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Understanding “Informational Developments”

A Reflection on Key Research Issues

*Report of the UNRISD Workshop
26–27 September 2003, Geneva*

Introduction

This workshop brought together academics from various disciplines, researchers working with civil society, and subject specialists from donor and multilateral agencies in a collaborative effort to begin mapping key research issues relating to “informational developments” and development policy. Key research themes and ideas for future research were discussed in the context of how research findings and evidence were being used in preparation for the then upcoming first session of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS, held in Geneva on 10–12 December 2003), as well as in other global information and communication technology (ICT) and development policy forums.

The rationale for the workshop, elaborated in exchanges before it began, was based on recognition of a number of factors. Questions of whether informational developments are provoking fundamental changes in economic and social relationships need to be addressed. In parallel, and almost irrespective of the answers to these questions, the “information society” discourse has acquired an importance in and of itself. This derives in part from the perceptions of the scale of the information “revolution”—and if world leaders talk of an unprecedented revolution, then such perception is significant. More concretely, the role, witnessed in the

Group of 8 (G8), WSIS and the United Nations ICT Task Force, of the information society as a serious factor in development policy making has major practical implications for the planning, implementation and budgeting of development assistance. What is less clear is how these factors interact with each other. Logically, they should be closely connected and inform each other, but any such connections are far from transparent. A need to critically examine each factor, and if and how they are connected, lay at the heart of the workshop agenda: that and the potential for theory and empirical research to illuminate the changes taking place and the consequent choices facing development actors.

The focus on how the intellectual agenda should serve development needs is vital but far from straightforward. There are a number of complicating factors. The “information society” is a *political* arena. Changing social relations of production and reproduction are always reflected in politics. One of the arenas for such politics is in the shaping of how such changes are studied, debated and understood—that is, in the struggle for control of discourse. The “information society” is a *contested* arena. Some argue that it does not exist either because they do not perceive information-related change as significant or, like Manuel Castells, the author of the most exhaustive and referred to sociological analysis of the