

IT, The Most Revolutionary Issue Globally: But is It for All?

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This article discusses the challenges of disseminating information using ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) in post-conflict countries like Sierra Leone and focuses on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) findings. The TRC findings were meant to promote an understanding of the crimes that were committed against the innocent civilians during the war, and to contribute to the prevention of future atrocities. It particularly looks at the most marginalized groups, namely, women and children. The TRC findings were published in both a book and electronic form. Some simpler versions of the findings were also published by some NGOs but nevertheless, the diffusion of information into parts of the society where it is needed mostly has been inadequate. The Internet is a medium used to disseminate information effectively from one to many. The electronic version of the findings is available on the Internet but access to it requires information skills and access to ICTs. It is argued that lack of ICTs and information skills is an obstacle to the empowerment of women and children in Sierra Leone, which also hinders sustainable development.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are tools that are globally used to disseminate information timely and efficiently but this can only be done with a functioning information communications infrastructure, access to computers and the political will to enhance the culture to access information. Even though new ICTs have remarkably spread across Africa and are essential for economic development, political democratisation, social advancement and cultural progress, the digital divide is still pronounced in most parts of Africa. This article looks at the case of the Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which investigated and reported on the human rights violations during the civil war in Sierra Leone. ICTs could have aided in disseminating the TRC findings to the people. The paper focuses on the most vulnerable and marginalized groups of Sierra Leone, namely women and children, and the challenges in diffusing important information to those who need it most.

The study relies on documentary analysis, primarily on published data sources. The outline of the paper is however based on the findings from two fieldwork trips in 2006 and 2007, including observations, interviews and

discussions with Sierra Leonean Scholars, which also corroborates the conclusions of this article.

Theoretical Framework: The General Systems Theory and the Diffusion Theory

The *General Systems theory* states that “the whole equals more than the sum of its parts.” The theory deals with “wholes made up of interdependent parts, the relationships between parts, and the relationships between the wholes and their environments” (Windahl et al., 2002:82). This theory is applied to illustrate that the uneven distribution of information technologies like the Internet, creates a dysfunction in a global system of development because some parts are not included in the system. This same scenario is maintained at the national level if the Internet is unevenly diffused and concentrated in the urban centres. The maintenance of a system requires that all parts are functional. The theory demonstrates that uneven distribution of the Internet connectivity is not likely to enhance equal development, and therefore, deepens the already existing socio-economic cleavages. This leads to underdevelopment and unequal distribution of resources, which often results into conflict. If the Internet as a system is to enhance information dissemination, there has to be access to computers. The *diffusion theory* focuses on whether people adopt or reject an innovation. The diffusion process is supposed to result into behavioural changes in terms of knowledge and attitudes (Windahl et al. 2002:57). Acquisition of knowledge can only take place through exposure to the innovation and its functions (Windahl et al. 2002:59). This theory helps us understand that knowledge about an innovation like computers can only be generated if people are given a chance to acquire the innovation and thereby be able to learn about its functions. Therefore as clarified by the two theories, the women and

children of Sierra Leone will need to have access to the computers in order to develop skills that will enable them to use ICTs as a tool for development, be able to deal with the past and to look forward to a brighter future.

The Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the TRC Report

A decade of armed conflict and political unrest affected the civilian population of Sierra Leone. It resulted into loss of lives, rape, torture, mutilation, the use of child soldiers, the spread of HIV/AIDS, displacement of the population, destruction of property and basic infrastructure (Baksh-Soodeen et. al., 2002: xxii). Baksh-Soodeen et al. argue that failed colonial administration, corrupt post-independent governments and an ineffective legislature and judicial system, are some of the factors that caused the war, (Baksh-Soodeen et. al., 2002:xxiv). Warring parties such as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the Sierra Leone Defence Forces, the police and the Nigerian led peace keeping force, Economic Community of West Africa Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), were involved in the execution of civilians (Human Rights Watch, 1999:43). The RUF was particularly notorious for systematically committing horrendous atrocities against women and children. The country witnessed the world’s worst rebel war where 53% of women and girls were raped by the RUF rebels (Malan, 2003:139). Children were also targeted and thrown into burning fires, toddlers were severed with machetes, and young girls were sexually abused. Abductees were forced by the rebels to participate in the killing and massacring of relatives and friends (Human Rights Watch, 1999:50).

In year 2000, by virtue of the Truth and Reconciliation Act, 2000 (the Act) the Sierra Leonean Parliament made a provision for the formation of a Commission. The Commission was a product of the Lomé Peace Agree-

ement Article 26, between the Government of Sierra Leone and the now defunct Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The Sierra Leonean TRC Act called for the commission:

to create an impartial historical record of violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law related to the armed conflict in Sierra Leone from the beginning of the conflict in 1991 to the signing of the Lomé Peace Agreement, to address impunity, to respond to the needs of the victims, to promote healing and reconciliation and to prevent a repetition of the violations and abuses suffered (Hayner, 2004:2).

The TRC was to investigate and report on the causes of the conflict, the nature of the human rights violations and abuses and the context under which these abuses were committed. The investigation was to further reveal whether the committed atrocities were planned or authorised by any of the governments, factions or individuals. Since the Sierra Leonean war was greatly influenced by external factors like the war in Liberia, the TRC had to also look at the role played by foreign actors. In 2004 the findings of the TRC were presented in a public report. The TRC recommended that its findings should be widely disseminated to the people. ICTs could have facilitated in the effective dissemination of the findings but there are challenges that are making the task difficult. Currently the final report is available on the Internet (<http://trcsierraleone.org/drwebsite/publish/index.shtm>) and there is a database of statements that is coded and therefore cannot be accessed by the citizens of Sierra Leone. Different media like video footages and audio recordings of hearings are also available but their effective use require ICTs.

The TRC archives are currently being stored in the dump rooms of Fourah Bay Col-

lege, University of Sierra Leone. In March this year, during her second research trip to Freetown, Proscovia Svård had a meeting with the Chair and Executive Secretary of the newly inaugurated Human Rights Commission. The commission, which is a statutory body, was inaugurated on the 11th of December 2006 and is charged with the challenge of holding the government accountable for the implementation of the TRC recommendations. The Commission is also to follow-up the TRC process and engage in the dissemination of the TRC findings. In order for the commission to be able to effectively live up to its mandate, it will need to establish a good records system that will preserve and enable the dissemination of the TRC findings. The challenges before the commission are many. There is need for premises, salaries to the commissioners and archival and information management expertise and the effective dissemination of the TRC Archives.

The management and availability of the information contained in the TRC report is crucial to an understanding of the causes of the conflict and the prevention of future atrocities. The knowledge contained in the report should enhance reconciliation and healing in an effort to achieve sustainable peace and development in the country. The recommendations contained in the report would also free women and children from the discriminatory laws that have hindered their development. According to Mazurana et al. women are in most post-conflict societies overlooked and underestimated despite their efforts to engage in peace building and to provide basic needs for the survival of their families (Mazurana et. al. 2004:ii)

Efforts Towards Information Technology Diffusion and Deterring Challenges

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Declaration of Principles states that

everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression and this includes the right to receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. In the Declaration emphasis is put on the human rights (Doria, 2005:29). The African Information Society Initiative (AISI) has since 1996 promoted ICT policy making on the continent. Despite being the least developed in ICT, African ministers are according to Etta the first among developing regions to adopt a master plan and a declaration to integrate their countries into the information age (Etta, 2005:10). AISI has continued to encourage national ICT formulation, the liberalization of national telecommunications and broadcasting and the articulation of national e-government ICT policies (Etta: 2005:10).

Even though the WSIS Declaration of Principles grants everybody a right to participate and enjoy the benefits of the Information Society, the obstacles of ICT diffusion are numerous. Despite the fact that all African states now have Internet connectivity and local Internet Service Providers, most of the Internet users are concentrated in the capital cities. The rural populations of Africa are not connected due to the expensive dialup connections (Polikanov et.al. 2003:43). Sierra Leone still lags behind in the utilisation of ICTs, which has

led to poor human development, (Sierra Leone Vision 2003:27). The key challenges preventing the diffusion and utilisation of ICTs in information dissemination include widespread poverty, illiteracy and under-utilisation of indigenous technologies, (Sierra Leone Vision, 2003:30).

This is further exacerbated by lack of a National and Education ICT policy, gender inequality in access to education, erratic supply of electricity, high costs of telephone connection and long-distance charges, inadequate supply of skilled ICT labour, and lack of adequate government resources for education (ICT4Africa/Country Report Sierra Leone).

This creates what many communication scholars refer to as the *digital divide* caused by the uneven distribution of ICTs (Hellström, 2005:1). This cleavage as argued by Hellström is due to lack of political will, the slow diffusion of new technologies and the uneven distribution of wealth. Hellström contends that the digital divide has reinforced the already existing poverty patterns (Hellström, 2005:1). Castells defines the digital divide as the inequality of access to the Internet (2003: 248). Internet diffusion in developing countries is said to deepen the digital divide since it is concentrated in urban centres, around global activities, among highly educated groups

Table 1: Statistics on ICT infrastructure and usage. Swedish figures for comparison within parantheses.

Indicators	Numbers
Fixed Line Operators	1 (50)
Total Fixed Line Telephone Subscribers (2005)	23,327 (5, 624,000)
Cellular Mobile Operators	5 (25-30)
Total Cellular Mobile Subscribers (2005)	297,000 (9, 087,000)
Mobile subscribers per 1,000 people (2004)	22
Internet users per 100 inhabitants (2004)	2 (37*)
Personal Computers per 1000 inhabitants (2004)	12

* Applies to subscribers, the amount of users is probably much larger.

Source: World bank, ICT4 Africa/Country Report Sierra Leone, The Swedish National Post and Telecom Agency

who in turn are connected to global networks. Most regions and people are left out (Castells 2003:262). Today, we have countries in the periphery that are still struggling to put in place basic communication infrastructure such as the radio or telephone services.

Challenges of the Inclusion of Women and Children in the Information Society

The women and children in Sierra Leone are among those who are least integrated in the information society. In the report of the Sierra Leone National Consultation, it was recommended that gender equality should be a priority in the post-conflict reconstruction because women have had a disadvantaged position in the society. This has deprived them of the possibility to develop skills that would enable them to contribute and engage in the reconstruction of their country (Baksh-Soodeen et. al., 2002:xxiv). Women lack representation at all levels of political decision-making and peace processes (Baksh-Soodeen et. al., 2002:xxv) though they have revived local economies and social networks and their coping mechanisms are a resource during times of conflict.

Girls at school going age are discriminated against, as parents prefer to invest their scarce resources in their sons. According to the Human Rights Watch report, only 21 % of the females account for primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment while the male account for 32 % (Human Rights Watch, 2002). According to the 2000 statistics 42 % of children of ages 6 – 12 in Sierra Leone were attending school. There are however disparities in school attendance depending on the region children come from (Government of Sierra Leone Survey Report 2000:29). The civil war also disrupted the schooling of most children. Universal access to information is promoted by the World Summit for Children because education is empowerment and a prerequi-

site for combating poverty and exploitation (Government of Sierra Leone Survey Report, 2000:29).

Nakafeero contends that while ICT is empowering both men and women it is also widening the gender inequalities (Nakafeero, 2005:27). This is because the gender gap will only be bridged by the packaging of appropriate information in the local languages, capacity building activities for women, improved ICT literacy and an integration of a gender perspective in the ICT Programmes and policies (Nakafeero, 2005:31). The fact that information communications infrastructure in Africa are concentrated in urban areas has also led to the exclusion of a majority of women who are based in rural areas (Munyua, 2005:183).

Recommendations to Improve the Status of Women and Children

During a seminar that took place on the 18th of April, in Stockholm at St. Immanuelskyrkan, on “A Mother’s Cry for a Healthy Africa”, the two main speakers argued that “educating a woman was like educating the entire nation.” This is because, women enhance culture. The male-dominated post-conflict reconstruction should see women as a resource (Baksh-Soodeen et. al., 2002:xv). The United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in 2000, to acknowledge the role played by women in promoting international stability.

The government of Sierra Leone was in the Report concerning gender equality urged to take concrete steps to implement the following recommendations, (Baksh-Soodeen et. al., 2002:xxix-xxxiii):

- Ensure that there is an increase in access to basic education, that media coverage is extended to all areas using local languages and that women should be educated about their rights.

- Investment should be made in functional literacy programs throughout the country to reduce the high rate of illiteracy especially among women.
- Research on traditional beliefs and practices that are gender discriminatory should be carried out and the research findings disseminated nationally.
- There should be zero tolerance against violence against women and children in all its forms.
- Rapid information dissemination should be available to support programs for community activities to facilitate networking and collaboration using traditional methods and electronic media.

According to the findings of the TRC the children have not had a meaningful role to play socially, politically and economically. The Children Forum Network, an advocacy group run by children during the TRC mission gave a voice to the children. The TRC therefore recommended the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children Affairs to support the network to enable it to operate provincially and at local levels (TRC Report n.d:180). The TRC further recommends compulsory and free education and incentives to encourage children of school going age to attend Secondary School (TRC Report n.d:177).

The former Swedish Minister for International Development, Carin Jämtin, argues that the effective use of ICTs gives people an opportunity to govern their lives by using tools like the Internet to both get educated through access to information and to interact with international arenas. However, technology does not translate into development. Therefore, it should harness services and applications that are affordable, useful and relevant. People should be empowered with capacity and knowledge to utilise ICTs for their own development (Jämtin, 2005:5). The in-

tegration of people in the information society therefore requires capacity building in terms of basic infrastructure and the development of skills (Jämtin, 2005:6). Jämtin recommends that donors should help developing nations to attract private investment in an attempt to create an enabling environment that would foster innovation, local competence building and ownership (Jämtin, 2005:2).

Analysis and Conclusion

Information is of great importance in all activities of a society. The ICTs are ideal tools for disseminating information and, in the case of Sierra Leone, would promote an understanding of the causes of the conflict and to prevent future atrocities. Access to ICTs and programs on information skills would have enhanced the diffusion of the important findings of the TRC. In post-conflict societies, the management of information is crucial to the promotion of peace and stability. Given the horrendous atrocities that were committed against the civilian population and in particular women and children, it is important that the TRC report is efficiently disseminated. An understanding of the causes of conflict would enable the victims to reconcile with the perpetrators and thereby enhance sustainable peace and development. Access to Internet would enable both women and children to take advantage of the information that was generated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This would enable them to handle the deep psychological effects the war atrocities inflicted on them through networks that can easily be formed on the Internet. It is also important that the TRC report, that can be considered controversial is openly discussed and contested.

The uneven distribution of ICTs both on an international and national level, like the two theories applied in the article show, will only lead to a dysfunction in the development

system. The effective use of information technologies would require simple applications with local content that would in the case of Sierra Leone diffuse information to the people who need it most. Countries like Sierra Leone lack electricity, which highly limits the effective use of the Internet as an information tool and thereby excludes Sierra Leoneans from tapping into such a rich information bank. Thus investments in basic infrastructure are necessary. The diffusion of mobile phones, wireless technologies and projects that work for the integration of Africa into global communication might help Africa to speed up its participation in the information society.

As said above, access to information technologies alone does not translate into development. It is therefore important for the government of Sierra Leone to invest in an education system that is not gender biased and that will enable its citizens to attain information skills. The marginalized women and children need an education that will empower them and also enhance their development by engaging in the post-reconstruction of their country. The Sierra Leonean government should therefore adopt a National and Educational ICT policy that will promote programs that will enable its citizens to participate in the information society. The children of Sierra Leone, if given a chance to learn the skills of handling the Internet and processing information in order to convert it into knowledge, might enhance a better diffusion of ICTs. Thereby they can help their mothers to better understand the advantages that ICTs can deliver in helping them to achieve development. For an underdeveloped country that wishes to embrace ICTs there is need to plan and budget for lifelong education for all. The speed at which ICTs change will require the type of learning that will continuously up-date the individuals with equally new skills.

For development to take place, all classes

of the society have to participate in the development process with equal opportunities to participate in the decision-making that will affect their lives. Given the poor communication infrastructure, the effective use of ICTs that are suitable to both the rural and urban populations would enable the diffusion of developmental information. The digital divide will long persist due to the different challenges outlined in the article, but the government of Sierra Leone together with its international partners will have to invest in ICTs with simple applications that can help even the non-literate communities to manage their lives. Information, information skills and ICTs are crucial components in the post-conflict reconstruction and development and should be addressed while engaging in international development projects. The information gap that exists in the world today, between and within nations and the unequal availability of information technologies need to be seriously addressed in order to fight global poverty and to bring about sustainable development.

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