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Abstract

'Electronic democracy' is a concept with a relatively long history. It has been a central feature of the technological Utopias since the 1960s. Today, the trend is spreading worldwide, as public funding is made available for the exploration of the potential of new technologies to provide new channels of access to political information and participation in decision-making. Nevertheless, whereas e-democracy in Western nations is a tool for resolving the perceived crisis of liberal democracies, in the developing countries it is a tool to build democracy. This assumption is clearly important in the action plans and policies of International Organizations (World Bank, OECD, United Nations) which have assumed a leadership role in the reform of political institutions. This paper will focus on theoretical and methodological issues, such as the prevalent meaning(s) of e-government and e-democracy and their ideological roots in the context of political development.

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E-democracy and International Organizations: Theoretical and Methodological Issues

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Abstract

‘Electronic democracy’ is a concept with a relatively long history. It has been a central feature of the technological Utopias since the 1960s. Today, the trend is spreading worldwide, as public funding is made available for the exploration of the potential of new technologies to provide new channels of access to political information and participation in decision-making. Nevertheless, whereas e-democracy in Western nations is a tool for resolving the perceived crisis of liberal democracies, in the developing countries it is a tool to *build* democracy. This assumption is clearly important in the action plans and policies of International Organizations (World Bank, OECD, United Nations) which have assumed a leadership role in the reform of political institutions. This paper will focus on theoretical and methodological issues, such as the prevalent meaning(s) of e-government and e-democracy and their ideological roots in the context of political development.

Introduction

The key issue of the present Congress “Is Democracy Working?” is decidedly, no new issue. It permeates/cuts across a significant part of the history of the 1900s, not least in the context of periods loaded with promise for the future of democratic values and agency. 1989 for instance, though hailed as a breakthrough year in the long triumphant march (the third wave of democratization) towards democracy, has cast a disturbing shadow over the destinies of the world: the message of hope that arose from the debris of the Berlin Wall has unfortunately, receded considerably, and a much more sober reality taken its place.

Not only has the list of what democracy promises but fails to deliver (Bobbio: 1984, Wallerstein: 2001) been lengthened, but processes have been consolidated in phenomenological terms that have posed “the problem of appropriately conceptualizing, accurately measuring and adequately theorizing these developments”. Cases in point for instance, are a Research Project on Political Agency for “cosmopolitan democracy” (Held: 1992), the proliferation of literature on the changing roles and political profiles of international institutions such as the United Nations Organisation, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization, and, perhaps in reaction to the wave of mounting scepticism at that time, the attention directed at the potential of an all-embracing, use of ICTs: from *Reinventing Government* to the virtual – national and supranational - public sphere. A myth is being recreated worldwide: in terms of organisation, in (re)directing the political agenda and public debate, i.e. if democratic government is to have a chance, and a future, then bit and digital networks have to be looked to and invested in (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kouzmin: 2003).

Debate is ongoing in terms of the boundaries and the nature of the *policy community* helping to consolidate the myth, conferring on it an extraordinary force of diffusion and cultural embedding: an intricate network of actors and interests - professionals, corporation managers, intellectuals, Nation-States, local elites - governed by the International Organisations, the core protagonists of this community of *mythmakers* (Mosco: 2005).

Hardly even mentioned by the literature on political development and democratization processes, this area of research is worthwhile exploring in depth. Three research strands, generally analysed separately, converge into a single area¹: the expansion of the

¹ I would say that mutual indifference has prevailed. At best, two cases have been analysed. Cfr. Rose, Richard (2005) . Governance and the Internet, in S. Yusuf, M. Anjum Altaf and K. Nabeshima (eds.). Global Change and East Asian Policy Initiatives, Washington, D.C.: World Bank and Oxford University Press.

In a global context, the Internet can be seen as part of the process of liberalization and development promoted through such diverse agencies as the World Trade Organization and the millennium goals of the United Nations (UNDESA 2003). Just as the World Trade Organization treaties emphasize transnational movement of goods and services, so the Internet emphasizes the transnational movement of information of all kinds. Just as the World Bank (1997) emphasizes the need for modern and transparent institutions of governance to promote economic development, so the inspection effect of the Internet spotlights bureaucratic deficiencies and the absence of rule-bound behavior and offers means for governors to undertake bureaucratic modernization within government and for citizens and institutions of civil society to challenge governors to do so.

geographical coverage of the International Organisations, and the “acquisition of a range of additional responsibilities going beyond their original mandates and taking them into much more highly sensitive and indeed politicized areas of policy-making” (Whitehead: 2004, 45); the transition – at what conditions and thanks to what policies - to democracy in the Third World and/or in the East after the breakdown of totalitarian regimes; and, last but not least, ICTs as central tools to improve representative democracy and /or to promote the democratisation process in developing countries: e-government, e-democracy, and, more recently, e-governance, which constitute the *keywords* of the lexicon of change.

In the 1990s given their leading role in government reform, the international institutions: declared ICTs and *political development* a core issue on their agenda. If the quite evident failure of development policies in peripheral countries, on the one hand, has contributed to the debate on the need for reform of governing institutions in the world (de Senarclès: 2004); on the other, it has pushed them, delegitimised as they are, in the direction of finding new strategies and solutions. Innovation through ICTs - social and economic advancement among the peoples of the world has become more and more bound to technology creation, dissemination, and utilization² - is at the core of the renewed focus on the role of the state and the institutions in this process. Re-defining the State – functions, responsibility, powers – as regards world market priorities and logics, has become strategic for international organization intervention, and ICTs a specific tool to achieve these goals.

Up to 1980, *development*, which had been defined as nationally managed economic growth, was redefined as “successful participation in the world market” (World Bank: 1980, cit. in McMichael, 2004, p.116). On an economic scale, specialization in the world economy as opposed to replication of economic activities within a national framework, emerged as a criterion of “development”. On a political level redesigning the State on competence and quality of performance in the discharge of functions was upheld, while on an ideological plane, neo-liberal and *globalization projects*³ were to the fore.

The aim of my paper is to reconstruct this issue, underlining the centrality of practices and discussions on ICTs, starting from an analysis of the reasons that have brought interest for the State and for the processes of institution building back into focus again.

ICTs and Institution Building: Bringing the State Back In

² “It is a productivity revolution, impacting new ICT industries, ICT-using industries and services, and overall total factor productivity. Is a knowledge revolution that is giving to an information society or knowledge economy, whereby knowledge creation, codification, diffusion and effective use are driving growth and competitiveness, and whereby lack of access to connectivity and knowledge tools is giving rise to digital and knowledge divides and pervasive exclusion. It is a learning revolution that has given rise to the learning economy, learning organizations, life-long learning. Accordingly, individuals, firms and countries are able to create wealth and obtain access to wealth in proportion to their capacity to learn. Not only does this technological change create new demands for learning and raises the bar for skills to function in the new workplace, but it also offers novel and powerful new pedagogies for learning and creativity. It empowers the students becoming more active and independent learners.” (Nagy K.Hanna “Why National Strategies are needed for ICT-enabled Development”, ISG staff working papers June 2003)

³ *Globalization Project* is an emerging vision of the world and its resources as a globally organized and managed free trade/free enterprise economy pursued by largely unaccountable political and economic elite. Cfr. McMichael (2004).

While during the 1980s the government reform movement had concentrated on deregulation⁴, in the 1990s it focused more on the reform of core state functions and the building of state capacity. The route to development was seen to be a route of liberalization and unfiltered integration in the world economy, supplemented by domestic institutional reforms to render effective integration viable.

The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, all developed extensive programs offering financial resources to countries interested in developing "state capacity."

Even though during this decade efficiency and the widespread introduction of information technology for government for first world countries have been fundamental and the efforts of developing countries concentrated more on building state capacity, decentralization and fighting corruption etc., there have been no absolute differences. In actual fact, converging reform strategies have been widespread. In the developing world, the impetus for reform of the state came, more often than not, from the development institutions on which those countries relied. Thus, the reform movement has involved the re-creation of the state along lines to help, rather than hinder, the newly created market economies.

Rethinking the state's role in development is a pre-requisite for the *Structural adjustment programmes (SAPs)*⁵. In other words, this is a shift in Bank lending policies from providing assistance for developmental concerns to aid for "comprehensive policy reform". The World Bank's premise for the shift was that post-colonial development states were overly bureaucratic and inefficient on the one hand, and unresponsive to their citizens on the other. Their brief is a means of rebuilding states, through "institution building". In this phase of Bank involvement, states are committed to the redefinition of the government's economic priorities. The state delegates its accountability to its citizens, who then however, lose input from their own government.

The United Nations, recognizing that the State has a key role in processes of development and in making globalization work for everyone, in alleviating poverty and income disparity, in advancing human rights and democracy etc., commissioned a Report from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs: "*World Public Sector Report*", which reviews major trends and issues in public administration and governance and is published every two years.

Moreover, the United Nations, under the auspices of its Development Programs section, has set up a Public Administration and Civil Service Management Reform project. In recent years they have coordinated external assistance in promoting a professional civil service, transparency, the use of Information and Communication Technology and other areas of government reform in more than 90 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) countries. Their funding policy does not consist in attempting to re-establish

⁴ As has been widely documented (also by the World Bank), this has been called the decade of drastic decline in spending in Social Services – such as health, education, social security, welfare, housing and community services. Privatization accomplished two radical changes: it reduced public capacity in developmental planning and implementation, thereby privileging the corporate sector, and it extended the reach of foreign ownership of assets in the former Third World – precisely the condition that governments had tried to overcome in the 1970s. Cfr: McMichael (2004).

⁵ *Structural adjustment programs* are programs involving comprehensive economic reform as a condition of a loan package from Bretton Woods agencies.

twentieth century bureaucracy. Rather, the terms of their recommendations are couched in the language of new public management and supportive of recreating government movements popular in first world countries.

As the World Bank declared in its 1997 *World Development Report*:

“The cost of not opening up will be a widening gap in living standards between those countries that have integrated and those that remain outside. For lagging countries the route to higher income will lie in pursuing sound domestic policies and building the capacity of the state⁶. Integration give powerful support to such policies – and increases benefits from them – but it cannot substitute for them. *In that sense, globalization begins at home. But multilateral institutions such as the WTO have an important role to play in providing countries with the incentive to make the leap*”.

At the Fifth Global Forum on Re-inventing Government (Mexico City, Mexico 3-7 November 2003 Guido Bertucci, Director of the Division for Public Economics and Public Administration at the UN, after briefly illustrating the principal trends of development that affect the public sector and the state worldwide, on the subject of developing countries declared: “Experience suggests that one of the main causes of the crisis plaguing developing countries and the incapacity of some of them to integrate in the world economy is state capacity deficit. Globalization is certainly presenting many opportunities, including foreign direct investment, trade, access to information technology. However, only countries that have an effective public administration system in place, solid political and economic institutions, adequate social policies and a committed leadership, can ensure that all sectors of society benefit from greater integration in a world economy”.

The problem is not *whether*, but rather *how*, to go global

There are no quick or ready-made solutions to complex development problems, and one has to consider that reform “should not be imposed from outside” and that “deep understanding of local conditions is essential in designing development programmes” (pp.6-7). Development is principally about policy reform in which ICTs are one of the main tools for implementing organizational and institutional consolidation (Heeks: 2002).

Although governments in many countries with developing and transitional economies are transforming their roles, not all states have successfully abandoned traditional functions and embraced those needed to spread the benefit of globalization. To benefit from more open and widespread economic interaction, states must sustain an economic system that promotes and facilitates the ability of business enterprises to compete effectively in international markets and, people at all economic levels to earn a decent livelihood. For the World Bank, poverty results not from globalization but, on the contrary, from the incapacity or unwillingness of governments to create the policy and institutional framework needed for effective participation in global economic interaction.

⁶ "It [state capacity] means subjecting state institutions to greater competition, to increase their efficiency. It means increasing the performance of state institutions, improving pay and incentives. And it means making the state more responsive to people's needs, bringing government closer to the people through broader participation and decentralization." (Kamark, 2004, pp.18-19).

“Of course, there are the ‘market failures’. But what are often called “market failures” are really “policy failures”; problems resulting either from the unwillingness or incapacity of governments to enact and implement policies that foster and support effective economic systems and prevent countries from participating in world trade and investment”. To create a “Competent State”, a crucial role is played by e-government and by Knowledge, Innovation and Technology system (KITS) (Rondinelli and Shabbir: 2003, 1-2) ⁷.

Ironically, despite the common belief that globalization weakens the power of the state to regulate, in the case of developing country governments they are obliged to regulate more, not less, with the result that the ‘development space’ for diversification and upgrading policies in developing countries is being limited behind the rhetorical commitment to universal deregulation. Globalization ties the hands of developing country governments ‘forever’ to the North’s interpretation of a market opening agenda (“you open your markets and remove restrictions on incoming investment, in return for [promise of] improved access to our markets”). (Wade: 2003).

One implication of this strategy is an expanding trusteeship role for the multilateral agencies that subordinates national policy to the demands of the global economy. This was the prevalent approach throughout the 1980s and the 1990s. It reflected the spirit of the time and was summed up in the formula “*Washington Consensus*” (Williamson: 1993), i.e. universal convergence” on specific principles seen as a shift from bureaucratic centralisation to market logics on the one hand, and the establishing of a new way of framing development issues and policies for development, on the other.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Conference/Council for Trade and Development (UNCTAD), however, denounced the ever widening gap between different countries. The responsibility for shifting the approach and the agenda of the International Organisations however, did not lie with these dissenting “voices” but rather, with the total or partial failure of e-government for development projects. These failures come at a high price for the world’s poorer countries, i.e. those very countries which, according to the prevailing paradigm, should gain the most advantage from e-government policies (Heeks: 2003).

Research contributions querying the analytical validity of this paradigm have been numerous, above all in democratisation process studies⁸. In particular, one of the concepts on which this specific strand of research has concentrated is that developing countries and “transitional countries” need a strategy of *state-building*. Institutional attention for this dimension however, has been in substance, reduced to the technocratic terms of administrative reforms or in the socio-centric terms of *good governance*. By reducing *state-building* to *democracy-building*, therefore, the goal was not to (re)construct the *state*, but rather to design democratic institutions and, *consequently*, ones as far as

⁷ Shabbir Cheema works for the United Nations.

⁸ In a political context, cfr. Linz, Stepan and O’Donnell who started debate on these issues in the *Journal of Democracy* in 1996. For a useful reconstruction cfr. Ottorino Cappelli (2005). (Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, n. 1, 2002, p. 6.)

possible decentralised/deregulated, horizontal, open, permeable and co-operative. In other words, *Governance without government*. According to Carothers (2002):

In countries with [...] extremely weak states, the democracy-building efforts funded by donors usually neglected the issue of state-building. With their frequent emphasis on diffusing power and weakening the relative power of the executive branch – by strengthening the legislative and judicial branches of government, encouraging decentralization, and building civil society – they were more about the redistribution of state power than about state-building. The programs that democracy promoters have directed at governance have tended to be minor technocratic efforts, such as training ministerial staff or aiding cabinet offices, rather than major efforts at bolstering state capacity.

Engaged as it was in projects of institutional re-design and the development of *governance*, the powerful “democracy-promotion community” had a *state-reducing agenda* prevail over a *state-building agenda*, that is to say, a vision that completely grinds down the concept of “**state-ness**” to the apparently de-politicised and technocratic dimension of *implementation & law enforcement*. Undoubtedly, this perspective grasps, essential factors in many respects. But the direction indicated in order to overcome the limits of the transition paradigm, i.e. that of recognising the importance of the “**state-ness**” dimension, of the *autonomy* of the state in the process of decision-making, is, possibly, even weaker, I would go so far as to say even anachronistic. In re-proposing strategies of *state-building*, this approach does not consider, on the one hand, the many pressures to change the machinery of the State (Cassese and Savino: 2005), and, on the other, that the *state-reducing agenda* is the appropriate, *rationale*, a strategy for development establishment to preserve its hegemony.

As we have seen, the institutional capacities of the individual states to implement global governance rules are important, but the evolution of the global political economy has brought into question the capacity of individual states to *shape* developmental trajectories (Evans: 2001).

The World Bank premise for their policy shift was that developing states were too bureaucratic and inefficient, on the one hand, and unresponsive to their citizenry, on the other. Probably the truth is somewhere between the two, nevertheless, the solutions proposed and then imposed by the Bank constitute a growing external control of these countries in the name of financial orthodoxy. The Bank advanced the idea of “political conditionality”. It proposed “policy dialogue” with recipient states, leading to “consensus forming”...This strategy is actually a way of remaking states, through “institution building”. The vision of a globalization project: the implementation of market regulations via the restructuring of policies and standards across a nation-state system. Trade (two-thirds of which is controlled by transnational corporations) was privileged as the engine of development. To call it a project emphasizes its political dimension. “freeing” markets is a political act. (McMichael: 2004, 153). And ICTs are the strategic tool to achieve these aims (Schech: 2002).

Digital Opportunities: Many Voices but Only One Reform Agenda?

In the light of the data emerging towards the end of the 1990s, on the evident inefficiency of development schemes, a broad spectrum rethinking policy has been implemented on the strategies to adopt on the part of the International Organisations. In concert with conventionally neo-liberal areas, such as increased property rights, trade liberalization and privatisation, there is a renewed emphasis on social issues. Inevitably e-government and e-democracy policies have been affected too.

In a recent study, the United Nations declared (2004): “At present, the disparities in access to ICT-related development for the future are remarkable and are likely to become greater, at the current rate of technological advancement... The new paradigm of development requires a review of the way countries consider ICTs and e-government. It needs innovative approaches to government and the public sector; business and the citizen; and culture and society; in other words, a holistic approach which fully exploits the centrality of ICT for the vision of a future knowledge society” (i). Thus, “the new imperative for development is to employ ICT applications across the board for the creation of economic opportunities and human development.

Even the World Bank (1997)⁹ and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD: 2001; 2003) have adapted their strategies in the direction of a *state friendly* and holistic approach. In the report *Information and Communication Technologies. A World Bank Group Strategy* (2002), the necessity is underlined for “a shift in the approach to the sector“ given that realizing the new vision involves broadening the Bank’s established agenda (p. ix). The new strategic agenda envisages the World Bank’s action range extending to cover the entire information infrastructure sector. The G-8 Okinawa charter on a global information society concluded that the World Bank Group has an important role to play in this area: as a catalyst in improving access to information and communication technologies and in promoting their use for stimulating economic growth, promoting equal rights and reducing poverty.

The most recent developments are moving in a converging direction in terms of International Organisation strategies, as emerges from the joint proposals and schemes for identifying medium term goals for global development and the tools for their achievement and for subsequent outcome assessments. All of them, not least that of *Development Contract*¹⁰ (Emmerij: 2004) have as their reference point the *Millennium Development Goals*¹¹ proclaimed at the Millennium Summit, organised in 2000 by the United Nations,

⁹ On its website, the World Bank presents mission of the GICT (Global Information and Communication Technology Department) as follows: “Information and communication technologies are opening new opportunities for emerging markets. The World Bank Group aims to stimulate sustainable economic growth, increase productivity, improve public services, promote transparency, and reduce poverty through extending the reach of the technologies in the developing world” (World Bank, 2002).

¹⁰ *Development Contract* is a comprehensive package of a national and international policies, long term in nature, and based on a contract – and hence *reciprocal* conditionality – between industrial and developing countries.

¹¹ The MDGs embody the key dimensions of human development – poverty, hunger, education, health – expressed as a set of time-bound targets. They include halving income-poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education and gender equality; reducing under-five mortality by two-thirds and maternal mortality by three-quarters; reversing the spread of

and in the presentation of the project *A Better World for All*, promoted jointly by the United Nations (UN) the Organisation for Co-operation and Economic Development (OCED), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

An important milestone was the *International Conference on e-Government for Development* organized by the Government of Italy in Palermo on 10 and 11 April 2002¹². Convergence was reached in the definition of a framework of reform that contributes to good governance and empowering citizens at the same time enhancing local culture and traditions.

A constantly reiterated concept was that of the need to intervene in order to strengthen the national capacity for public administrations as one of the best measures that governments in developing countries can undertake in their efforts to realize the MDGs¹³.

In the UN World Public Sector Report (2005a) given that the quality of public institutions in development performance is fundamental as is the value of professionalism, the question remains, in the light of the modest results achieved thanks to downsizing programmes and related structural adjustment measures, whether “Leap-frogging” is effectively a feasible option, questioning, as it does, one of the pilasters of the developmental paradigm.

Taking into consideration the NPM (New Public Management) solutions to the problem of developing countries, the Report declares: “It can be argued that this issue seems to fall into the trap of predicating all “development” on the need to follow a single path or trajectory: the trail that has been blazed by “advanced Western democracies”. Such a view is open to the charge of ethnocentricity. This transfer of Western blueprints and models as if they were relevant to all times and places has aptly been labelled “institutional monocropping”. Crucially, such an approach is likely to miss opportunities for improvement that emerge from tapping local problem-solving capacities”. It would be preferable on the contrary, “to suggest a somewhat prudent scenario in which innovation has to await the slow, attentive development of support systems and institutional frameworks that Western countries have developed over centuries”.

However, the “latecomer advantage” can be a real one. So long as arguments about the need to tackle reforms in logical sequences or stages are pointing to the existence of prerequisites for particular measures of improvement, a more optimistic view of possibilities opens up. In other words, “leap-frogging” may be possible, although not across the board but rather in specific priority areas: governments may not need to wait until a fully fledged, functioning traditional public administration is in place in those

HIV/AIDS; and halving the proportion of people without access to safe water. These targets are to be achieved by 2015, the comparison point being 1990.

¹² The event, part of the Italian Initiative on e-Government for Development, a multi-million effort that combines advocacy with funding development projects. The Conference provided a platform for members of the G8 Digital Opportunity Task Force (DOT Force) and the United Nations Information and Communication Technology Task Force (UN ICT Task Force).

¹³ In slightly different terms the Global Monitoring Report 2004 prepared for the meeting of the Development Committee by the staff of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The findings focus attention on governance and institution-building reforms as an area for particular attention, as poor governance and weak institutions can seriously undermine the effectiveness of policies and programs throughout an economy.

priority areas before implementing NPM initiatives, so long as attention is paid to having vital accompanying administrative support systems and infrastructure in place relevant to each specific issue.

The issue here is not whether devolution can work only if it is preceded by or builds on a functioning, rule-governed bureaucracy and a well-managed system of performance measurement, but whether in its deployment, certain conditions are put in place such as staffing procedures that ensure competence and task commitment and a set of outcome standards that facilitate transparency and accountability. In this particular case, the government was able to invest sufficient human and financial resources to ensure that those conditions were in place to enable “leap-frogging” to happen” (17-21)¹⁴.

In conclusion, leap-frogging may be possible, but only in specific priority areas: not across the board. What about the holistic approach then? Needless to say, in this respect all the IO are now in agreement. The UN *Global E-Government readiness report 2005. From E-Government to E-Inclusion* is distinguished by its flexible attitude to the variables of the system. If existing disparities in income, infrastructure and education among and between countries and regions of the world have mapped onto disparities in ICTs making access and inclusion for less developed countries and regions difficult, a crucial imperative is “*the formulation of a development strategy based on effective and indigenously appropriate utilization of the ICTs in each sector, so that the market, the government and the citizen have a mutually beneficial and equitable role to play.* Consequently, rethinking the interaction between the state and the citizen towards a partnership, which actively promotes participatory decision-making is needed. This involves redefining institutions, processes and mechanisms whereby information is supplied and information is demanded. Governments need to formulate a national strategy based on the *holistic* concept of e-inclusion, whose goal is access for all: ICTs considered not just another factor of production, but rather a unique opportunity for achieving higher standards of living and greater economic and social empowerment of the millions of citizens around the world.

A solemn reference to the UN Human Rights Charter’s lies at the foundation of this vision of the world. This model, defined *Socially Inclusive Governance Model*, suggests that disparity leads to deprivation and poverty, which is ‘un-freedom’.

A Socially Inclusive Government promotes ‘access for all’ and “is as much about the government providing opportunities as willingness on the part of society to become involved in participation. As such, socially inclusive government is a partnership between the government, the private sector and civil society in pursuit of opportunity-for-all”.

In this context, the definition of e-government needs to be enhanced from basic ‘government-to-government networking’ or ‘use of ICTs by governments to provide information and services to citizens’ to encompassing the role of the government in terms

¹⁴ Of course, a wider array of solutions should be considered for the particular problems in hand, but in sum, the consequences of implementing NPM measures may include some of the following: Abolition or downgrading of many central personnel and financial control mechanisms; Conversion of civil service departments into free-standing entities, perhaps outside the civil service; Performance-based accountability through contracts, replacing old civil service employment rules; Deregulation of middle management; A strong customer focus in designing and administering services; and Extensive use of market-type mechanisms, such as competitive tendering and contracting, both for delivering internal services and for services to the public (21).

of being equitable and socially inclusive.

E-inclusion goes well beyond e-government¹⁵. A different theoretical and cultural register compared say to the World Bank appears to emerge¹⁶. There is a temptation to assert that the premises are being launched for a revision of the predominant paradigm or at the very least, that positions are no longer unequivocally convergent¹⁷.

In postponing however, an analysis on why in developing countries there is the *lack of affordability* and the *lack of an enabling regulatory environment*, the UN in actual fact renounces dealing with the most delicate part and, in a style/language inspired by Amartya Sen's approach of 'capabilities as freedom', does not touch on the structural nodes of social inequality which are *also* at the basis of the growing disparity in access to modern technology.

Governments have to acknowledge the importance of ICTs; they have to rethink their development strategy; they have to actively promote participatory decision-making; improve human capacities; develop public/private partnerships and so on: these recommendations are at the basis of the *Socially Inclusive Governance Model*. A 'well-being-centred' redefinition of development implies a focus on the state's traditional role in delivering collective goods and services, like health and education, and a more broadly defined set of state-society relations. Governments need to continue their reinvention efforts by institutionalizing innovative practices and by working in close cooperation with societal actors to improve state capacity and the scope of public services. Even though alternative visions and models for governance are emerging around the world, particularly within the developing countries, there are some basic principles of good governance that all countries must promote or achieve.

In actual fact, the different positions described above are distinguished merely by the factors that have absolutely no influence in terms of intervention policies. We are not witnessing a paradigm being abandoned but, on the contrary, a reminder of the systemic variables aimed at justifying the failures of development policies. A broadening of the

¹⁵ Among the objectives of e-inclusion the following are of paramount importance: Building inclusion for all; Efficient and transparent service delivery to citizens; Empowerment of the people through access to information; Efficient government management of information to the citizen; Promoting awareness about the information society; Building social and cultural consensus.

¹⁶ Cfr. The World Bank's Information and Communications for Development 2006: Global Trends and Policies. "The report shows that private sector competition remains the driving force in extending telecommunications access to billions of people around the World..., but cooperation is also key to ensuring further progress – cooperation between government and private sector to connect the next billions, within governments to extend e-services to citizens, and across countries to ensure regional access and connectivity."

¹⁷ Cfr. Markle Foundation (2003) *Global Digital Opportunities. National Strategies of 'ICT for Development'*. 'Development' itself is a word loaded with ambiguity and controversy (12). There are at least two dimensions of the potential contribution of ICTs to achieving the MDGs. On the one hand, ICTs can be viewed as a set of "tools" for application to particular development programs. From this perspective, they are specialized instruments for the accomplishment of specific measurable objectives. On the other hand, ICTs must also be seen in broader terms as the agents of a more fundamental transformation of societies. National development strategies must recognize and address both dimensions of the development agenda because the ambitious goals of the MDGs are simply not achievable without such broader social transformation. Or better still, these objectives cannot be attained merely through a sector-by-sector application of technologies to improve performance. Of course, development dynamics may operate not only at the "macro-dynamic" level, but all development strategies must create an impact greater than the mere sum of the separate initiatives or inputs (13-14).

range of dimensions considered crucial for good outcomes of such policies leads to an obscuring of the logics that directed them rather than to their being questioned..

So much so that in the documents produced by and for the IO, responsibility is highlighted in terms of accumulated delays in developing countries compared to Western countries and that only with “*courage and determination*” will they be able to “*move around the iceberg*” rather than crash into it. Proposing Latin America and South East Asia as examples of success has the purpose of reinforcing the idea that in the world market “*we are all playing the same game*”¹⁸.

Access to “a free, world market, democratic, inclusive and participatory” characteristic of the “information society” remains a fundamental strategic goal for achieving a democratic order. Every policy is aimed at that objective. Even in reports, such as the UNPAN Report, which deal with issues, opportunities and risks involving “late” countries, from a more pronounced cultural and political sensitivity standpoint, this is the only viable way. The intention is to deal with the growing complexity of public decision making by means of the broad involvement of competence and experience widespread in society, activating dynamics of dialogue and consultation: e-democracy represents the point of arrival of the path which starting from e-government aims to construct greater e-governance.

Nonetheless, “in light of the failures to improve the economic and social position of Third World countries, emphasis on governance now includes decentralization to partner private entrepreneurship and the release of social capital. In a context of state shrinking via structural adjustment, responsibility devolves “downward” to municipal authorities, communities, and their NGO supporters. The World Bank’s world development report of 1999-2000 urges participatory policymaking, observing that “institutions of good governance that embody such process are critical for development and should encompass partnership among all elements of civil society”. The Bank’s brief is to stabilize populations impoverished by structural adjustment and continuing debt service. This may be a new development strategy, under the guise of responding to the voice of poverty, but it shifts responsibility from development institutions to the poor. In so doing, it detaches deteriorating local conditions from their global political-economic context and depoliticizes poverty” (McMichael: 2004, 296-297). Even when significant elements of innovation are introduced, in this approach there is a tendency to de-contextualise the social dimensions of development, and thus to favour generic arguments about social engineering (Bebbington, Guggenheim, Olson, and Woolcock: 2004).

The assumption is once again that a free market is essential for sustainable development, and that good governance is important to facilitate the move away from government

¹⁸ “The distinction between ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ nations is somewhat misleading and tends to perpetuate the image of the world as composed of one group of rich ‘donor’ countries and another, the larger group of poor and passive ‘recipient’ countries. In fact, some ‘developing’ countries, particularly in Asia-Pacific and in Latin America, are catching up quickly with the so-called ‘developed’ countries. These emerging economies are leapfrogging technology” Emberg (1998): FAO www.fao.org/sd/cddirect

regulation toward market self-regulation¹⁹. The existence of technological disparity has been identified but the roots of this disparity remain problematic²⁰.

The economic growth of many developing countries has been closely associated with the shift from inward-looking protectionist development strategies to outward export-oriented liberal trade strategies. The underlying logic stays hidden i.e. that development is realized through *inequality*²¹.

E-democratization or e-dependency?

This dual tendency to explain the underlying causes of failure and to understand how risks can be reduced, on the one hand, and to de-contextualise the social dimensions of development, on the other, emerges in the framework of one of the most important contributions based on exchange of best practices and dissemination of knowledge: *The E-government Handbook for Developing Countries of infoDev (2002)*²². The Preface states that “e-government will be a powerful tool to help all types of economies (developed, developing and in transition) to bring benefits of the emerging global information society to the largest possible part of their respective populations...”. The need to provide an operational tool to help e-government practitioners arises from the awareness that “since resources remain scarce in regard to the immense tasks of socio-economic development and poverty alleviation, it is essential they be used wisely and with a maximum chance of success”. For the future of e-government it will be vital to understand the causes of their successes and failures, and to adapt that knowledge to the characteristics of the socio-

¹⁹ Cfr. the two international initiatives which took place in Seoul in 2004 and 2005. The first was the Twenty-sixth International Congress of Administrative Sciences; the second was the Sixth Global Forum on Reinventing Government. Both focused on the further development of ICTs and democratic governance as a “universal strategy for government renovation” (Kim: 2005, 100).

²⁰ “The developing world has a right to voice our skepticism about this brave new world. In the half-century that many of us have gained independence, we have not seen our countries go from strength to strength from the struggle for emancipation to being treated as equals on the world stage. We have always been, and may continue to be, shut out of charting the common future of humanity... We believe that there needs to be an honest reassessment in the world-view of the richer, developed countries. Much as they have hailed the freedom of expression and the plurality of ideas as the bedrock of their civilizational success, they seem to be welded to a dogmatic intellectual conception of the international political economy... It is this very same dogma [structural adjustment and global economic neo-liberalism] that threatens to ignore the pleas of the developing countries in the era of the new global knowledge economy. The deification of the market with no regard for social and human development will not yield a thriving global knowledge community, but a cyber-elite alliance of technopreneurs and western-dominated international financial institutions with a mass of nations left behind permanently”. YAB Dato Seri Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi, (2000). Speech and the GKII Conference. www.globalknowledge.org

²¹ A noticeable source of tension emerges from official documents in the context of how really feasible is the widespread use of “high-tech” and related levels of preparation necessari in order to achieve advanced sustainable human development, and whether this instead of creating economic growth tends to create ulterior techno-economic dependence.

“Nonetheless, it has also been recognised that unless a concerted effort is made, information technologies risk widening the gap between developed and developing countries, creating a ‘digital divide’ between North and South. Indeed, although the deployment of information technologies provides opportunities for leapfrogging, allowing developing countries to bypass stages of development, considerable obstacles stand in the way. Consequently, most developing countries are still a far cry from making the transition to a knowledge-based information society”. Uimon, P. Evaluation of the UNDP/BDP Information Technologies for Development Programme. www.undp.org/info21

²² The Information for Development Program is a multi-donor grant program that supports innovative projects demonstrating the development opportunities offered by information and communication technologies (ICT). *infoDev*’s mission is to promote the application of these technologies and the sharing of best ICT practices for social and economic development, with a special emphasis on the needs of the poor in developing economies.

economic environment. The *Handbook* is a roadmap for policymakers considering electronic government as a mechanism for reform. “It is now clear around the globe that the utilization of ICTs has the potential of revolutionising the way people interact with government and each other”. E-government is a process that requires planning, sustained dedication of resources and political will. The message is that, up to now too many resources have been wasted for the limited knowledge of the main variables at stake in the implementing of e-government policies.

However the *Handbook* has its weak points. On the one hand, there is acknowledgement that e-government policies have greater probabilities of success on the basis of a greater knowledge of socio-economic contexts of reference. On the other hand, it is these very contexts that are missing in the presentation on *best practices*. The short descriptions in the grids of model experiences and what can be learned from them are not much more than general observations under the guise of a *vademecum* for aspiring reformers.

The Handbook example helps to clarify in some respects the gap between the rhetoric and the implementation of the policy framework. In a rhetorical context, in projects on e-government, e-democracy and e-governance, ICTs should favour the development of institutions and democratic society acting *positively* on performance indicators “good” democracies²³.

If in the studies on democratisation processes the technological element is not considered of fundamental importance, this appears a central element on the contrary, in the analysis of supranational organisations.

The Director General of UNESCO Koïchiro Matsuura (2003) is quite straightforward in his article “*Cyberspace, Democracy and Development. A contribution to the Open Democracy online debate More*”. Here the objective of e-democracy “*is to strengthen public trust in government and to improve relations between the government and its citizens through increased transparency and accountability of government representatives, as well as to provide new possibilities for citizen involvement, owing to its capacity to link citizens with their representatives unbounded by time or space constraints. It means that citizens take an active part in the policy-making process. They are no longer seen as passive, but as pro-active with the possibility of proposing policy options and shaping the policy dialogue*”.

In pragmatic terms the link between ICTs and democracy is often reduced to the choice of *e-techniques* that can favour democratising practices²⁴.

²³ IN the literature on the subject many instances of good outcomes of digital government policies are to be found in newly industrialised countries and how they favour processes of economic and social development (*Creating a National ID System in Egypt; Delivering Management Control in Tanzania; Improving Sustainable Development Strategy in China; Breaking the Apartheid Legacy in South Africa*). “Cfr. e-Government: Technology for Good Governance, Development and Democracy in the MENA countries, www.worldbank.org

²⁴ “Group discussion via Internet forums and bulletin boards, voter guides, e-mail, instant messaging, blogs, CDs, video, film, PC-produced publications, community broadcasting, and other new media; Rapid group mobilization Rapid group mobilization via e-mail, mobile cellphones, instant Internet messaging; Controls on spam, access to Web sites and other content; Interactive voting and polling via the Internet, digital TV, text messaging; Government, public agencies, NGOs and politicians using all ICTs to inform, communicate and consult with the public.”UNESCO, “Social Transformation in an Information Society: Rethinking Access to You and the World”, 2004

However, many researchers underline how these potential benefits²⁵ can also correspond to phenomena and processes far removed from democratic forms of participation²⁶.

The UNDP reports and other data support a reciprocal relationship between technological achievement and human development, but they also emphasise that “the digital divide, which recognizes the yawning gap in accessibility to the Internet among countries, continues to grow, condemning entire regions of the world to even greater poverty” (Hill and Dhanda: 2003, 1021-1022). It would seem then, that these policies not only have often been inefficient, but also that the new orientation does not take into due consideration the reasons for such failure, on the contrary, the attempts to bridge the digital divide may have the adverse effect of locking developing countries into a new form of dependency on the West²⁷.

If by now it is widely asserted that as governments incorporate mechanisms of global governance into their administrative practices, they compromise their sovereignty and their representative role in transferring national powers upwards to the multilaterals (McMichael: 2004, 225) the developing countries are being more tightly constrained in their national development strategies by the proliferating of such regulations²⁸.

Among the most significant implications of the tendency i.e. the subjection of national powers to global standards, there is then the raising role of private actors which may enjoy rights (for example, rights to participation) deriving from them (Cassese and Savino: 2005, 10).

As Wade (2002, 443-461) underlines: “The technologies and ‘regimes’ (international standards governing ICTs) are designed by developed country entities for developed country conditions. As the developing countries participate in ICTs, they become more vulnerable to the increasing complexity of the hardware and software and to the quasi-monopolistic power of providers of key ICT services... Much of the ICT-for-development literature talks about plans, intentions, and opportunities provided – and blurs the

²⁵ New information and communication technologies can make a significant contribution to the achievement of good governance goals. This e-governance can make governance more efficient and more effective, and bring other benefits too. Three main contributions of e-governance: improving government processes (e-administrator); connecting citizens (e-citizens and e-service); and building external interactions (e-society). Cfr. Heeks (2004). , “eGovernment as a Carrier of Context”, 2004 , i-Government Working Papers Series n15.

²⁶ “Removes vital face-to-face communication cues; fragments communities; marginalizes and drowns most sources in a flood of information, without respected gatekeepers to filter misleading or extremist views; Encourages the rapid mobilization of anti-democratic forces, or flash campaigns to block policy; Increased censorship, citizen monitoring, and control by the government, police, and other public and private agencies; Expressions of public opinion biased by unrepresentative e-voters, and an opening for new threats, such as government management of public opinion and fraudulent votes and polls; ICT innovation not matched by necessary related policy and legislative innovations to protect and promote freedom of speech and other civil rights.”UNESCO, “Social Transformation in an Information Society: Rethinking Access to You and the World”, 2004

²⁷ One issue of democratization processes and new dependency, also emerges in other policy sectors no less important for the future of democracy in developing countries and transition societies. A case in point is broadcasting. Privatization in this sector means that ownership or control patterns change to remove or substantially diminish state or public dominion of decisions concerning media space. Technical assistance in the democratization process, particularly where there are economic limitations and poverty, has created not an independent and self-sufficient media, but “just another dependency”. Cfr. Price (2002).

²⁸ Cfr. Wade (2003). The author shows how the main international agreements coming out of the Uruguay Round – on investment measures (TRIMS), trade in services (GATS), and intellectual property rights (TRIPS) – systematically tip the playing field against developing countries.

distinction between these and verified actions on the ground. It talks about benefits and not costs. And it explains cases of failure, when noted, in ways that protect the assumption that ICT investment is a top priority”.

Developing countries are in danger of locking themselves into a new form of e-dependency on the West as they introduce software and hardware systems that they have no capacity to maintain for themselves and that become crucial to the very functioning of their corporate and public sector. Technical and investment assistance to promote access in liberalized markets is accompanied by definitions of criteria of selectivity and evaluation that maximize the project development impact, and at the same time enhance the role of the Organisations that are responsible²⁹. Therefore, the dominant trend has become one of blurring boundaries between private and public administration. This is true in terms of organizational patterns as well as on normative grounds. As ICT has developed from mainframes to networks of PCs to web-based technologies, government organizations have had more and more difficulty maintaining the skills necessary to manage electronic elements. From the inspiring role of think-tank of the Institute for Electronic Government of the IBM to the partnership officially sanctioned by the large Companies in the Digital Opportunity Task Force, progress made in the field of electronic government and e-democracy is strictly tied to the presence of the Corporations that hold the monopoly on know-how. This means that governments delegate to these entities the definition of their own particular vision.

Exalted by the International Organisations in their dominant approach – both in forms of partnership as in forms of delegating in *outsourcing* functions and responsibility – the involvement of private actors has become a pre-requisite for the supplying of resources and for the implementation of policies³⁰. The debate that has evolved above all in relation to e-voting, for example, deals with the issue of the role the relation plays between public authorities and private power, reaching, at the least, conclusions of a doubtful nature. In initial analyses on political and juridical of technological innovations tied to the network, this does not seem to be a problem to take into serious consideration. In implementing e-voting critical variables are of various kinds – financial, technological and juridical, but:

“there is a more fundamental question regarding the role of public authorities. By introducing an ICT element into the electoral process there is a danger that the state may become uncomfortably dependent on the skills and resources of private organisations. It would be difficult to envisage the implementation of e-voting systems without some degree of involvement from the private sector. This begs the question of whether the organisation of democratic elections has to be the exclusive obligation of the state and whether underlying parts of the electoral process can be outsourced to private organisations. For some member states the involvement of private intermediaries in the electoral process could be problematic, for others it may be less so. Opponents of e-voting have pointed out that the state should keep its monopoly position with regard to the organisation of elections and any type of public–private partnership should be

²⁹ It should be clear that this role is by no means absolute, and it requires compliance from the states themselves.

³⁰ “Treat the private sector as a partner: Companies can offer valuable lessons in customer service, responsiveness and adaptability to customer needs. Make the private sector a genuine partner in e-government. Private sector partnerships are especially promising when there is a possibility of creating revenue streams from e-government services or where e-government projects can be replicated for other agencies or governments.” Road map for E-government in the developing world. 2002 The working group on e-government in developing world The Pacific Council on International Policy

avoided. Our position, however, is that the potential involvement of the private sector is not the real issue. The private sector's involvement in politically sensitive areas is already a common feature of the contemporary political and economic environment".

From this comment, of a certain significance given that it is the expression of the point of view of a European Research Centre, it is evident that the involvement of private actors is not a problem³¹ – and why should it be so in that specific area while others no less politically “sensitive” of democratic, contemporary political systems have now been released from state monopoly and control? – and that it is the duty of the public authority merely to guarantee the correctness of procedures, in particular with respect to the security system in order to deal with the real problem “which is one of confidence and trust in the electoral system”.

That these innovations, already problematic in contexts of advanced democracy, when related to developing countries might already result deflated of their democratic charge is therefore, much more than just a risk or remote possibility. Both in terms of the re-engineering of government functions as a principal objective or in favouring ways of democratic participation via ICTs, their economic integration in the world economy not only seems to widen existing disparities, but even creates new fractures and dependence. A development this, that, quite understandably, dissimulated in International Organisation reports, finds, on the apparently neutral terrain of methodologies and *benchmarking*, its consequent expression.

Benchmarking: A Technical or Political Tool?

Benchmarking is an evolving concept that has developed since the 1940s towards more articulated forms (Watson: 1993). Recent studies have discussed the further steps in this evolutionary process: new forms of benchmarking, and new fields of application (small firms, public and semi-public sectors, etc.) introduce a wider horizon for benchmarking practices, allowing its adoption even in more articulated and complex areas of policy (Kyro: 2003). One of the areas in which benchmarking is assuming a prominent role in evaluation practices is that of public projects of e-government and electronic democracy.

Benchmarking, in this context, is a method of analysis that comprises the identification of significant factors that influence the perceived quality of an interactive virtual space and that facilitates a constant process of comparative monitoring and evaluation of experiences. Many institutions and research centres are currently committed to this task, deducing empirical frameworks of analysis from theoretical reflections on ICTs and democratic government (Gibson, Ward and Rommele: 2004; Trechsel, Kies, Mendez and Schmitter: 2004). The outcome of this kind of research is often a set of *best practices*, intended to export successful approaches from one country to another.

The theoretical foundations upon which benchmarking and standardisation depend may be related to the “institutional isomorphism” (Di Maggio and Powell: 1991) that establishes a pattern of analogies between the working of different organisations. This perspective is

³¹ For a different viewpoint that underlines the “instrumental collusion between quasi-public interests and private interests, cfr. W.Lusoli “Of windows, triangles and loops: the political economy of the e-democracy discourse”, Social and Communication Studies University of Chester.

founded on the idea that technological innovations in different environments all work towards a similar organisational form (La Porte, de Jong and Demchak: 2002).

This idea has much in common with technological determinism which contends that the powerful and ubiquitous nature of communication technology and the speed with which it is being implemented may overcome the differences between political and institutional contexts and structures. It can be argued, moreover, that a deep conceptual link exists between institutional isomorphism and theories of globalisation. Ideologies of globalisation in actual fact continue to identify the impediments to development with factors internal to nations, emphasising on the other hand the advantages of integration and interdependence in global markets. Thus, institutional isomorphism and benchmarking practices are strictly linked to the possibility – and desirability – of a global organisational harmonisation that should function as a driver of mutual understanding and shared knowledge. These concepts tell us why benchmarking finds its privileged field of implementation in the analysis of public service delivery, on one hand, and on the difficulties and obstacles to e-government and e-democracy development, on the other.

In this field, institutional action is benchmarked on the basis of its efforts to enhance democratic life through the use of information and communication technologies. In particular the process of democratic development can occur in three ways: (i) increasing the transparency of the political process; (ii) enhancing the direct involvement and participation of citizens; and (iii) improving the quality of opinion-formation by opening up new spaces of information and deliberation (Trechsel, Kies, Mendez, and Schmitter: 2004). The quantitative indicators relating to electronic democracy are construed on the basis of the presence of parliament or political party web sites, with close attention given to communication systems and not merely limited to the distribution of information, but dedicated to citizen participation³².

In these cases there is a form of benchmarking that is still product-oriented, that is limited to the counting of characteristics related to access, usability and interactivity. Benchmarking electronic democracy is, in other cases, construed on the basis of indicators that measure the participation of citizens in decision-making processes and greater emphasis is placed on experiences in the sectors of e-consultation and e-voting. Cases in point are provided by the corpus of studies focused on deliberative democracy – a putting into effect of Habermas- type concepts (Janssen and Kies: 2004).

Even though a dual significance emerges - the first aspect places the use of new technology by formal institutions at the centre of attention, the second, by contrast, emphasises the role of citizens, since greater involvement in public life or greater satisfaction with administrative services are considered evidence for an advanced phase in the realisation of electronic democracy (Coleman: 2005) – there is basic convergence between the indicators and benchmarking methodologies utilized.

It has been affirmed that the restructuring of the public administration is the threshold for

³² The properties of the sites examined are as follows: (i) information provision, (ii) bilateral interactivity, (iii) multilateral interactivity and (iv) user-friendliness. A similar approach is at the root of contributions presented in Brussels at an international seminar on electronic democracy (Riley, 2004), in which the fundamental assumption of the role of national parliaments is the fulcrum of projects of network involvement of citizens.

introducing or improving democracy (Chadwick: 2003). There is a basic reason why there is this tendency, above all in IO reports, i.e. the ideological presuppositions and political objectives of benchmarking democracy. With the great faith that is demonstrated in the technological factor and the top-down approach of most innovation, there are signs of a logic of development approach once more (West, 2004). In the past, this has been employed by Western countries to interpret and pilot processes of modernisation in those countries just emerging from colonisation. The same approach has been recovered on a global scale today, to the extent that ICTs are considered as a panacea for the evils of established democracies (for which the definition ‘deficit of quality’ is used) and as an instrument of action in countries of recent, or in the process of, democratisation (World Bank: 2002).

These logics are part of an even more complex approach detailed in a Report commissioned by the United Nation (UN: 2004) preliminary to the United Nations World Public Sector Report. In echoing the position expressed in the UN General Assembly Millennium Declaration (2000), according to which electronic democracy is a “participatory, inclusive, deliberative process of decision-making”, “this research takes a comprehensive look at the democratic outcomes that can be sought by government, civil society, and others in order to deepen and enhance participatory democracy online. With a particular focus on e-government and democracy, the vision for online-enhanced participatory democracy, or “e-democracy”, relies on an *incremental model of development* (my emphasis) that involves the many democratic sectors and their institutions across society” (2). The factors taken into consideration show how a wider definition of electronic democracy is discussed, indicating that “the path toward information-age democracy is a deliberative one” (4), particularly because it aims to stimulate direct and mass participation.

The close relation between e-government and e-democracy is represented by the conceptualisation of technological implementation processes as effective stages of development, where the acknowledgement and evaluation of web presence is the unit of analysis for studying change.

In the most recent UN contribution (2005), the web measure model defines the stages of e-government evolution. The words are different, but the meaning is the same. E-democracy – here *Networked presence* - is Stage V which represents the most sophisticated level in the online e-government initiatives. “The government encourages participatory deliberative decision-making and is willing and able to involve the society in a two-way open dialogue. Through interactive features such as the web comment form, and innovative online consultation mechanisms, the government actively solicits citizens’ views on public policy, law making, and democratic participatory decision making. Implicit in this stage of the model is the integration of the public sector agencies with full cooperation and understanding of the concept of collective decision-making, participatory democracy and citizen empowerment as a democratic right”³³.

³³ As evident from the following passage there is substantially convergence :“E-democracy cannot be separate from e-government because how governments make policies, pass laws and deliver services—locally, nationally and globally—is the most important democratic agenda facing us; secondly, e-democracy is bigger than government, involving the more autonomous political spheres of communities, workplaces, culture and even the family; and thirdly, as well as government-to-

Democracy and development are inseparable categories in the process of technological implementation of ICTs. In this respect the IO dictate the guidelines of the process subordinating aid to acceptance of these guiding principles. The centrality that institutional *web presence* has assumed inside what is being delineated a global approach - *im(posed as it were)* – of designing-implementation of technological standards and applied models reflects, therefore, a conception of ICTs to form and/or to strengthen democratic institutions that stop just at surface level of the network³⁴. That the structuring of interaction space between institutions and citizens within the web area is the ultimate goal of such policies, is simply a logical consequence, or implication, of the affirming of the globalization project. Institutional isomorphism, identifying the “one best way”, acceptance of the principle of exportability, the guiding role rediscovered by the more advanced countries which have taken upon themselves the task of tracing the path towards democracy, all of these factors are in harmony with dominant positions in relation to political development.

Possessing a prescriptive nucleus that is very easily identifiable, addressed to action and policy planning, “the perception was that in one way or another, albeit disjointedly or with frictions and fleeting tensions produced by the unequal advance of different dimensions of development, new nations.... would move gradually toward societies characterized by welfare, equity, order, democracy, and autonomy” (Filgueira: 2001, 3585). The benchmarking of electronic democracy brings with it an inherent difficulty: if any type of assessment cannot be detached from a correct definition of the object under examination, then the ambiguity of the concept of democracy (and, by consequence, of electronic democracy) threatens to increase the uncertainty of assessment procedures (Berg-Schlosser: 2004). E-government and e-democracy merely adds to the theoretical issues which are still open concerning democracy per se in terms of a still insufficient understanding of the political consequences of benchmarking (Townley: 2005).

In analysing benchmarking we should take into account the whole set of theoretical problems posed by the measurement of democracy, by its culturally and ideologically characterised tools, by its assumptions about progress towards (more) democratic government.

In Search of a New Paradigm

The analysis of the IO strategies and policies has shown a significant convergence in approaches to ICTs in the socio-political realm: e-government, electronic democracy and their benchmarking practices. The concept of electronic democracy and that of electronic government, albeit distinct in conceptual terms, are perceived to be closely entwined. Indeed, the accomplishment of the former often does not constitute an objective in itself

citizen (G2C) and C2G interactions, there is an important sphere of C2C interaction through which social capital is generated and democracy strengthened. E-democracy is both top-down and bottom-up; it is both about the institutional processes of hierarchies and the more fluid arrangements of networks”. Cfr. Coleman S. and Norris D. (2005), “A New Agenda for E-Democracy”, Oxford Internet Institute, Forum Discussion Paper No. 4

³⁴ This orientation has also prevailed at community level. How relevant politically speaking the elaboration of methodology and indicators for benchmarking, is an aspect on which several authors have been drawing attention in recent years.

but an indirect effect of administrative restructuring (Waller, Livesey, Edin: 2001). This is an approach which considers the improvement of public administrations as the principal indicator for measuring the quality of democracy.

The latest developments do not suggest a radical shift in policy on the part of the International Organizations. The benefits of the ‘information age’ are held to be true axiomatically. As emerged from the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), core issues are placed within the framework of the prevailing development paradigm: ICTs have the power to advance human development; in other words, human potential can be achieved through ICTs and access to knowledge³⁵. “Development is delivery. This delivery process is geared towards the integration of its recipient into a global marketplace. There is no space for a different conceptualization of development as a process of empowerment that intends ‘to enable people to participate in the governance of their own lives’” (Hamelink: 2004, 284).

E-dependency issues highlight how the developing countries are disadvantaged in their access to the global economy also by the very standards and rules that are built into international systems. These standards and rules ensure that as developing countries become more integrated into international ICT system, Western suppliers benefit disproportionately.

While the International Organizations have found agreement on strategic objectives, the many dissenting voices underline how the patterns of globalization and liberalization over the past two decades have provoked economic stagnation, or decline, and state collapse in some regions of the developing world, such Africa and Latin America (Putzel: 2005).

Such criticism has damped enthusiasm somewhat but up to the present time, have not succeeded in altering significantly the predominant approach. It is true to say that the key concepts are now ‘possibilities’ and ‘opportunities’ and technological determinism seems therefore, to have been replaced by a more ‘realistic’ approach.

As regards some of the more evident limits – theoretical and methodological – tangible in the production of knowledge as well as in IO action plans, there is sometimes an attempt to find remedies by suggesting paradigms of analysis that take into account the multi-dimensional character of the concept of democracy (Bass: 2005), and a methodology that can recognise differences in quality, as, for example, that of good governance in the public arena and in quality of life (Bovaird, Loffler: 2003).

The idea that there is just one path of political development – a neo-liberal, global, order that is however *structurally unequal* - continues to be the guiding principle of IO policies and strategies: perhaps even more decidedly so as far as ICTs are concerned.

Even the role of the Un, which has always been to safeguard economic, social, and cultural rights through the reciprocal relations of its member states, appears weakened, indeed flattened by the positions of other more influential IO. As state sovereignty has been

³⁵ In preparation for the WSIS, for example, Ghana hosted a meeting in February 2005, during which the participants tried to build a consensus on an Africa agenda for a full integration of the region’s countries into ‘the global village’. For a number of these participants, the Information Society is unquestionably perceived as a chance for Africa, a chance to blend into a world economic opportunities and social well-being. They think that information and communication technologies are the instruments through which the growing marginalization of Africa can be tackled (Alzouma: 2005, 339-340).

weakened by the mechanism of global governance, the UN instead of protecting sovereign rights, has been subject to these mechanisms itself.

Political development on a national scale for most states is impossible to achieve whatever method is used, and in those few states where it is possible, the benefits will be obtained necessarily at the expense of some other area. Is the goal effectively speaking an egalitarian and democratic world, or simply a reversing of fortunes inside the present system of inequality?³⁶

In the face of these issues, both normative and theoretical, posed by these developments, instruments for comprehending reality need to be sharpened. If democracy is still nowadays, despite everything, a good idea, one of the ways for not rendering it vain is that of going to the roots of the conflicts and tensions that cut across it, the masking and concealing of which remain the principal goal of the ideological productions of these institutions.

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³⁶ But the basis for not accepting the present agreements is not only moral. The case for 'development space' also rests on the costs to the world, including the citizens of the prosperous democracies, of making the creation of dynamic capitalism in the non-core zone of the world economy even more difficult than it has been to date. Globalization erodes the insulation of the North from the response to poverty, inequality and subordination in the South – including migration, imploding states, civil wars, religious fundamentalism, and destruction of symbols of the structure of domination. (Wade, 2003, 1-3).

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