship, both theoretically and in practice?

I suppose that, first of all, it should be noted that, without women's participation, there is no information society (although perhaps an "information economy") in the inclusive sense that many commentators intend and no matter how much the expression "information society" is repeated as a mantra. Women's equality is necessary for the emergence of an information society, in other words. Otherwise, we are caught in a situation in which women must fit into a paradigm and set of practices in which they had no input or influence from the beginning. This is similar to how the World Summit on the Information Society was handled, from a gender perspective, where a preliminary agenda was drafted through the ITU/UN in 2001 and then it was circulated to the various women-oriented intergovernmental entities so that they, in effect, might "genderise" the agenda – more-or-less after it had been determined in advance. We need to consider how an "information society" might emerge with women as full participants and citizens at local, national, regional, and global/transnational levels.

Of course, notably since the mid-1990s, remarkable progress has been made by a growing number of local, national, and international women's networks whose efforts are focused on global information dissemination, monitoring of governmental and intergovernmental organisations, and the creation of educational programmes to promote women's social, political, and economic empowerment. But, within the so-called information society, these practices exist alongside – and within – a global, neoliberal capitalist environment in which forms of communication and information have become products and services and citizen-activists are considered less useful than are consumers, users, and "knowledge workers." This poses a significant problem in particular for women in the Global South who mostly have had far less access to information technology than have women in the Global North, in line with the "digital divide," which is an economic development divide. In recent years, women in the Global South have become attractive to policy-makers and the private sector, less as claimants to the rights of citizenship than as information workers, often labouring at low-skilled and semi-skilled jobs in the information processing sector. What is promising is that many women in the Global South do not surrender to the New Information Economy but, instead, struggle to claim their rights and the rights of others, fight for gender justice, and demand to have a voice in matters of government and governance. ICTs have been very effectively used in these efforts, although clearly, ICTs in and of themselves do not create an environment for democratic inclusion and dialogue. As Jürgen Habermas has written, there can be no public sphere without a public. Women are playing a critical role in the counter-public sphere (or counter-public spheres) and are making use of technology to advance their agendas toward socio-economic justice.

2. What conceptual threads did you see emerging at the conference? What ideas did you find intriguing?

In thinking about the conference and reviewing my notes on the presentations, I am struck by how many of the representatives of the research groups and authors of the think-pieces are interrogating and refining the concepts that are critical to understanding gender and citizenship in the information society, including those that are central to their own research and practice. As a "public sphere theorist," not surprisingly, I was very interested in the attention directed to issues of "private" and "public" in respect to gender and the information society. I have been intrigued by the "importation" of the concept of the public sphere into Asian contexts for a number of years, so I suppose that it wasn't surprising

that I raised this issue with the China team in particular since the PRC was such as vocal advocate of "Asian values" in the "Asian value debate" over human rights. It seemed that a number of participants were concerned with the risk of becoming overly technologically-deterministic, which is very much a risk of conducting research that takes on the issue of access. Yet, many participants had a healthy scepticism about access-is-everything approaches, and I recall that one participant commented that "openness" on the Internet is not the same as "equality." Participants overwhelmingly refused the notion that the Internet is a great equaliser. Whether "the Internet" has the potential to equalise is another question and depends on what one means by "the Internet," but that's another subject, too unwieldy to address for purposes of this interview.

3. As an advisor of the project, how do you envision the future of the network on basis of the ideas that emerged during the workshop?

I suppose that I do not need to remark on how critical it is to have funding to have a future? Bracketing this question, I think that all of us have learned a great deal since the inception of this programme – not only from the research reports but also from the interaction overall. As with all projects with which I'm familiar, one had to learn to expect the unexpected, put the care and effort into understanding the ideas and circumstances of other participants, let patience, strategic thinking, and an orientation toward results – and, what I've called the "legacy" of the research – be one's guide. I hope that the programme continues, and I believe that the network can continue regardless. One aspect of the programme that worked very well should be mentioned: the relationships among academics, activists/advocates, and practitioners were among the best that I have encountered in many years of working with, and for, groups that are not part of my academic world. After many years of telling colleagues that there are not so many differences in knowledge and concerns between many academics and advocates/practitioners, I feel as though this project has solidified my case!

4. How would you have defined ICTs for development twenty years ago? How would you define ICTs for development today? What are two things that you would like to see changed?

To put my answer into context, twenty years ago, Cisco Systems, the router-making technology giant, was just becoming commercially known, Amazon.com and Google did not exist, communicating via email was a "clunky" practice, and attention to mobile phones and the Internet mostly focused on business and government uses. It was a time of transition. We didn't use the words "new" – as in new ICTs – or ICTs, for that matter – very often. It was only in the mid- to late-1980s that computer monitors began to appear as objects on professors' desks. I was a Ph.D. student. When I took my first course in communication and development, it was titled "Development Support Communications." In general, one would speak of communication and development, communication for development, and development communication, but not ICTs for development. But, the '90s was the transition decade, and it was not long before the Internet was the oracle for both Global North and Global South, this despite a great deal of evidence that the "old" technology of radio was far more useful as a development medium in many countries of the Global South where, for economic, historical, political, social, i.e. colonial, reasons, deficits in infrastructure and literacy were foundational to the "digital divide." You asked for my definition of ICTs for development, however. My definition of ICTs for development would be something along the lines of technologies used in order to share information and to communicate as a way of improving and ensuring the well-being of all human beings, regardless of geographic location, so that they thrive socio-economically and with full consideration in respect to human rights.

I would define ICTs for development as I did twenty years ago. I would add that, although

we have gained much in respect to nuance and general theoretical and practical/strategic understandings of ICTs, we seemed to have lost something in the sense that we now focus on the "new" and forget history and practicalities. Case in point: the laudatory approach to Internet radio at a time when so many in the world have no access to Internet, except perhaps through telecentres.

This is an open-ended question, and I could go on further, but I'll respond based on gender, citizenship, and the information society. First, I would like to see **every** party involved in development as it stands to recognise that they are less important than the entities in ICT and development which currently are defined as "targets for development." We often speak of communication as a basic human right, and it also is a basic human quality. Development today nearly is as bereft of a bottom-up or grassroots approach as it has ever been, despite the new multi-stakeholder approach that was to have characterised the WSIS and now the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). Second, and related to this, I would like to see the discourse of ICTD to expand beyond the Internet and governance. Truly, this is an important subject, but the extreme focus on this aspect of ICTD obscures a number of other issues of communication inequality.