

# IT: the gap is growing

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WILL the new information era help reduce disparity? Or reinforce it? In considering an answer to these questions, it is necessary to note that disparity is shaped by factors other than information. Factors such as a person's access to land, water and other natural resources. To capital and credit. To employment and income. To justice and equity. Unless governance and economic systems are reformed and restructured, they are incapable of using new information to reduce disparities.

Some parts of information empower and emancipate. Such parts are about political issues and rights, about health care and education. Some parts of information enthrall and hypnotize. These are usually related to entertainment, the arts and sports. Some parts of information make no difference. For example, voters sometimes re-elect leaders either already convicted for corruption or charged with malpractices.

Radio was the first mass medium to reduce the gap between the information-rich and the information-poor. Whereas radio immediately reduced the information gap, the computer and the Internet, specially in their initial phase increased the information gap — because of costs, need for literacy, electricity, need for formal learning and networking, need for paper and other factors.

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Thus, as the numbers of human beings still imprisoned in poverty — that is, about 4 billion — are enormous, the crises of population, urbanization, unemployment, HIV-AIDS, drought and famine have compounded the suffering of the poor.

Despite the harsh reality of the data cited earlier, there have been some encouraging improvements in the conditions of poverty. For example, between 1968 and 1998, average incomes more than doubled in developing countries, and in 1990-98 alone, the number of people in extreme poverty fell by 78 million.

The poverty of the vast majority of human beings is as old as recorded history itself. What makes the contemporary condition of poverty more painful, more inequitable and more startling is that, whereas previously mass poverty coexisted with a relatively slow pace of change, in the closing 20 years of the 20th century and now, here in the first decade of the 21st century, the pace of material betterment for the rich minority is gal-

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There are possibly eleven factors that cause the information gap: 1) poverty; 2) low level of print literacy; 3) low level of education; 4) low level of access to telecommunication. For example, as of 2001, one estimate calculates that 80 per cent of the world's people have never made a telephone call; 5) low access to computers, low level of computer literacy; 6) inadequate bandwidth; 7) low access to mass media; 8) lack of adequate official policy commitment to IT; 9) an inhibiting environment of covert or quasi-censorship; 10) social, economic and political conditions of internal conflict that preoccupy governance; 11) dysynchronous state of development.

An illustration of the eleventh factor is that if computing power has been doubling every 18 months to two years, the rate of decline in mass poverty is comparatively fractional. The rate of improvement in systems of governance and delivery of social justice to the poor is also fractionally low.

Structures of internal governance in most developing countries perpetuate unjust systems of wealth production and control, systems that stifle initiative and enterprise, preventing nations from raising the poor out of poverty and narrowing the wealth gap and the information gap.

There are also eleven ways to reduce the gap: 1) Significant increase in investment in the social sector: literacy, education, health, utilities and services. 2) Partial or complete debt write-off for

even the middle category of developing countries with a direct linkage between the write-off and investment in the social sector and in information technology. 3) Deregulation, deconcentration and privatization of telecommunication in return for guaranteed cover-

Internet, especially in their initial phase increased the information gap — because of costs, need for literacy, electricity, need for formal learning and networking, need for paper and other factors.

Never before in human history have so many people and so many nations been so well off. Because of vaccines, better health care and nutrition, life expectancy levels are the highest ever at 65 years for males, 69 years for females. Electricity, roads, bridges and dams have created unprecedented physical infrastructure and promoted economic productivity. Hundreds of millions of children go to school and educational participation is broadening. Seven hundred million people travelled as tourists in the year 2000, crossing oceans and continents in just hours and days. Trillions of dollars are traded and transferred every 24 hours.

Yet even as information technology (IT) gathers momentum as the driving force of the 21st century, economic poverty continues to entrap the vast majority of the world's people. The globalization of poverty is evident in the following data: Of 6 billion people, 1.2 billion live on less than \$ 1 a day, 2.8 billion live on less than \$ 2 a day — that is, four billion people, or two out of every three people in our world today are poor. The World Development Report for 2000-2001 informs us that: "The average income in the richest 20 countries is 37 times the average in the poorest 20 — a gap that has doubled in the past 40 years. And the experience in different parts of the world has been very diverse.

In East Asia the number of people living on less than \$1 a day fell from around 420 million to around 280 million between 1987 and 1998 — even after the setbacks of the

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The rich are shooting ahead. The gap is growing. The information gap exists between countries in the same region of the world — for example, between Singapore and Laos. The gap exists between the rich and the poor within a single country — between Jakarta and West Timor in Indonesia. The gap exists between the rich and the poor within a single city — in virtually every major urban centre. The gap exists between groups of countries — for example, between the 22 members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and seven members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The gap exists between sectors within a country — between banking in Pakistan and the judiciary in Pakistan. The gap exists between areas within an advanced OECD country — between Wall Street and Harlem in New York.

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even the middle category of developing countries with a direct linkage between the write-off and investment in the social sector and in information technology. 3) Deregulation, deconcentration and privatization of telecommunication in return for substantial increases of guaranteed coverage of low income groups and disadvantaged areas.

4) Enforcement of open, free networks and reduction of covert or quasi-censorship (for example, retaining controls only on pornography, hate and violence-promoting content). 5) Significant increase in support to IT education. 6) Promotion and replication in other countries of innovative approaches in telecommunication, — for example the Grameenphones of Bangladesh.

7) Increased access to mass media. 8) Provision of increased credit and support to the poor. 9) Enhanced IT skills training at all levels. 10) transfer of old personal computers from developed countries to developing countries. 11) Mobilizing corporate sector support to promoting IT in developing countries.

Profit — and greed — spur growth in information technology as well. But growth per se, is no guarantee of fair distribution of opportunity. The gap is likely to grow before it levels off to approximately equalize.

We are inexorably moving towards a world of increased access to information. The gap is likely to be reduced in the coming decade.

Yet it has not been conclusively established that information and IT can