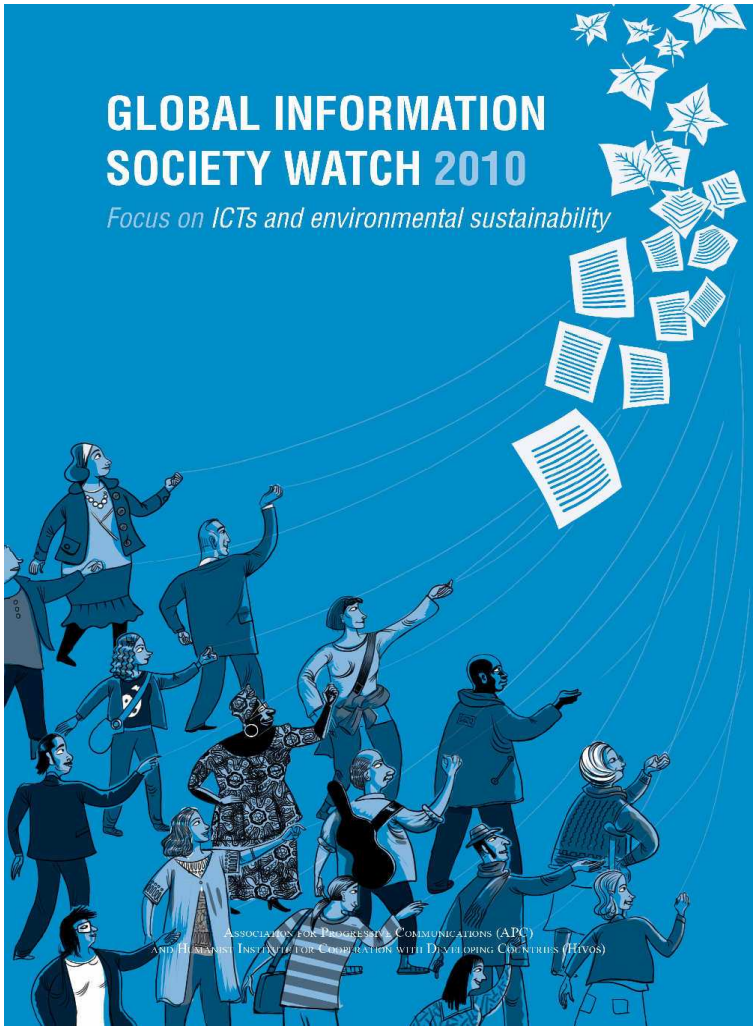
New report asks, How sustainable are ICTs really?



JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA, WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 1 (APC/Hivos) – A new report launched at the start of the UN Climate Change conference questions the assumption that information and communications technologies (ICTs) will automatically be a panacea for climate change.

The report spells out the impact the production and disposal of computers, mobile phones and other technology is having on the earth's natural resources, and the massive global carbon footprint produced by their use.

The potential of ICTs to mitigate and adapt to climate change is also discussed, as are the roles of international institutions, the global research agenda on ICTs and climate change and "sustainability" as an evolving concept.

The report Global Information Society Watch 2010 covers 53 countries and six regions including Latin America and the Middle East, with the key issues of ICTs and environmental sustainability explored in ten expert thematic reports.

The report is produced by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), the world's oldest online social justice network and the Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation (Hivos), the Dutch development agency.

No single point of view

The report does not take a reflect a single point of view. Instead there are counterpoints, arguments and implicit or explicit disagreements that show a vibrant and critical arena that has started to receive attention in recent years.

GISWatch 2010 makes an important contribution as the voice of global civil society – and is aimed at both beginners and experts in the field of ICTs and climate change,

e-waste and the use of ICTs for environmental good generally.

The dark side of ICTs

Paul Mobbs points out in his introduction that ICTs have become "invisible". What we take for granted in our everyday use of the internet, mobiles and computers, has a darker side and some governments are arguing for strategic policies to protect the supply of the "critical raw material" that is used in computer chips.

Emanuele Lapierre-Fortin and Leslie Chan from the University of Toronto argue that the real consequence of ICTs as an environmental and socio-political phenomenon have been "externalised" and are not being factored into the visible cost of surfing the net or making that call. The environmental injustices they catalog include the facts that the ICT industry:

- will become a bigger carbon-dioxide emitter in the UK than the airline industry by 2012
- doubled its consumption of world office paper between 1980 and 1997
- contributes to the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo by its use of precious metals
- is creating massive e-waste.

The Korean Progressive Network Jinbonet, in its report on South Korea graphically testifies to the negative impact the production of technology has on workers, and how their case is frequently ignored, in part because the link is difficult to make (reminiscent of the "inconclusive" consumer health warnings around the use of mobile phones).

ICTs mitigate climate change

Yet many reports argue that ICTs have a critical role to play in mitigating and adapting to the impact of a phenomenon like climate change.

Peet du Plooy from Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies argues that the use of smart technologies help us to imagine a world where the real potential of renewable energy becomes possible:

> *"Grids that can predict and plan are also a key enabler for adding large amounts of variable renewable energy to the generation mix. Smart grid applications can predict, for example, the supply of wind power for the next day, the next hour or the next minute based on weather models and real-time data."*

There are few country reports here where the tangible impact of climate change is not felt. Yet this report suggests that the two perspectives – for and against current consumption patterns of ICTs – are not easily reconciled and that while ICTs can be used for climate change mitigation and adaptation, it cannot be "business as usual".

Who will take the lead?

What we do know is that our environment is changing, and our use of ICTs is contributing to that change – positively and most certainly negatively. Takao Shiino

and Izumi Aizu from Nomura Research Institute (NRI) and the Institute for InfoSocionomics, Tama University, argue that Japan showed leadership in Asia by being the first country to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and that "[b]ased on the experience to control the carbon footprint, Japan should take the lead in these endeavours for the region".

But where are our other leaders now, asks the report?

For more information

Members of the media may obtain print copies of this and previous reports on request and interviews can be arranged with authors by writing to Karen Higgs, APC communications manager at khiggs@apc.org.

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GISWatch 2010: Reports and authors

Thematic reports

1. Introduction – Paul Mobbs

2. ICTs and sustainability – International Institute for Sustainable Development – Don Maclean, Ben Akoh and Bjornar Egede-Nissen

3. The carbon footprint of ICTs – University of the West Indies – Hopeton Dunn

4. ICTs and climate change: Research agendas – University of Manchester – Angelica Valeria Ospina and Richard Heeks

5. Green grassroots technologies – ALIN – James Nguo

6. Smart technologies – Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies (TIPS) – Peet du Plooy

7. E-waste and the working class – Panos London – Murali Shanmugavelan

8. Building sustainable networks – Pavel Antonov

9. Institutional overview – EFOSSNet – Abebe Chekol

10. Green indicators – TNO Delft – Silvain de Munck

11. Mapping – Amsterdam Digital Methods Group – Noortje Marres

Regional reports

1. South Asia – Bytes for All – Partha Sarker

2. Europe – Sapientia – Hungarian University of Transylvania – Rozália Klára Bakó

3. Latin America and the Caribbean – LaNeta – Olinca Marino

4. North America – University of Toronto – Leslie Chan and Emanuele Lapierre-Fortin

5. Middle East and North Africa – ArabDev – Leila Hassanin

6. East Africa – KICTANet – Alice Munyua

Country reports

1. Argentina – Nodo TAU – Florencia Roveri and Danilo Lujambio
2. Australia – EngageMedia – Andrew Garton
3. Bangladesh – Bytes for All – Partha Sarker and Munir Hasan
4. Benin - GOREeTIC – Barnabé Affougnon
5. Bolivia – NETWORKS Foundation – José Eduardo Rojas

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6. Bosnia and Herzegovina – OneWorld Platform for Southeast Europe Foundation (owpsee) – Valentina Pellizzer
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23. Jamaica – University of the West Indies – Hopeton Dunn
24. Japan – Tama University; Nomura Research Institute (NRI) – Izumi Aizu and Takao Shiino
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