The Policy Stops Here: Civil Society, the Internet, and Indigenous Politics in Ecuador

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Abstract

Polices and discourse on global development in recent years have increasingly centered on the instrumental role of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in political development and change. The recent (2011) events in North Africa ensure that these inquiries will continue. At the same time, many initiatives and programs have emerged in developing regions featuring the implementation and use of ICTs for development. In the Andean region of South America, some of these are designed and promoted by national governments, some by the regional organization, the Andean Community, and others by external organizations such as the Canadian IDRC. This paper evaluates the outcomes of these initiatives, specifically focused on Internet use, in one Andean country, Ecuador, with an emphasis on the responses of civil society organizations. The research is based on the premise that the engagement of the civil society is a likely measurement of the outcomes of various initiatives to integrate ICTs into the development process, and address empowerment of marginalized groups and regions. The paper addresses a fundamental question: How do the activities of civil society organizations connect ICT policies to practice in ways that address political marginalization? We highlight the intersection of ICT for development policies and societal activities in a region that exhibits one of the highest levels of socioeconomic and political cleavages.

Introduction

Development theories, research and policies have in recent years increasingly centered on the instrumental role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in addressing uneven socioeconomic and political development. These discourses are collectively known as the ICT for development (ICT4D). Accordingly, various initiatives and programs have emerged in different parts of the developing world, with initiatives featuring the implementation and use of the technologies for development. Some are designed and promoted by national governments while others are initiated by the regional organizations, as in the case of Ecuador and the Andean Community. External organizations such as the Canadian International Development Research Center (IDRC) and the European Union (EU) are also involved in the utilization of ICTs for development in various parts of the developing world, including the Andean Region. Some of these policies are coordinated, when there is collaboration, for example, between the EU and government of Ecuador. Many, however, are not coordinated, and it is unclear which initiatives are most effective.

While state and international agencies have been pivotal to the integration of ICTs as tools for development, civil society organizations have also played significant roles. This is particularly so in countries where the state apparatus may not always have the capacity or willingness to respond to the demands of the citizenry. In the case of the utilization of ICTs for political development, the engagement of civil society can provide a useful measurement of the outcomes of various state-sponsored initiatives to integrate ICTs into the development process. One of the expected outcomes of ICT4D is the

reduction in structural inequalities among different groups of people. These inequalities manifest both in availability of opportunities and resources, as well as spatially. That is, the spatial distance among groups of people living in different parts of a country or region can be a factor in the political marginalization of those located in the geo-economic peripheries, as they are hindered in their participation in political issues of importance to their lives. Information and communication technologies have the capacity to bridge these spatial inequalities.

Our objective is to explore these processes – the participation of civil society as a catalyst, and the role of ICT policies and implementation – in the Andean Community of South America, starting with this research on Ecuador. We examine selected ICT projects in the country to demonstrate multiple layers of policy initiatives, their intersections, and the resulting engagement of civil society organizations (CSO). Our research and analysis are framed around the question: Can civil society organizations implement ICT4D projects in ways that potentially increase access to the political process, particularly between those at the center and marginalized (indigenous) groups in the Andean Community? Posed differently, how do the activities of CSOs connect ICT policies to practice in ways that alleviate political marginalization? This paper will explore these questions by identifying the sponsorship of internet websites, and by examining the political activity and discourse on these websites, particularly between 2009 and 2010 when significant content and development occurred. Given that there are multiple layers of ICT activities, we also examine the various ICT initiatives at different levels – international, regional, national and local. Many of these initiatives are government-sponsored but there are also grassroots projects stemming from civil society

aimed at utilizing the technologies to achieve various goals. We critically analyze the connections between these grassroots-based projects and those sponsored by agencies in ways that demonstrate the synergies between political society and civil society. We begin with an overview of the discussions about the civil society and civil society organizations.

The Civil Society: The Fifth Wheel or People Power?

Civil society has traditionally been described as the space between politics (state) and the economy (market). The conceptualization of this "space" often connoted a sense of emptiness and vacuum, or if it was occupied at all, its contents and occupants consisted of insignificant activities and actors disconnected from the important processes of state and market relations. However, the Center for Civil Society at the London School of Economics defines civil society as:

> the *arena* (italics added) of un coerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power (Whyte, 2004).

An understanding of civil society as an "arena" implies the presence of multiplicity of actors and activities in the hitherto conceptually unpopulated territory. These actors often consist of "organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups" (Whyte, 2004). In the same vein, Hauss

(2003) observes that the civil society "refers to *voluntary* participation by average citizens and thus does not include behavior imposed or even coerced by the state." This may also include "political activity engaged in through nonprofit organizations such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)" all involved in voluntary participation in the public and private sector. The activities of civil society, according to Hauss, accumulate social capital, a "human equivalent of economic capital" which can be "expended when a society finds itself in crisis" (2003).

Both definitions are characterized by the presence of groups who organize around shared interests. In contemporary discussions of the civil society therefore, the notion of organizations is intricately connected such that the focus is now on organizations as important manifestations of civil society. And there has been an explosion of civil society organizations around a myriad of issues at the grassroots, national and global levels. This has inevitably attracted a lot of interests from academics and researchers in the social societies. Though CSOs, even in their formalized configurations, have always existed, the current focus on them arises from the plurality of their functions and ubiquity in various sociopolitical and economic forums.

The importance of the civil society organizations is underscored by the fact that the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations have elevated them as pivotal to successful performance of the state and its agencies. In 1999, the United Nations sponsored a world civil society conference in Montreal, Canada. The theme of the conference was: "Building Global Governance Partnerships" and participants came from all over the world and represented numerous non-state and

grassroots organizations. The event was so important that the keynote speaker was the UN secretary general, Mr. Kofi Annan. At the end of his speech, he did not simply shake hands and leave. Rather, he fielded questions (some quite confrontational) from the thousands of CSO representatives who traveled from around the world to the French Canadian city for the international conference.[1]

Also, the World Bank has a long history of interacting with CS0s, starting from the 1970s. On its civil society website, the Bank reports that through three decades of interaction with civil society organizations, it has

> learned … that the participation of CSOs in government development projects and programs can enhance their operational performance by contributing local knowledge, providing technical expertise, and leveraging social capital. Further, CSOs can bring innovative ideas and solutions, as well as participatory approaches, to solving local problems. (World Bank, 2009)

The IMF collaborates frequently with civil society organizations especially since it began focusing its attention on poverty reduction strategies in developing countries. The Fund mostly works with CSOs engaged in economic matters "through information sharing, dialogue, and consultation at both global and national levels" (IMF, 2009).

The recognition and increasingly expanded role of CSOs have been influenced by two major interrelated factors: the accelerated processes of globalization and technological advances in transportation and ICTs. These developments have blurred the traditional boundaries between politics, economy and society and increased the role of individuals and nongovernmental agencies even as state capacity, arguably, diminishes. While ICTs have increased visibility and access for CSOs, these organizations also promote the

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[1] One of the authors attended the conference as a rapporteur.

diffusion and penetration of the technologies both as tools for socioeconomic development and as means of communication. This is therefore the basis of our interest in the manner in which CSOs can harness the technologies both to achieve their own organizational goals and as tools for development and reduction in socioeconomic inequities in their spheres of influence. We however acknowledge that while these technologies can create a level-playing field for political and economic actors, they can also exacerbate pre-existing inequalities within and between countries. The tendency for the latter outcome can be mediated by purposeful utilization of ICTs by civil society organizations through appropriate translation of national and regional policies.

Multiple Layers of ICT Projects in Ecuador

Like all developing countries and regions, Ecuador and the Andean region of South America is the recipient of a myriad of initiatives and projects aimed at expanding access to ICTS, and in particular, the Internet. The issues that impede such access are complex, ranging from lack of infrastructure to low levels of literacy among rural populations. Thus the initiatives vary in their emphasis as well as their outcomes. What are increasingly apparent are the proliferation of ICT and internet initiatives, and the lack of coherent coordination of such efforts. Of course alliances and cooperation do take place, with an institution such as the World Bank, for example, backing a state-sponsored project. Just as often, however, projects are created in isolation, and if they create synergy it may well be by accident. Yet this may not be a negative thing. In terms of engaging civil society in the development of local intranets and utilization of the internet for potential socioeconomic and political development, it is the grass root initiatives rather

than a top down governmental approach that indicate this sort of development. Policies and projects from governmental and non-governmental organizations can play a role in laying the foundations and sparking interest and ideas.

With so many initiatives, how is it possible to know which are successful, and actually lead to civil society participation and political activities? Are there initiatives which come from civil society without governmental or organizational catalysts? We are interested in studying these questions for Ecuador in a regional context, in order to capture the dynamics of regional integration efforts, national development, and the role of ICTs. The layers of policymaking and project funding have been identified as multinational or NGO, international, regional and state, as illustrated in Figure 1. There is an additional category for civil society initiatives. The middle circle indicates network outcomes from these initiatives, or the resulting internet-based outcome that can be assessed. Of course the multinational projects typically support or collaborate with efforts on other levels, and these collaborations will be discussed as well. In the following sections we review the projects and assess any measurable outcomes, particularly in terms of civil society participation.
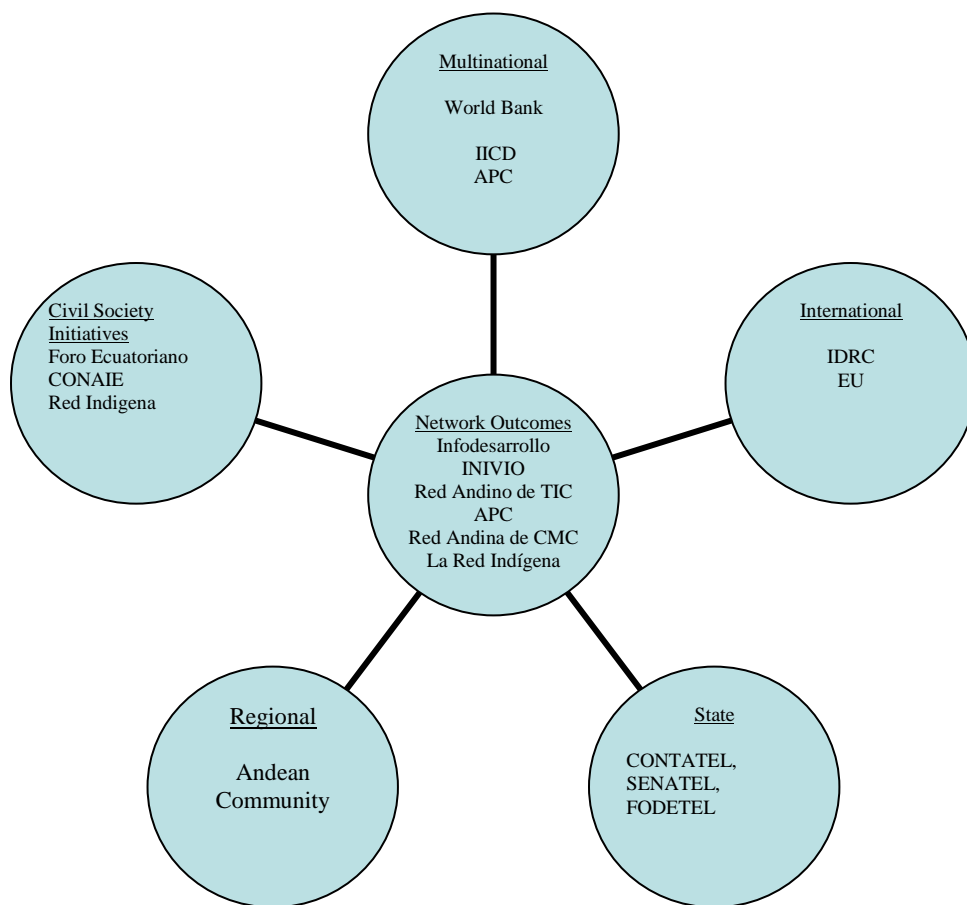
Multinational

World Bank

IICD
APC

Civil Society
Initiatives
Foro Ecuatoriano
CONAIE
Red Indigena

International

IDRC
EU

Network Outcomes
Infodesarrollo
INIVIO
Red Andino de TIC
APC
Red Andina de CMC
La Red Indígena

Regional

Andean
Community

State

CONTATEL,
SENATEL,
FODETEL

Figure 1 Levels of ICT Initiatives and Internet Outcomes in Ecuador

Multinational

This category includes the World Bank, and international non-governmental

organizations such as the International Institute for Communication and Development

(IICD), and the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). The United

Nations Development Program has also supported some initiatives in Ecuador, in

collaboration with other groups such as the APC. The other significant international

organization in Latin America, the Organization of American States, did not appear to

have any significant projects aimed at ICTs and universal access in Ecuador. In fact, the projects reported were not technology-related at all.

In the past few years the World Bank has supported the Indigenous People's Leadership Capacity-Building Program for the Andean Countries that started with funding from the Ecuadorian and Peruvian governments, a fund called the Fondo Indigena. Between 2003 and 2005, this collaboration led to workshops and training sessions on public policy, leadership and the use of ICTs. The expressed goals include an increase in indigenous leadership capabilities in the national arenas, as well as to "promote the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), and to establish a network of institutions oriented to the formation of indigenous leaders" (Uquillas Rodas, 2005). A related initiative, also sponsored by the Fondo Indigena, is an internet project called the Red Indigena (Indigenous Network). Started in 2004, it also seeks to build leadership and national and regional involvement for indigenous communities, because the Internet "crosses borders and permits horizontal and permanent communication" (La Red Indigena). This website project features publications and materials directed at informing the indigenous communities of their rights, and of the global context in which their political mobilization takes place. It also provides an intranet and other services. However the site is not yet fully developed and appears to be used more for posting news items on indigenous leadership and political action, and connecting leaderships from the various countries in the region. In March of 2009 a public letter was posted from indigenous leaders in the Andean region to President Evo Morales of Bolivia, expressing appreciation and solidarity.

The non-governmental international organization, IICD, seeks to utilize ICTs to connect people within certain developing countries in order to promote development and meet the UN Millennium Development Goals (About IICD, 2011). The only countries in Latin America that the IICD is currently active in, according to its website, are the Andean countries of Ecuador and Bolivia. It focuses on local empowerment and enhancing the occupations that people are already engaged in. On the Internet the IICD has sponsored the website Nuevared.org, whose stated goal is to provide web and technical support for civil society organizations, not just for Ecuador, but to make connections across Latin America (Nuevared, 2011). An offshoot of this initiative is the site Infodesarrollo.ec which promotes universal access to ICTs, and invites memberships from any organization that shares its goals. It provides information on software, uses of ICTs, and is linked to many active blogs (Infodesarrollo, 2011). It is a very interactive site, and lists more than 30 organizations that have joined the site and are utilizing its services and information resources.

Another project funded by IICD provides more quantifiable tangible results, and it is collaboration between this international organization and a civil society organization that pre-dates the Internet. Camari is a co-operative organization for a collection of about 200 indigenous artisan and agricultural groups in Ecuador, who market and sell their goods collectively. Camari has had a website for online trading (or e-commerce) in the last five years. Also, the funding from IICD has enabled them the collective to create 'infocenters' and other community centers in eight small towns across Ecuador. These centers provide the merchants and artisans with access the Internet for their online marketing and sales (INICIO, 2011).

Another international NGO, operating worldwide, which appears to have significant involvement in the region monitoring ICTs policy and implementation is the Association for Progressive Communications, whose goal is "Internet and ICTs for social justice and sustainable development" (APC, 2011). This organization is funded by a wide array of government and non-governmental organizations, including the IDRC of Canada, discussed below, as well as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNESCO. With the goal of universal and open access to the Internet, the APC focuses on the participation and engagement of civil society in the Andean Region, a region noted for its socioeconomic inequities (La region andina) . The organization emerged following a 2008 assessment during which it was noted that ten years after a meeting in Quito on the need to design intranet capacities in the Andean region, there was insufficient evaluative research. . Thus forums such as Infodesarrollo.ec, NueveRed.org, and Foro de la communication became significant for evaluating the outcomes of the implementation of the various ICTs initiatives. These are discussed in the following sections.

International

This category includes initiatives between Ecuador, or the Andean region, and another country outside the region. Canada's IDRC is a significant international development player in the region. In 2008 the Center announced the implementation of the Andean Network (Red Andina), in which it also partnered with the APC (Nace la Red Andina). The Ecuadorian sites NuevaRed.org and Foro de la communication, among several others, are part of this network. The most notable participation is by the Red

TICBolivia, a network of agricultural, indigenous, government and educational agencies in Bolivia, supported by the IICD in the Netherlands (Red TIC Bolivia). In 2009 this site had undergone major construction to take advantage of the interactivity of Web 2.0 technologies and applications and provide a forum for participants to communicate and exchange ideas

Potentially, this would be an Andean-wide network linking civil society organizations that could lead to unprecedented communication and socio-political networking within a region long compartmentalized and isolated. Bolivia is likely to continue to be focal point for this development, particularly among indigenous groups, with the strength of the indigenous movement at the national level in that country.

Regional

The regional organization which impacts Ecuador the most is the Andean Community, an organization that seeks to increase economic integration and regional development in Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia. This intergovernmental, regional organization focuses the application of ICTs in specific areas, such as the project Quality and Equity in Education to improve math and science education in poor rural and urban areas of the Andean countries (Proyecto, 2009). When fully implemented, the project would connect educators in these countries electronically, provide materials and training for using ICTs, especially the Internet to supplement and update math and science education. Projects such as this have the potential to create online communities of educators, connecting poor regions in the various countries. As such, it is one to be examined in the future.

The Andean Community has directed a major effort at integrating civil society in the region – in fact, engaging civil society to improve integration and development for the entire region. This implemented project, SOCICAN, is funded and supported by the European Union, and uses the EU as a model for involving civil society in the integrative process. (SOCICAN, 2009) An ambitious project that involves the regional and multinational levels, it has initiated several forums in Ecuador dealing with the environment, the status of women, and other issues significant for development. The Andean Community is utilizing the Internet to publicize, promote, and report on the programs. The SOCICAN website is much more developed, and contains interactive forums where citizens are discussing development issues within the region.

State

In 2001 the government of Ecuador passed a telecommunications ruling on the state's commitment to universal access to communication services, including the Internet, emphasizing the needs of marginalized, rural and impoverished areas of the country. The Universal Service Plan, as it was officially called, was to be administered by the National Council on Telecommunications (CONATEL), the National Secretary for Telecommunications (SENATEL), and funded by the Fund for the Development of Telecommunications in Rural and Marginalized Urban Areas (FODETEL). In 2008 the IICD and UNESCO completed a study to assess the progress made by these government agencies and to map the extent of access to the Internet through telecenters in the country (Gordon, 2008). The Universal Service Plan, which includes telephony, has received steady financial support by the government since its inception (Gordon, 2008). At least

542 installed telecenters, including some internet and computer centers in public schools, were promptly installed. (Ibid.). In 2009 the government announced another funded initiative by CONATEL and SENATEL to bring Internet access to the rural areas of the province of Carchi, with a focus on educators and students and the eradication of 'digital illiteracy' (Presidencia de la Republica, March 29, 2009).

Most of these installations and projects are still too new or under-utilized to evaluate in terms of concrete outcomes. An IICD and UNESCO team has however evaluated some of the telecenters and found that the main issue for the centers themselves was sustainability due the lack of qualified and trained personnel to service and manage them. Despite this, it noted that many of the centers were thriving regardless of some obvious constraints. The main ingredient for success was apparently the appropriation of the centers by civil society in the local communities. As people realized the value of the centers, they were more willing to maintain and finance upgrades on the systems (Gordon, 2008). The conclusion of the report was that in developing countries the state was the most important factor for ICT policy and implementation, as well as collaborations with NGOs and local governments.

Civil Society and Indigenous Politics

While the implementation of hardware and infrastructure comes from the state and other funding sources, there are networks emerging directly from civil society, enabled by the growing access to the Internet. In Ecuador, as in the rest of the Andean region, the socioeconomic and political inequities follow patterns of the ethnic social divide. Almost half of the citizens of Ecuador are likely to be of indigenous descent, and

the majorities of those people are among the poorest and most marginalized in the region.
Thus when Ecuador's Universal Access Plan refers to the most marginalized citizens,
they are likely to be from one of the country's indigenous tribal groups. Some of these
groups are using the Internet to communicate politically and socially, and to connect with
other groups who have long been isolated from each other.

The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), founded in
1986, has been active in unifying many of the Ecuadorian tribal groups and working to
empower them on a variety of issues. CONAIE has a website which has been mainly
used to post declarations and political positions against the status quo, neoliberalism and
the government of Ecuador. In early 2009 several announcements were posted on the
CONAIE website, one of which refuted President Correa's accusation that indigenous
political mobilization was destabilizing to the country and in league with neoliberalism.
This final point was refuted with references to indigenous opposition to foreign mining
and petroleum companies coming into the country (CONAIE, 2009). The site, however,
in 2009, was limited to those declarations and was not interactive. By the beginning of
2011 however, this site was much expanded, with interactive forums and links to
YouTube videos of demonstrations and presentations. Also, there is now more evidence
of outreach to tribal communities in other countries in the region, including discussion of
the creation of a pan-indigenous political entity in Latin America, a 'multinational state'
(CONAIE, 2011).

A site that has been active and interactive longer is that of the Confederation of
Kichua Tribes of Ecuador (ECUARUNARI), which is affiliated with CONAIE. Still
under construction in 2009, it offered subscriptions to a magazine published by the

organization, the latest news about CONAIE and ECUARUNARI, and links to several other indigenous organizations. By late 2009 this site showed evidence of utilization for political mobilization by indigenous groups, including a September march to support the current cap on water that can be privatized by the state. The website is used to publicize the events, with pictures, and a detailed report of the goals. The site also reported on workshops conducted over the past few years to enhance the skills of indigenous people in accessing and effectively utilizing the Internet in ways that can enhance their lives, such as capitalizing on free open source software and education on how to reach other resources online. It currently offers discussion forums, live radio feeds, and videos of events.

One of the potentials of the Andean Community's project to include civil society in the integrative and development processes is to connect indigenous groups from the various countries. In 2006 a web-based alliance was launched among groups in the Andean countries, such as Chile and Argentina as well, and was called the Andean Coordination of Indigenous Organizations, CAOI (Somos, 2009). The information on the site is minimal, but what is significant is the connecting of these groups electronically, an unprecedented vehicle for building unity among previously separated tribal groups. This development has a significant potential for unified political mobilization. Among others, the organization's goals include uniting for solutions to common socioeconomic, political and environmental problems, and end the isolation and political fragmentation wrought by the European invasion and colonialism (Ibid.). Several recent links on the site include reports on organized political activities, such as participation in the World Social Forum and a presentation made by Peruvian indigenous groups to the United Nations. In 2010

there were a growing number of forums and reports on offline activities dealing with global climate change and the role of indigenous people (CAOI, 2011). What is apparent with all of these websites is that they are linked to Facebook and other social media, and it appears that this is where most of the ongoing discussions are occurring.

The development of interaction among participants on these websites has therefore grown over the past two years, especially with expanded social media networks. This could be an indicator of civil society organizations being active in a virtual public space. A civil society initiative on the internet which aimed at a national audience, rather than at a particular group, was the blog Ecuadorian Forum for Communication (Foro Ecuatoriano), which created an online community made up of a myriad of CSOs, particularly those involved in communication, such as journalists, public radio stations, and university communication faculty. Also included are the indigenous groups ECUARUNARI and CONAIE, and this expansion of membership enhances the forum's capacity to connect marginalized groups with political and social elite groups. The blog is a tool to communicate within this designated community, but also to promote the message of universal access to those who are in a position to provide communication access, and the 'democratization of communications' (Foro, 2009). In 2009, posting of declarations on the importance of access, free speech and open communications were the main activities, limited to only two or three per month, though showing a consistent flow of activity. By 2011 there is not much activity, nor does there seem to be participation by the indigenous groups. This could reflect the current political climate in Ecuador, which has experienced communications and media restrictions by the Correa government. And

yet, the indigenous networks seem to be more active than ever. Thus, it is possible that the political and social cleavages that exist in Ecuador are being replicated online.

Conclusion

A compelling objective of this study was to analyze the myriad of ICTD policies and projects implemented at international, multinational, regional, national and local levels in Ecuador, both for their effectiveness in coordination and in outcomes. From this preliminary examination of ICT policies and projects, it seems that the collaboration between multinational or international organization and the state had the strongest initiatives, including the commercial site for indigenous products, Camari, and the network RedTIC in Bolivia. Further, these multinational – national partnerships appear to have also included civil society organizations that were already in existence, such as the indigenous artisans from Otavalo and other areas which already had some experience with cooperative marketing. Thus, the project funding was directed at groups and activities which already existed. This has implications for future policies and initiatives, as it seems most fruitful to support and enhance existing networks. The initiative supported by the EU, for example, that the Andean Community is developing on the regional level, would stand to benefit from involvement of the indigenous networks which are already creating civil society space on the internet and seeking to mobilize groups throughout the region. Of course, there are political barriers to this approach, as indigenous political mobilization is also seen as a threat to the status quo, and the example of Bolivia has led to fears of instability. Nevertheless, the regional level ICT

policies appear to be the weakest. It indicates that in order to utilize technology to strengthen civil society, existing groups and interests must be engaged.

Regarding the types of outcomes observed, there appeared, in terms of the marginalized indigenous communities, to be a focus on political communication and mobilization. While there was also evidence of the Internet being used to enhance economic livelihoods and education, the indigenous leadership is utilizing virtual space to cross social and geographical divides both within Ecuador and externally, in order to broadcast their agenda to a wider audience and confront the state and the status quo in new ways. In reality, however, political mobilization via the Internet is only as effective as the access and computer skills of the participants. Thus, to use this technology to increase political participation among marginalized people, education and infrastructure development must occur as well. There is some evidence of this, with the implementation of telecenters and workshops designed to address computer and Internet education. It is difficult to measure the closing of the digital divide, however, as national statistics on access typically do not measure ethnic divides in the Andean region.

Finally, continuous research is necessary to assess the outcomes of Internet use by civil society and indigenous groups in particular, as these activities are clearly in the rudimentary stages. How much Internet use will grow to create effective political participation by indigenous groups is dependent upon many factors, including access, perceptions about technology, and the nature and direction of indigenous movements within the national context in Andean countries. In order for ICT policies and projects implemented at any level to have effective outcomes for marginalized societies, they

must be preceded by ongoing, current research, as well a strong alliance with existent

civil society organizations.

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