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Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society:

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Reading Resources: Set 3

Reading 1

Title

'Which knowledge for rural development?'

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with

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Which knowledge for rural development?

(Excerpted text. Dotted lines indicate snipped passages.)

Sally Burch. ALAI, Quito, Ecuador (January 2007).

The World Bank - an institution which also boasts of being a knowledge bank - expressed this vision of "universal knowledge" in a document which argues how knowledge management can favor development: "Developing countries need not reinvent the wheel (...) Rather than re-create existing knowledge, poorer countries have the option of acquiring and adapting much knowledge already available in the richer countries. With communication costs plummeting, transferring knowledge is cheaper than ever." Among the national strategies to reduce inequalities, the Bank mentions three means of facilitating this acquisition: "an open trading regime, foreign investment, and technology licensing"; in addition, it proposes corporatizing research institutes (Pascal Renaud, 2005, p. 404-406).

We could hardly expect alternative approaches to development to arise from this model of thought. Rather the creation of other forms of knowledge will be required, which is an enormous challenge, as is argued by investigator Rigoberto Lanz, adviser for the Scientific Mission of the Ministry of Science and Technology of Venezuela: The question is not only putting what we have already developed in science and technology 'at the service´ of the people. (...) It is not just a matter of people´having access to´ a particular science or technique, that is simply available in some kind of department store of neutral options. The fundamental question is how to produce a distinct logic for integrating knowledge and society, another cognitive model, with new concepts and categories that lead toward a new rationality (...) This implies... an emerging process of critical appropriation of all available knowledge within society, which will reverberate within the institutional models responsible for governing this field. The grassroots impact of this policy cannot be measured in terms of ´extension' but rather by the predominant role played by the people in driving their own affairs (including the technical solutions to their problems) .

Private property or public good?

In this dichotomy concerning visions, the privatization of knowledge (via the ever greater expansion of intellectual property rights) and its nature as a public good comes into play. From their original purpose of stimulating creativity, while assuring reasonable remuneration to authors and inventors, copyright and patents are expanding today into more and more areas - including forms of life, such as genetically-modified seeds and genomes. One of the areas in which the impact of such policies is felt most intensely is in the countryside. Without giving them recognition, transnational companies are patenting the ancestral knowledge of indigenous peoples, and then trying to earn royalties from these same rural populations for using the seeds that they have patented. In the face of this problem, Latin American countries have been slow to react to ensure adequate protection of the traditional knowledge of their peoples.

In fact, the production and exchange of knowledge and information has a peculiarity that distinguishes it from material goods. Through the process of sharing, knowledge is not lost, rather it is multiplied and enriched. In other words, intellectual common goods can be used concurrently by a countless number of people, without interfering with or destroying the shared resource. For this reason, the economy of symbolic goods does not correspond to the same parameters as that of material goods. With the growth of digitization and the Internet, the cost of reproducing and distributing symbolic goods (texts, data, audio-visuals, computer software, music, etc.) is close to zero; but as these products are very easy to copy for free, this is seen as a threat by those who are trying to profit from them. This leads to demands for establishing and extending intellectual

property rights and further restricting copyright. In the majority of cases, the main beneficiaries of such rights are no longer the individual authors and inventors, but rather large corporations. One of the consequences of this push toward privatization of knowledge is that it jeopardizes the principle of international law, recognizing cultural and scientific creation as the common property of humanity and as a source for new creations.

"Collective intelligence" initiatives stand out among the citizen-based responses to this phenomenon, one of the main expressions of which is the free software movement. This movement defends four freedoms: the freedom to use computer software; the freedom to study and adapt programs; the freedom to distribute copies, as well as to upgrade and share programs so that everyone benefits. These liberties are similar to those claimed by the movement for the free exchange and improvement of seeds. As reaffirmed by Jean- Marc Defilhes and François Dufour (2005, p.86) members of the Farmers's Confederation of France, the traditional practice of farmers has signified: the liberty to freely sow and reap the fruits of a plant; the freedom to study plants and to adapt them to one's own needs; the freedom to share seeds and to participate in their geographic distribution, as well as to improve seeds and to share these improvements for the benefit of the community.

The potential and limits of information technologies

As part of the answers to the issue of knowledge for rural development, formulated within the field of international development, in the last decade, great expectations have arisen from the potential of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). Dominant discourse focuses on the need to overcome the "digital divide," pointing out that the lack of access to these technologies will only deepen gaps in development, whereas greater access would allow rural communities to connect with information and knowledge that will supposedly help them to overcome underdevelopment. These arguments have led to considering programs which give marginalized populations access to technology as a solution for underdevelopment.

Undoubtedly, access to telecommunications should be guaranteed as a universal service1. However, there is no evidence to demonstrate that these technologies can, in and of themselves, provide solutions to the problems of rural development indicated above. In practice, many projects based on a technological approach have failed, when they start from the view that technology is a tool with which to channel knowledge from the outside, without regard for the existing knowledge system within the community concerned, their values or their culture.

Nonetheless, there is mounting evidence, that through a process of community appropriation, these technologies can indeed be a strategic component of more integrated solutions. Various initiatives that have started from a process of the communities themselves identifying their needs and priorities, have taken on a search for methods and methodologies, in which ICTs are identified as one of many possible options which may be harnessed for development and exchange of knowledge. There are no universal prescriptions to achieve this, but some common criteria can be identified. The sharing of experiences, including the successes and errors encountered, can help optimize integration of these tools.

It was with this understanding that, in March of 2006 in Ecuador, the Workshop on knowledge-sharing for rural community development was organized, which was part of a series of South-South exchanges that have taken place in various countries of Asia and Africa - this being the first for Latin America -. (The workshop was coordinated by Hivos, ALAI, IIAV and IDRC. The following chapter is an overview of the results).

This publication gathers together experiences shared during this event as well as other related experiences which show-case different facets and methods for knowledge sharing in the context of rural communities. In addition, it explores several methodological instruments and materials for exchange, employed in one Central American initiative in social economy. It also draws from five local experiences, accounting for different approaches in the use of ICTs as tools for systematizing, sharing and building knowledge. These are: in Bolivia, self-managed audio-visual documentation in various locations; in Peru, an online agricultural information system in the Valley of Huaraz; in Ecuador, a website and telecenters for relatives of migrants, in Cuenca, and photographic documentation for raising awareness in communities of shell-fish collectors in the mangroves of Esmeraldas; then in Uganda, exchange of agricultural knowledge with the help of radio, cell phones, the internet and other technical supports. Also, we present a contribution of aspects concerning resistance based upon Mayan indigenous knowledge, in Guatemala; and finally, the proposal for rural education and training developed by the Landless Workers' Movement, in Brazil.

These very dissimilar experiences have in common an understanding of the importance of starting from needs and priorities as identified by the concerned communities, respect- ing local culture and means of communication. They also make it clear that technology, as powerful as it may be, is a tool, whose contribution to development will depend upon how the actors and the communities adapt it to their own goals.