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## **If only they knew better: strengthening knowledge systems for social development?**

### **Abstract**

Information and knowledge are frequently upheld as the cornerstones of development programmes. Poverty reduction measures delivered through social policies are frequently premised on the need to ensure that both users and providers of services have access to information. In contexts where poor and marginalised groups are largely excluded from knowledge access and uptake, Southern-based civil society is called upon to act as an interlocutor to leverage knowledge on their behalf to achieve social welfare objectives. Ensuring that the greatest number of people have access to timely and relevant information, promoted as part of global-level discourses on the desirability of fostering a 'knowledge society', is presumed to contribute, for instance, to the capacity of citizens to uphold government accountability, ensure access to entitlements or protect basic rights. This paper critically analyses the capacity of knowledge, delivered primarily though not exclusively through new ICTs and leveraged through Southern-based civil society acting as intermediaries, to achieve social policy objectives in development.

**Keywords:** knowledge society; social development; ICTs; civil society; neoliberalism; South-South cooperation

### **Introduction**

Programmes designed to deliver poverty reduction measures through social policies related to health, education, employment or other elements of welfare service delivery persistently emphasise a need to ensure that both users and providers of services have access to relevant and timely information. Global social policy prescriptions, whether relating to primary education, savings, labour rights, breastfeeding, vaccinations or nutrition, and formulated by international institutions or small NGOs, refer extensively to the importance of improving the availability of, and democratising access to, information. The meeting of broader social welfare objectives is intrinsically linked to the capacity of individuals to leverage knowledge to pursue their own social development. Where direct access to marginalised groups is not deemed possible, and reflecting a historical, if at times contradictory, relationship, it has been the role of Southern civil society in particular, frequently contracting with the state, to deliver substantial elements of social welfare. Within this, it is very often Southern-based development

NGOs who are called upon to act as interlocutors to leverage the knowledge on which the delivery of social welfare objectives are perceived to depend. Ensuring that the greatest number of people possible have access to timely and relevant information, promoted as part of global-level discourses on the desirability of fostering a 'knowledge society', is presumed to contribute to the capacity, for instance, of citizens to hold governments to account in the delivery of services, ensure access to entitlements or protect basic rights. The notion of the knowledge society facilitated through engagement directly with marginalised groups or through Southern-based NGOs acting as knowledge intermediaries is crucial to generating not just economic growth, but is seen as a way of improving outcomes in relation to, for instance, global goals such as the MDGs or the recommendations emerging out of the WHO Commission on the Social Determinants for Health (CSDH, 2008).

This paper critically analyses the capacity of information and knowledge, leveraged through Southern-based development NGOs acting as knowledge brokers, to achieve social policy objectives in development. The paper begins by exploring the relationship in development discourse and practice between access to knowledge, facilitated mainly though not exclusively by new ICTs, and social policy in development, critiquing the tendency to posit a linear and reasonably unproblematic trajectory from investments in knowledge access to improved social welfare outcomes. The analysis then problematises the nature of knowledge in this paradigm and the implications of this conceptualisation in terms of how social change is to be facilitated. This is followed by a critical analysis of the imagined capacity of civil society in this framework in facilitating the inclusion of marginalised groups on which efforts to strengthen Southern knowledge systems invariably depend. The conclusion draws out some of the worrying implications of investing so heavily in the dominant narrative elision between access to knowledge, the facilitative role of civil society and achieving social policy objectives development.

### Exploring the relationship between access to knowledge and social policy in development

In its World Development Report of 1998 entitled *Knowledge for Development*, the World Bank promoted the idea that a lack of information and knowledge was one of the key barriers to development in the global South. The emphasis on a pervasive knowledge gap as *the* explanation for chronic underdevelopment represented a historical turning point in the

evolution of development practice. It became a decisive point where knowledge itself became the intervention, where improving its availability to people in developing countries was presumed to have the capacity to spark change processes that would in turn unlock the South's development potential (Narayanaswamy, 2013). In the period that followed the release of the World Bank's report, and with the articulation and affirmation of this knowledge gap and the need to address it to achieve a 'knowledge economy' that would drive economic growth and development, knowledge-based development was rapidly taken up as an identifiable, standalone intervention by a range of development stakeholders (King and McGrath, 2004).

Yet from the time of its publication, the World Bank's knowledge paradigm has sustained heavy criticism for its narrow emphasis on promoting a knowledge economy, where the focus is on market-driven, technical knowledge transfers from the 'developed' North to the 'under-developed' South as a panacea for failing markets and the promotion of development (see Das, 2009). The global-level discourse therefore began to move away from a narrow focus on productivity and economic development embodied in the private-sector inspired term 'knowledge economy', towards embracing a broader, more inclusive, more socially just vision of a 'knowledge society' that worked for the benefit of everyone. The notion of the 'knowledge society' was spearheaded by the UN, reflecting its historical emphasis on ideas, policies and practices promoting social welfare and human development, messages that have frequently been at odds with the emphasis placed on markets, privatisation and economic development by the World Bank (see Deacon, 2007). Multi- and bilateral donors immediately identified the possibilities proffered by promoting 'access to information for all and freedom of expression' (UNESCO, 2005: 24) that in turn 'increases the possibilities for citizen's participation in decision making processes' (Pedersen, 2009: 1). Facilitating the establishment of Southern knowledge systems in particular addresses what Baillie Smith and Jenkins (2011: 168) remind us is the continued 'exclusion of individuals, groups and organizations in the global South from the production of development knowledge, decision-making processes and project implementation' that, they argue, 'is of course well known'.

With rapid advancements in new ICTs emerging in the 1990s, a powerful narrative synergy emerged between ICTs, knowledge acquisition and social development, fostering programmes considered not only more cost-effective, but providing platforms that promised Southern-

based, locally relevant, direct access information loops that would improve public sector service and thus social welfare outcomes:

ICT also has a great role in the public sector reform and governance. It can help improve transparency and efficiency of the public sector, create network links across service delivery agencies, cut bureaucratic red tape and realize vast savings. ICTs in the public sector can engage citizens as participants in the overall development for the future (UN Global E-Government Readiness Report, 2004: 3).

Nor has the narrative of possibility and hopefulness associated with ICTs and knowledge acquisition for social development changed in the intervening decade. This is evidenced through the oft-emotive language that continues to conflate access to information, the knowledge society and the delivery of social welfare objectives in development. The Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD), part of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) of the United Nations Secretariat, in conjunction with partners, organised 'a high-level panel discussion' in April 2014 entitled 'Strengthening social development to fight poverty through the use of new technologies', again reinforcing the power of this narrative frame to promote social development:

New technologies are powerful tools for poverty eradication, economic, sustainable and social development. They help disseminate valuable information on public services, health care, education and training, livelihoods and rights, and also connect individuals and groups with one another, thereby improving social inclusion; and facilitating citizen participation (UNDESA-DSPD, 2014).

And whilst governments are encouraged to establish and sustain the 'enabling environments' (UN Global E-Government Readiness Report, 2004: 3) necessary to realise the benefits of new ICTs for achieving social welfare, access to information is frequently bound up further with the facilitative role of civil society, particularly in relation to supporting those individuals and groups perceived to be at the sharpest end of the knowledge divide:

Civil society can help spread a stronger understanding of, and advocate for, policies for openness and privacy, and for knowledge and infrastructure that meet the needs of people who are poor and marginalised (Gregson et al., 2015: 6)

Underpinning the substantial investments of both human and financial capital that sustain these information initiatives is the continued and intractable belief that access to information can and should be improved for marginalised individuals and groups to achieve social

development. Indeed, the narrative in support of improving access to new ICTs in particular is bound inextricably with access to knowledge. In other words, the digital divide is understood as important precisely because of the underlying pervasiveness of the knowledge gap that is perceived to be impeding social development, a divide that can be bridged for those people marginalised from mainstream knowledge systems through improved ICT infrastructure and support from civil society organisations.

As a result of this emphasis on supporting the growth of Southern knowledge societies as a means of achieving social welfare objectives, development stakeholders, through the provision of financial and in-kind support, have encouraged the proliferation of civil society-based knowledge brokers and information services for social development based in the North as well as the South. Delivered principally though not exclusively through new ICTs, this burgeoning community of intermediaries providing ‘portals, gateways, resource centres and related services’ (Kunaratnam, 2011: 3) began with well-publicised investments in telecentres in the 1990s. Telecentres offered spaces designed to meet information, communication and learning needs (Hudson, 2001: 169) through ‘public access to information and communication technologies, notably the Internet, for educational, personal, social, and economic development’ (Reilly and Gomez, 2001: 1). Given the steadily falling costs of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the resultant capacity to produce and disseminate vast amounts of information more quickly and cost-effectively than has historically ever been possible, there has also since been an exponential proliferation of websites featuring social development information. Northern-based examples abound, including Eldis ([www.eldis.org](http://www.eldis.org)), a multi-issue, freely accessible website that ‘aims to share the best in development, policy, practice and research’. Healthcare Information for All (HIFA, [www.hifa2015.org](http://www.hifa2015.org)) describes itself as ‘a global campaign’ whose vision is ‘A world where every person and every health worker will have access to the healthcare information they need’ because ‘People are dying for lack of knowledge’.

Mobilising new ICTs to improve access to knowledge for improved social development outcomes has also offered a powerful narrative frame for the establishment of Southern-based civil society information initiatives. There is an emerging discourse and practice around South-South cooperation, evidenced by, for instance, the World Bank’s South-South Knowledge Exchange (<http://wbi.worldbank.org/sske/>), wherein the World Bank perceives its role as a

'connector' between Southern governments, facilitated through, amongst other strategies, integrating knowledge exchange into country strategies and lending operations. Representing donor investments from which Southern knowledge systems are ideally expected to emerge and/or be strengthened, there has been an exponential growth in the number of Southern-based information initiatives wherein is evidenced again an emotive language that establishes implicit, frequently causal relationships, between access to information, new ICTs and/or the knowledge society and the delivery of social welfare objectives in development. The Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET, <http://wougnet.org>), for instance, 'expects to make a significant contribution to the use of ICTs' that they suggest responds to government-inspired objectives of 'a knowledge-based Uganda where national development and good governance are sustainably enhanced and accelerated by timely and secure access to information and efficient application of ICT'. Dnet ([www.dnet.org.bd](http://www.dnet.org.bd)), a Bangladesh-based NGO that describes itself as a 'not for profit social enterprise', claims to have 'pioneered in research [sic] on using ICT as a primary means for alleviating poverty, empowerment through minimizing the digital divide and access to information, civic participation, capacity development and employment generation'. Acting as facilitators to meet social welfare objectives as part of this is key, as they use a 'fusion of social and technological innovations for improving the lives of marginalized people in Bangladesh ... Initiating activities in ... healthcare, education, livelihood and social accountability'.

In dissecting the language used to describe these information initiatives, we can identify how the different aspects of the elision between the knowledge society and social welfare in development are actualized in practice. Firstly, it is clear that improving access to information is perceived as inherently valuable, an idea that is presented in both the discourse and practice as relatively unproblematic. With the establishment of NGO intermediaries, individuals or groups now have direct access to greater volumes of previously unavailable information. So whether a midwife is looking for additional information about birth complications, a teacher is looking for information to plan lessons or an entrepreneur is looking for updated market information, these intermediary services facilitate access to a wider range of information than has ever before been available, particularly to marginalised groups in Southern countries.

Secondly, and as some of the quotations included previously in this analysis illustrate well, this nexus of individual/community partnership with civil society to improve access to knowledge,

frequently bound up with the deployment of new ICTs, is also privileged as a way of demanding accountability for access to social welfare entitlements. Devereux, Roelen and Ulrichs (2015: 5; my emphasis), despite the use of tentative language, reiterate the hopeful positivity associated with the potential for access to knowledge, notably through new ICTs, to improve what they term 'social protection' through improving the capacity of individual (citizens) to hold governments to account:

Technological advances are likely to lead to enhanced delivery of social protection, while the spread of social media *could* improve awareness of social protection rights and enforce government accountability.

Improving government accountability through this type of coordinated activity is also captured by a recent initiative of the 'Making All Voices Count' research programme, a consortium of research, NGO and donor organisations promoting social accountability, citizen engagement and good governance, underpinned by new ICTs. In conjunction with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in the UK, they have launched a budget accountability initiative in Uganda entitled 'Know Your Budget – Give Your Feedback!'

([www.makingallvoicescount.org/news/uganda-know-your-budget-give-your-feedback/](http://www.makingallvoicescount.org/news/uganda-know-your-budget-give-your-feedback/)), designed to improve information and feedback loops around accountability for spending on service delivery and associated priorities between the Ugandan government and its citizens through a 'new platform' consisting of 'a mobile website, free budget hotline and SMS system'. What is evidenced in their description of the programme yet again is the powerful narrative frame eliding access to new ICTs and, by extension, knowledge coupled with the central, facilitative role of civil society to achieve social welfare objectives:

Providing information is the first step towards empowering citizens to advocate for fair budget allocations and quality service. However if nobody can interpret, understand or act on this intelligence, making data "open" won't achieve much. The project is therefore committed to working with, and training, journalists and civil society groups (Making All Voices Count, 2015).

Despite the assured language of empowerment, fairness and 'quality service' that is to be achieved by 'providing information' as well as training to support the facilitative role of civil society to leverage knowledge, the tentative hopefulness re-emerges in the discussion of possible outcomes: 'Just how responsive the government will be to information posted is yet to be seen, but the platform *could* provide a nationwide transparency system to rival any other in the region (ibid; my emphasis).



Finally, the link between the knowledge society, NGOs, social development and accountability is further cemented with the growing emphasis cited earlier around explicitly privileging South-South exchange and Southern-based intermediaries as a way of establishing and/or strengthening Southern knowledge systems. The website Practice in Participation (<http://www.practiceinparticipation.org>) was established in 2012 as a joint venture amongst a range of Southern-based civil society organisations and, as evidenced by their 'About Us' page, draws on this powerful narrative conflation between access to knowledge, new ICTs and Southern-based civil society to present a seemingly unassailable justification in favour of knowledge society investments in NGO intermediaries to achieve social development:

Organisations and practitioners using participatory methodologies promote collectivisation and learning for empowerment and inclusion such that the poor and excluded can claim their rights and improve their lives ... **PRACTICE IN PARTICIPATION** is a one-of-its-kind initiative which aims at global south-to-south collaboration for preserving, maintaining and collaborating on issues and practices of social justice. It is *an invited space for practitioners to share their local knowledge and learn from others' practical experiences, and participate in generation, production and dissemination of knowledge based on experiences from the field* ... (emphasis in original).

The power of this narrative is underpinned by a number of key concerns. The first of these is that the tentative and hopeful language evidenced in this analysis reflects a set of intractable beliefs about the relationship between access to knowledge and positive social development outcomes. The language is tentative because in reality there is a lack of empirical data to support the assertion that improving access to new ICTs will provide real social welfare and/or developmental benefits. Whilst there have been some efforts to capture and reflect on how new ICTs in particular may contribute to the knowledge society and improved social development outcomes (see for example, Feek, 2009; Mansell and Wehn, 1998), the purported positive associations of ICTs in particular for development, with a resultant increase in accessible information for hitherto marginalised groups, has been much heralded without any evidence or impact assessment to endorse these claims (see Feek, 2009). Instead, it is assumed that 'as long as the development sector recognizes the biases in corporate, ICT-based approaches [to knowledge-based initiatives], and seeks to adapt its usage based on local needs and circumstances, negative impacts can be reduced' (van der Velden, 2002: 32). Recently, an acknowledgment of the dangers of this new ICT-led, supply-side approach came in the form of

climate change knowledge brokers, who expressed concern about ‘portal proliferation’ (Barnard, 2013) in terms of the sheer number of organisations attempting to host websites with climate change information, particularly in relation to development, which is argued will risk diluting the message and/or create a sense of information overload (see also Narayanaswamy, 2013 on information overload).

The assumptions underpinning case studies of information initiatives emerging out of a learning study looking at the ‘users’ in Technology for Transparency and Accountability Initiatives (T4TAI) from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in the UK, also echo yet again the presumption that knowledge access will in principle lead to greater accountability and thus improved delivery of social welfare. The examples cited, including a pilot survey tool established in partnership with a local radio station and an SMS service to report water infrastructure faults, both in Uganda, have as their underlying assumptions variously that poor service delivery is the result of weak feedback loops between the state and citizens, wherein ‘citizen-monitoring’ mechanisms to improve these feedback loops are essential and need to be strengthened (Kelbert, 2013: 2-3). The study findings accept that, for instance in the case of the water infrastructure monitoring project, the ‘starting assumptions about potential users’ access, capacity and motivation to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) have turned out to be overly optimistic’ (ibid: 2). Drawing together conclusions on the basis of the larger study on which this briefing is based, the ‘lessons learnt’ acknowledges that ‘[a]mong the myriad T4TAIs currently being implemented, **few are demonstrably transforming governance and accountability**’, where ‘**active participants are often the “usual suspects”**’, including ‘men, urban dwellers, and people with higher levels of education and/or access to information’ (ibid: 3; emphasis in original). They identify the risk of ‘**T4TAIs unwittingly “empowering” only some kinds of citizen** which could further entrench discrimination and social exclusion rather than increase accountability and equity for all’ (ibid; emphasis in original).

Whilst these findings are undoubtedly valuable in establishing the empirical evidence base necessary to allow a more in-depth analysis of the efficacy and any associated causal relationship between knowledge society investments, including in new ICTs, and improved social welfare outcomes, at issue here is a more fundamentally problematic set of assumptions underpinning the conflation between access to knowledge and social development that

animates the remainder of this analysis. In short, I would argue that questions about the capacity of improved knowledge access through new ICTs to deliver improved social welfare outcomes are the wrong questions. Instead, we need to further problematise the nature of knowledge in this framework, the target audience for knowledge initiatives and the imagined capacity of Southern NGO intermediaries in particular to leverage this knowledge to achieve social welfare objectives in development.

### Problematizing knowledge and its uses

At a basic level, this framework is problematic in terms of how the term 'knowledge' itself is used and applied. To advance this argument we need some preliminary insight into the nature of knowledge and knowledge systems. The terms 'information' and 'knowledge', as the literature cited in the foregoing analysis suggests, are frequently used interchangeably in development discourse and practice. Yet the two terms are conceptually distinct and there are well-established theoretical positions which illustrate the evolutionary relationship from data through to knowledge creation (de Kadt, 1994: 100; Davies, 1994), Haywood (1995: 3), for instance, supports the notion of a transformative process linking data to information and knowledge, suggesting that: 'the transformation of data into information is thus a process of reception, recognition and conversion . . . accurate conversion of data to information can only take place when we are able to add value to it from stores of information that we have access to'. The knowledge that derives from information is in turn dependent upon a transformative process occurring during the communication of information itself. As Hart and Kim (2001: 35–6) put it: 'information, by itself, does not constitute knowledge . . . One must possess some cognitive filtering and structuring mechanism to sort out what is relevant information from among what is not and to incorporate the new information productively into the old synthesis'. Some, like Strange (1988: 122), would argue that '[f]or many purposes, the two terms are interchangeable', although she does note that 'whether it can be communicated or not depends on the ability of the receiver to understand and grasp it: when that is so, it must presumably be categorized as knowledge rather than as simple information'. All of these insights converge in the belief that knowledge is not an entity but rather that knowledge creation is a process that is experiential and situated. Knowledge creation is also an interpretive process that, given limitations such as context or language, should not be assumed to be automatic.

By contrast, knowledge initiatives tend to focus on improving the supply of information

without concomitant efforts to put in place — or tap into already existing — mechanisms to facilitate the conversion of information into knowledge. The pervasive belief in a knowledge gap that precludes participation and inclusion in the ‘knowledge society’ presumes that access to information is the key concern. Improving the supply of information through removing the costs and improving the availability and diversity of information is an approach that neither accounts for contextual factors in terms of either the appropriate format or relevance of information, nor recipient community’s expressed information needs or interests (Narayanaswamy, forthcoming). These efforts are instead premised on the fragmentation of knowledge processes that results in the treatment of information and knowledge as conceptually indistinct, ‘disembedded’ (see Giddens, 1994, as cited in Radhakrishnan, 2007), tradeable and context-free.

This is evidenced most dramatically by the language of ‘knowledge products’, used to describe the content of information and knowledge initiatives by a range of agencies, including the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and UNDP<sup>1</sup>. Even Dnet, the Bangladeshi NGO cited previously, identify the creation of ‘livelihood, educational and knowledge products and contents’ as one of their core activities. It is suggestive of a treatment of knowledge as an identifiable, stand-alone entity, a ‘something’ that can be traded or simply made available in a way that will maintain its utility regardless of the context. It also suggests that knowledge may be delivered to recipients who are enabled, through communication initiatives and intermediaries, to shape this knowledge and create new meanings or adapt and apply it in diverse, particularly Southern, contexts.

Following on from concerns around the disaggregation of knowledge processes where knowledge itself is understood as a standalone entity or ‘thing’ that is tradable and context-free, we can further problematise the tendency to address presumed knowledge deficits by privileging the production and dissemination of vast amounts of information conceptualized in

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<sup>1</sup> For how ADB uses this term, please see the page ‘Disseminating Knowledge Products’, [www.adb.org/publications/disseminating-knowledge-products](http://www.adb.org/publications/disseminating-knowledge-products) (accessed 7 April 2015). The UNDP uses this term widely across their global operations, see for example their ‘Handbook on Planning, Monitoring and Evaluating for Development Results’ [web.undp.org/evaluation/handbook/ch8-3.html](http://web.undp.org/evaluation/handbook/ch8-3.html) (accessed 7 April 2015) and UNDP Asia-Pacific’s page on ‘Knowledge Products and Services’ [www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/ourwork/KIC\\_overview/kic\\_focus/kic\\_focus\\_k.html](http://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/ourwork/KIC_overview/kic_focus/kic_focus_k.html) (accessed 7 April 2015).

this way. Improving the availability of, and access to, knowledge, principally though not exclusively through new ICTs, may be justified as an end in itself, representing two worrying underpinning assumptions. The first is that information, like wealth, will 'trickle down' (Goetz and Sandler, 2007) to those most in need of information. Yet given the nature of embedded inequalities in both existing market structures and in mainstream knowledge systems, increasing the access to, and the volume of, information produced is not inherently valuable. Contrary to the assumption that intermediaries are effective at ensuring that information is 'passed on to a wider group of people' (Humphries, 2008), Goetz and Sandler (2007: 169) instead suggest that information is as likely to be hoarded by people 'in their own private knowledge bank' as it is to 'trickle down'. As Davies (1994) argues, where information production and dissemination are not tied to particular decision-making tasks or geared towards more dialogic learning relationships (Freire, 1970), concerns persist around how a fragmented knowledge process could be relied upon to actively address the knowledge deficits of 'the poor' in the global South in order to promote social welfare and service delivery.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it raises the question of who precisely is meant to ensure that knowledge is converted into poverty alleviation, social justice or development? In this narrative frame it is not states or improved governance that is meant to facilitate these processes. Rather it is individuals and/or communities who are expected to act on this increased volume of information to promote their own social welfare and improved development outcomes. Even the more inclusive notion of a 'knowledge society' and the empowerment that is hoped will flow from it hinges on the belief that people will act given the right information, and relies on people to actively seek out, engage with, or respond to the information that is given to them. Radhakrishnan (2007: 145) asserts that

knowledge economy discourses ... presume an advanced liberal relationship between the individual and the state. In this scenario, rational individuals with access to unlimited information "govern" themselves.

The concern here is not that making more information available is in itself problematic, nor to suggest that people should not have access to information. Rather it is the assumption that improving the availability and accessibility of information, notably through new ICTs, can *in isolation* lead to the sorts of changes envisioned in this narrative. Efforts to diversify and improve access for users in the global South reinforce the assumption that individuals need access to information and that empowerment will result if they choose to act upon the

increased volumes of information now being made more widely available. It has echoes of a 'bootstraps-out-of-poverty' mentality (Hickel, 2014) where knowledge need only be harnessed for individuals to achieve their own development. This is problematic not only because of concerns around the fragmenting of knowledge processes that results from information supply-led approaches. More worryingly, the emphasis on the individual effectively obfuscates critical attention away from questions around context in relation to inequality and power imbalances that shape not just access to available information, but knowledge systems in their entirety (Mukherjee-Reed, 2000), ultimately side-lining the state and structural explanations of inequality and instead privileging the agency of the individual (Radhakrishnan, 2007; Sharma, 2008).

In revisiting some of the examples used throughout this analysis we can see this emphasis on the individual reiterated again and again, where, as we saw above, information initiatives are 'empowering citizens' through 'enhancing access to information' in order that 'the poor and excluded can claim their rights and improve their lives'. For example, according to the UN's Global E-Government Readiness Report of 2004 cited earlier, it is not states or even civil society who are tasked with knowledge uptake for social development. The 'cornerstone of an ICT led development strategy' is the creation by development stakeholders, notably governments, of an 'enabling environment' (UN Global E-Government Readiness Report, 2004: 3) for ICT and ultimately knowledge uptake and use. Indeed, reading further on in the introduction leaves us in little doubt of who is meant to facilitate these change processes and the associated dangers of withholding knowledge society investments:

As more of the services in an economy come online those individuals and groups *without access* will be marginalized ... Disparity in access is also important from an equity standpoint since it tends to perpetuate existing income and other inequalities in a vicious cycle. The poor lack income to be connected to ICTs which in turn reduces *their opportunities for obtaining and utilizing information for employment, health and education* thus leading to higher potential for continuing reductions in income again (ibid: 4; my emphasis).

In contrast to Freirian (1970) notions of collective conscientisation the focus here is clearly on individual agency. This report makes clear that information access is important for 'the poor' who need 'opportunities to obtain and utilize information'. This model is therefore clearly reliant on the capacity of individuals to acquire 'culturally appropriate content' and then transmute, process and utilise this content to 'create opportunities for economic and social empowerment' (UN Global E-Government Readiness Report, 2004: xi).

South-South cooperation amongst NGO intermediaries, despite using the language of partnership and collaboration, is also clearly promoting individual empowerment to improve social welfare outcomes in development. The Practice in Participation portal cited above goes on to suggest in their 'About Us' page that the portal will 'impact social change' because, amongst other things:

- Local communities, in particular the disadvantaged and marginalized, will learn to value their local knowledge.
- Valuing their own knowledge will lead *communities to be primary actors in changing their own lives* – demanding better services, governance, transparency and their rights from their governments (my emphasis).

What becomes clear is that knowledge initiatives, in terms of design, focus and intended outcomes, have become, intentionally or otherwise on the part of the intermediaries that have emerged to facilitate them, a part of what Alikhan et al. (2007) suggest is a post-Washington consensus underpinned by a pluralism allied to serve the needs of the market. Access to, and application of, knowledge therefore becomes a prerequisite to participation in the dynamic interactions between a robust state, private sector and civil society stakeholders, reflecting what Cammack (2003: 7) calls a 'blueprint' for 'the sustainable reproduction of capitalism' (emphasis in original) that necessitates a move 'beyond simple macro-economics to [consider] the social and cultural dimensions of economic success' (Alikhan et al., 2007: 22). Cammack's and Alikhan's arguments point to a global consensus on the necessity of fulfilling essential social welfare needs, but not primarily to achieve human rights or social justice. Instead, improving access to information to promote social development is about supporting the poor to participate more effectively in economic development, where the goal is fundamentally about strengthening Southern knowledge systems in a way that informs and thus strengthens market economies. Put another way, marginalised groups are enabled to become agents of (their own) economic development as part of underpinning and/or strengthening capitalism, a process that depends on the achievement of some degree of social development.

In this context, empowering the poor and marginalised in the Global South to demand accountability or access to social welfare entitlements by increasing their access to, and use of, the 'right' kinds of knowledge has been undertaken as part of a broader process of 'creating structures of incentives at the micro-level that [have] complemented the macro-level fundamentals' (Cammack, 2003: 7). By framing development shortcomings as hinging on the

relationship between individual empowerment and access to knowledge, even more visible, progressive efforts to create inclusive knowledge societies are in danger of conforming to fundamentally neoliberal approaches to development, where '[t]he individual is posited as both the problem and the solution to poverty rather than as an issue of the state's redistribution policies or global trade policies' (Kamat, 2004: 169). In this narrative frame, the imperative of seeking out and then acting on this increasingly available information is transferred to the poor, thus establishing a self-help model that transfers the moral responsibility for the uptake of information resources to those least able to capitalise on them. This results in what Hickel (2014: 1366) suggests is 'the onus of responsibility' to end poverty being 'shifted from the institutions that have caused underdevelopment to its victims'. And as the next section of the analysis emphasises, Southern-based NGO intermediaries, understood as a category of development stakeholder, are not necessarily best placed to challenge this articulation of knowledge uptake for social development.

#### Civil society, access to knowledge and social development

Having problematised the tendency to deploy knowledge as a discreet entity devoid of context and to be accessed and applied by individuals to empower themselves, we can now consider the facilitative role of civil society in leveraging knowledge on behalf of marginalised groups to promote broader social policy objectives in development. As the analysis up to this point has highlighted, the discourse and practice tend to presume that Southern-based intermediaries in particular have a greater capacity to bypass pre-determined, Northern development paths and instead glean what they need from this greater volume of available information. Whether it is to hold governments to account or to facilitate access social welfare entitlements, the presumption is that Southern-based civil society will ensure that any relevant information is used by local organisations and/or passed on to people in ways that the poor themselves, either acting on their own or in conjunction with local NGOs, deem appropriate.

So are civil society and/or NGOs really able to deliver improved social welfare outcomes by supporting and/or facilitating the uptake of knowledge amongst 'the poor'? In fact, this articulation of how civil society or NGOs might operate to leverage knowledge for social development in practice is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, the empirical evidence would suggest a very mixed picture. Deacon (2007: 96), for instance, identifies concerns



emerging from his own work in the late 1990s about how Northern INGOs were ‘uncritically involved in ... setting up forms of service provision parallel to impoverished state services that has had the effect of further undermining public provision’. On the other hand, Ebrahim (2003) uses case study evidence to suggest that NGOs offer sites of co-option but, as importantly, resistance to mainstream development imperatives, where NGOs have a capacity to leverage knowledge to prioritise local needs and promote social development, even within the constraints set by donor funding and reporting imperatives.

This mixed picture reflects a broader scholarship that is equivocal about the role of NGOs in development, which tends to be ‘either gratuitously critical or excessively optimistic about NGOs’ (Bebbington 2004: 729). But I argue, as with the question of ICT effectiveness above, that whether NGOs are effective or not is actually the wrong question. The question is not whether ‘civil society’ or ‘NGOs’, taken as a category, are less or more effective in promoting knowledge uptake for social development. That is a question best answered through broader empirical, case-study based research or systematic reviews of NGO evaluations (where these may be available), nor would I suggest that it would ever be possible to make definitive pronouncements about the effectiveness of civil society or NGOs in the aggregate. Instead, the remainder of this analysis draws out the implications of the lack of definitional clarity in the usages of the terms ‘civil society’ and ‘NGO’. There is a tendency to deploy the terms ‘civil society’ and ‘NGO’ as idealised concepts, understood to be aligned, implicit in the literature cited throughout this analysis, with participation, inclusion and/or mobilization. Sheth and Sethi (1991: 56) identify this as part of

a common stereotype held by many observers and policy planners that an NGO is small, convivial, participative and innovative, demonstrates a high leadership quality, is cost-conscious and austere, locally-rooted and responsive, and thus a worthwhile instrument for welfare, developmental and mobilisation organisation programmes.

As the remainder of the analysis makes clear, not only does this stereotyping deny the diversity of organisations that would fit this description, it also raises important questions about oft-repeated claims in development discourse and practice about the facilitative role of ‘civil society’ and ‘NGOs’ in leveraging knowledge in pursuit of social development objectives.

Whilst the definitions of 'civil society' and NGO' share broadly similar themes around mobilisation, inclusion and participation, their usage varies widely in how they are understood and deployed. According to Banks, Hulme and Edwards (2014: 708), civil society is 'the space in which people mobilize to bargain, negotiate, or coerce other actors in order to advance and promote their interests', where 'civil society' more broadly is 'seen as the honest broker of the "people's interests"' (Kamat, 2004: 158). Yaziji and Doh (2009), in their book exploring the relationship between NGOs and corporations, begin their analysis by suggesting an evolutionary relationship from civil society through to NGOs, where common interests emerge, through to social movements where alliances are made and cemented, leading finally to more organised relationships embodied in the establishment of NGOs. Suggesting that the UN coined the term 'non-governmental organisation', Yaziji and Doh (2009: 4) cite the UN's definition of an NGO as '[t]ask-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, NGOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens' concerns to Governments, monitor policies and encourage political participation at the community level'. Scholte (1999: 2-5), in attempting a definition of civil society that consists of setting out what it is *not* i.e., it is 'NOT the state' and 'NOT the market', goes on to suggest that civil society is an umbrella term that is made up of a diverse range of NGOs, including labour unions, academic institutes and business organisations. And in a substantial proportion of this literature, these two terms are used interchangeably, in amongst a range of other terms such as non-profit organisation, voluntary sector, civic organisations, third sector and community-based organisation (see Scholte, 1999). Alvarez (1998: 307; emphasis in original) suggests that 'NGO' itself has become the overarching descriptive term most widely used, 'indiscriminately deployed in development discourse to refer to any social actor *not* clearly situated within the realm of the state or the market' and used to describe everything, 'from peasant collectives and community soup kitchens to research oriented policy think tanks'.

Whilst achieving definitional clarity on the extent to which NGOs and civil society are meaningfully similar or different may be valuable, what is more important for the purposes of the present analysis is how this 'indiscriminate' usage has resulted in the terms 'NGO' and 'civil society', particularly in development discourse and practice, being used as shorthands for representative, inclusive and democratic organisational forms ideally suited to deliver social welfare:

NGOs ... rose to prominence as vehicles of popular participation and advocates for the poor, as well as service providers (Bebbington 2005). Seen to offer

participatory and people-centred approaches to development that were both innovative and experimental, they offered the opportunity for generating bottom-up opportunities for development, reflecting the needs and wants of local communities and disadvantaged groups. The initial hype greeting NGOs as a development alternative, however, was surprisingly uncritical, based more on assumptions than evidence (Banks and Hulme, 2012: 11).

Echoing the lack of empirical evidence underpinning the continued faith in new ICTs cited earlier, the consequences of these assumptions leading to the generalized usage of these terms is significant, insofar as any civil society or NGO involvement is assumed, *a priori*, to have the capacity to facilitate knowledge uptake and/or social development. Development discourse has now 'consolidated [civil society] as proxies for broader processes of citizen engagement that would enable them to act as a countervailing power against local and national governments' (Banks, Hulme and Edwards, 2014: 708). Indeed, a belief in the stereotypical image of the voluntary organisation as inclusive, participatory and 'convivial' has led some to suggest that 'NGO characteristics render them a priori likely to be more effective in certain kinds of endeavours ... Indeed, this is one reason why government agencies contract NGOs to deliver various services' (Khan 1997: 9).

Yet the sheer diversity of organisations that may be labelled as 'civil society' or 'NGOs' renders the notion of *a priori* characteristics an absurdity, from which we may extrapolate a number of key concerns in relation to the narrative elision between access to knowledge, the facilitative role of civil society and the achievement of social welfare objectives that, as we have seen earlier, continues to animate development discourse and practice. Firstly, as Deacon's study cited above suggests, NGOs who act as primary service providers where state or public provision has been weakened or withdrawn entirely is problematic not least because where an elision is made between access to knowledge and accountability in governance and social welfare delivery as we saw earlier, it is contradictory to suggest that NGOs, posited as a 'category' imbued with powers to mobilise and facilitate inclusion and participation, are able to support the 'poor' or 'marginalised' to access social welfare entitlements. In many instances, NGOs acting as service providers may in fact be exacerbating the conditions for poor public provision, weakening governance and eroding existing accountability even further. There is a further and related contradiction in that many 'non-governmental' organisations in fact rely heavily or even exclusively on government funding, an issue that Howell (2013) reiterates raises worrying questions about NGO accountability: 'The close working relationship with

government – where NGOs seek state funding, becoming co-producers of welfare, development and security – also raises issues about autonomy and political positioning’.

At issue is the more fundamental concern around the nature of the facilitative role that civil society or NGOs are meant to play with regards to leveraging knowledge. In other words, to what ends are NGO intermediaries leveraging knowledge in service of social development? And here again we see echoes of the earlier discussion of the neoliberal tendencies implicit in how knowledge is understood as a driver of change. In considering the question of autonomy and political positioning of civil society and NGOs a second and related concern emerges. Despite the proliferation of non-state, non-market actors, Banks, Hulme and Edwards (2014: 707) suggest that their ‘entrance ... remains a mask for maintaining the dominance of free market capitalism and that goals of transformative social justice remain far-removed’. Nagar (2006: 147) reiterates this position, suggesting that ‘the interventions made by powerful NGOs have often ended up serving the interests of global capital’.

Furthermore, and returning to the narrative privileging South-South cooperation identified earlier, scholarship in this area would suggest that Southern-based NGOs are not necessarily better enabled to work outside these constraints, despite their assertions to the contrary. As I have problematised elsewhere (Narayanaswamy, 2014: 580) there persists a tendency to cast Southern-based development NGOs as very well-placed to address social welfare objectives, since

The moral claims to representation asserted by Southern NGOs invite significantly less scrutiny due to their perceived proximity to subaltern groups ... [where the] perception of Southern-based NGOs as interlocutors between power brokers and those marginalised from decision-making processes arises out of powerful and intractable discursive associations between terms such as ‘Southern’, ‘local’ and ‘community-level’ with ‘the poor’, ‘the marginalised’ or ‘the grassroots’ ...

Indeed, my previous work in this area raises concerns about ‘the inclusion of Southern NGOs as democratic, accountable and inclusive interlocutors to promote broader social justice objectives’ (ibid: 582).

Reiterating this concern from the perspective of their work with Indian women’s NGOs, Nagar and Raju (2003) suggest that women’s NGOs perform a range of functions, not all of which are transformative. It is worth noting here, as I analyse in-depth elsewhere (Narayanaswamy,

forthcoming), that women are frequently identified as a target group for knowledge-based initiatives designed to achieve improved social welfare outcomes, where Southern women's NGOs in particular frequently act as interlocutors. This raises questions about the gendered nature of the knowledge divide (see Hafkin and Huyer (2013) and the historical association of femininity with non-profit activity (see Sharma, 2006) which, whilst important, is beyond the remit of the present analysis. What is important about this engagement with women for the purposes of this analysis is Nagar and Raju's identification that many Southern women's NGOs actively engage with social welfare objectives, including a 'focus on education, communication and dissemination of information' (ibid: 2003: 2). But they argue that these efforts are 'aimed at raising women's consciousness within the existing structures, while a select few actively work to identify and challenge the structures responsible for growing social inequalities' (ibid). They go on to suggest that the purpose of information production and dissemination is 'not to overthrow the current system and build a new one', but to help 'the poorest women cope better with this reality of shrinking resources and increasing social and economic inequity and injustice by making them more knowledgeable' (ibid: 3).

What is clear is that placing the burden of social development on the shoulders of the poorest has become part of 'great neoliberal strategies for bringing the poor under the control of the state and market, which is directed at poor women in particular and often uses NGOs as delivery agents'<sup>2</sup>. This then is problematic not only for the nature of the assumptions it makes about the capacity of 'the poor', as recipients of information in this model, to act as agents for their own development, but also presumes that NGO intermediaries are able to facilitate these information dissemination processes to support social development objectives through the empowerment and inclusion of marginalised groups, where instead NGOs themselves are potentially implicated in the perpetuation of neoliberal development paradigms (Kamat, 2004).

### Conclusion

This paper has raised important concerns regarding the unfettered optimism in the narrative elision between access to knowledge, the facilitative role of civil society and the pursuit of

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<sup>2</sup> Janet Townsend, Visiting Fellow, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, personal correspondence, 2014.

social policy objectives in development. The importance of investments in improving the availability and accessibility of knowledge alongside a continued faith in the imagined capacity of civil society or NGOs acting as intermediaries to leverage knowledge on behalf of poor and marginalised groups to address key social development challenges is not supported by any definitive empirical evidence. Two key reasons are proffered for the empirically mixed picture that emerges, revealing instead some worrying underlying assumptions that inform a knowledge-based development model for social development. The first is that knowledge in this narrative frame is conceptualised as a discreet, standalone, tradeable and context-free entity that is easily adapted to diverse contexts, effectively disaggregating knowledge processes. This conceptualisation of knowledge further places the burden of knowledge uptake for social development, whether it is to hold governments to account or demand access to social welfare entitlements, on to the individual, side-lining systemic, structural explanations of inequality and weak governance that invariably underpin poor social welfare outcomes.

The second is that engaging with civil society in order to facilitate the empowerment of the poor or disenfranchised to strengthen Southern knowledge systems and in turn promote social development belies the diversity of organisational forms and issues that constitute civil society, however it is defined. What is clear is that non-state, non-market actors may uphold at times contradictory positions variously as primary service providers, advocates for marginalised groups or representatives of powerful stakeholders and/or ideas. The concern raised here is the tendency to deploy a discursive category of 'civil society' in practice that is imbued in the aggregate with the discursive power to facilitate social development in favour of their poor and marginalised constituents and beneficiaries.

The more worrying implication of these two key concerns is the extent to which civil society engagement with knowledge for social development is transformative, as it is frequently believed to be. This again is not to suggest that all knowledge initiatives undertaken by civil society organisations or NGOs have been co-opted in service of neoliberal development, nor that broader commitments to strengthening Southern knowledge systems in pursuit of development and social justice are not central motivations for the individuals and organisations mobilising around these concerns. Rather it is to raise critical questions about the faith and optimism that continues to channel substantial financial and human capital in the hopes of a one-dimensional, linear conversion from investments in access-to-knowledge

initiatives facilitated by a strengthened Southern civil society to improved social welfare outcomes and greater social accountability. The more nuanced analysis here instead suggests a range of concerns with this articulation, not least the spectre that the pursuit of social development through improving access to knowledge and facilitated, where necessary, by civil society, may not in reality represent the pursuit of human rights or social justice but rather, as Cammack (2003) suggests above, may simply represent tools to underpin the sustainable proliferation of capitalism.

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