

Partnership Governance: Involving Business and Civil Society in ICT-for-Development Policy Dialogues

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Project description:

This project investigates how the United Nations uses so-called ‘multi-stakeholder networks’ to involve the private sector, civil society and international organizations in policy processes in the area of ICT-for-Development.

Multi-stakeholder participation, multi-sectorial dialogues and partnerships with civil society organizations and the private sector have become established practice in a number of issue areas within the UN, but particularly in the area of development (Brinkerhoff 2002), and in recent world summits (Gordenker 1996; Utting 2001; Alger 2002). The inclusion of non-state actors in the various dimensions of policy making, such as agenda-setting and advising, is carried out via a number of mechanisms, such as preparatory committees, advisory boards, task forces, policy networks, commissions and open forums for dialogue. In recent years, the UN has focused on how ICTs may be used to foster development, in particular the Millennium Development Goals, and here ‘multi-stakeholderism’ is an often-repeated concept and an increasingly common practice.

At the heart of this investigation lies the question of the manifestations and nature of the relationship between technology, governance and politics: What are the multiple roles played by ICTs, particular the Internet, in the area of ICT-for-development (ICT4D)? How is this technology integrated into development thinking, the governance of the networks involved, and the policies and recommendations that come out of such an ICT4D network?

The primary aim with this project is an analytical, context-sensitive investigation of the practices and rationalities that constitute and structure multi-stakeholder consultations on Internet governance within the UN. The methodology applied in this research project is inspired by the so-called ‘phronetic’ approach to qualitative social scientific inquiry (Flyvbjerg 2001). This implies a reliance on detailed case studies, a focus on practice, the posing of dynamic ‘how’ questions before more structural ‘why’ questions, and an interest in rationality and power.

There is a burgeoning literature, which challenges state-centric approaches to international cooperation, particularly under the broad heading of global governance. Here it has become commonplace to talk about a shift from ‘government’ to ‘multilayered global governance’ (Held 2002) and to point to the importance of networks in global politics (Keck 1998; Florini 2000; Hirst 2000; Reinicke 2000; Aronson 2002). A wide range of actors, including international organizations, civil society organizations and corporations now shape and take part in the political negotiations, policy- and decision-making processes that governments and intergovernmental organizations used to control alone (Gordenker 1996; Rhodes 1997; Rosenau 1999; Reinicke 2000; Brühl 2001; Hall 2002; Higgott 2002; Rosenau 2002). The literature on global governance, regimes and networks shows how such public and private authorities all shape global politics. But so far, most accounts sketch the broad theoretical and conceptual *contours* of an emergent shape of international cooperation. This project takes a different route and explores instead the *minutiae* of policy dialogue in this UN network involved in global ICT policies.

International regime theory and the IR literature on the importance of ideas and knowledge in global politics provide important points of departure for an investigation of how multi-stakeholder dialogues affect political authority in the area of ICT4D. Ideational approaches, particularly the constructivist strains, stress the importance of knowledge, discourse and ‘framing’ in agenda-setting (Haas 1992; Keck 1998), wish to give neither actors nor structures ‘ontological priority’ (Hasenclever 1997: 169), and view political authority as located in an increasing number of spheres. Expanding on insights from International Relations, particularly cognitivist international regime theory (Hasenclever 1997) and ideational approaches to global politics (Haas 1992; Keck 1998; Haas 1999) by applying an ‘analytics of government’ (Miller 1990; Burchell 1991; Miller 1992; Rose 1999), actor-network theory (Latour 1986; Latour 1993) and ‘discursive policy analysis’ (Fischer 1993; Hajer 2003), the project interrogates ‘multi-stakeholder’ dialogues and international cooperation in the area of ICT-for-development as a form of governance. What ideational approaches lack are an analytical apparatus that can be used to unravel and explore in some more detail the ‘causal and principled beliefs’ (Haas 1992; Goldstein 1993) that actors hold, and which are central to policy outcomes. To this end, the ‘governmentality’ literature (Miller 1990; Miller 1992; Dean 1999; Rose 1999), which is inspired by the work of Foucault (Burchell 1991), actor-network theory (Latour 1986; Latour 1993) and discursive policy analysis provide the analytical framework for an investigation of the techniques and rationalities involved in the performance of the ‘art of government’ (Burchell 1991: 3) in a multi-stakeholder network engaged in policy issues.

The analytical categories applied in this project are, on the one hand, ‘technologies of government’, which refers to the “humble and mundane mechanisms which appear to make it possible to govern” (Miller 1990: 8), and, on the other, ‘political rationalities’, that is, “discursive fields characterized by a shared vocabulary within which disputes can be organized, by ethical principles that can communicate with one another, by mutually intelligible explanatory logics, by commonly accepted facts, by significant agreement on key political problems” (Rose 1999: 28). For the purposes of this project, these two analytical concepts provide a way to approach questions of political authority in an empirical manner.

The project thus explores the mechanisms through which multi-sectorial dialogue is made possible, and fleshes out the political rationalities that structure policymaking processes and procedures.

The project carries out an in-depth case study of the UN ICT Task Force – a policy network with 50 representatives from the member states, the private sector, civil society and international

organizations. The UN ICT Task Force was established in 2001 with the mandate to “provide overall leadership” regarding how to make ICTs an integral component in UN development efforts, give advice on ICT policy issues in general, and help the UN reform itself through the use of ICTs (UNICTTF 2001). Since the outset, the key issue has been to create “strategic partnerships” and a “global forum for dialogue” among “public, private, non-profit, civil society and multilateral stakeholders” in order to “lay the foundation for future universal participation in the global information society” (UNICTTF 2001).

The empirical data consists of large and diverse collection of statements, documents, and discussions from both publicly available and private archives, qualitative interviews with participants, key people and administrative staff, as well as detailed participant observations made during meetings, forums, summits, etc.

The research project identifies the partnership principle as a central ‘rationality of government’ – one that functions not only as an organizational model, but also as a governance strategy, a way to establish political authority, and a form of strategic communication working to make those involved in the collaborative endeavour do something they would not otherwise do.

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