

ICT 4 PEACE: TOOLS FOR TRANSCENDING DEADLOCK

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Information Communication Technologies (ICT) for many is still a phenomenon of mere technological advancement on the path of information technology and the development of the computing power. Nevertheless ICT has become a factor which has been incorporated into approaching various social issues beginning from the pioneering notion of *ICT for development* in the area of development study.

The importance of understanding ICT in conflict analysis is twofold. Firstly, as ICT itself has become a preferred tool of many crime rings and more advanced terrorist organizations converting it into a domain of contestation. Analysis point out this new mode of warfare has become popular among groups involved on the lookout for an unconventional warfare. Terrorism has found an able ally in the form of ICT. Secondly, ICT itself as the essential tools that can facilitate peace in this unconventional conflict domain. Conflicts and peace are mutual opposites within the sphere of ICTs.

Terrorist waging secessionist, ethno-nationalistic campaigns find the ICT as one of the best modes for offensive operations. As terrorists must somehow appear to be more capable than they actually are in order to induce fear and gain respect from the government and the populace. Brian Jenkins states "all political terrorists want to give the illusion that they can fight on another level" and they use force multipliers to support that illusion (cited in White, 2002). Force multipliers allow a terrorist organization to increase its striking power without increasing its size (White, 2002).

Jenkins suggests they employ four force multipliers routinely to accomplish this illusion and add to their aura: technology, transnational support, media, and religion (White, 2002). The force multipliers are not weapons *per se*, rather they constitute a process of information exploitation intended to influence decision makers and shape public opinion (Armistead, 2002). Two of the force multipliers, technology and the media, facilitate the terrorists' use of Information Operations. Bruce Hoffman contends that the merging of these two force multipliers, coined as the 'information revolution', has created improved opportunities for terrorists to manipulate the media and influence multiple audiences.

Thus in a conflict situation especially similar to that of the Sri Lankan context the state should realize the power of ICT. Research has proved in analyzing the power of the Tamil diasporic websites to what extent their operations succeeded in contributing to the

conflict. For the uninterrupted flow of international funding the LTTE kept up a virtual open communication link with the global forces while providing real-time updates on its ongoing campaigns against the government of Sri Lanka.

Towards the current context after the signing of the MOU between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, the outcome has been a negative peace. The government desperately seeks an exit strategy to break the deadlock that has kept out both itself and the LTTE away from peace talks. If the government had realized the importance of ICT in such a situation and in general in a situation of deadlock it could have used its potential to the maximum in forging a breakthrough.

The ICT master plan for Sri Lanka was also drawn in this context two three years back in the time of this negative peace. This grand narrative was dubbed "E Sri Lanka Policy" and boasted of a total ICT solutions package. The lengthy text spoke of development issues, gender issues and education but never can one find the word peace in any form embedded in the text. The Grand ICT master plan has read the whole Sri Lankan context incorrectly or it simply lacked the urge to get involved in this complicated peacemaking initiative of the country. Hardly any literature is about making peace in Sri Lanka using this powerful tool, with few exceptions in concept papers and writings of young researchers.

Technologies are neither the naïve production of disinterested sciences nor the deterministic forebearers of social processes. They are shaped by existing social relations, while in turn they open up opportunities for social change. ICT includes tools and processes that permit us to produce, manipulate and communicate information. By changing the way the information is controlled, ICTs allow valuable knowledge to be released from certain groups to others. The ICTs also have dramatic implications for the ability of various social groups to control the information flow, ultimately to change the balance of political power.

ICTs imply 'that a world rewired to connect human beings to vast data banks and communications systems would be a progressive step, a point much famous in the international development community. ICTs underline the point that information is power but not an end in itself. It is power only to the extent that it is grounded in material reality. That it has consequences for how people act, thus how societies produce value and reproduce relations of order and change.

This is the power of ICT that should be harnessed by policymakers. The Information Communication Technology Agency (ICTA) was established last year to facilitate the E-Sri Lanka initiative of the Sri Lankan government functioning as the agency's web site statement use authoritarian terminology to identify it self as "the single apex body involved in ICT policy and direction for the nation the implementing organ of the E-Sri Lanka initiative". But sadly ICTA is yet to engage in the task of peace building using ICT or at least disseminating the ideology of such an initiative.

Information Communication Technology is at the heart of cyber interactions, it is also the key infrastructure behind the modern notions of e government, e society and e business. The above notions to a certain extent are now being introduced to the governance establishment of Sri Lanka, but little is done on the peace front.

The E-Sri Lanka initiative may sound and look nice since it is something new and the mechanism may be fired through dynamism but if one studies the configuration of the agency and its theoretical reading of the burning issues of the state, it may be out of focus. The agency structure also reveals the embedded weakness of the architecture of the whole system as it has minimal coordination with the Sri Lankan polity as a whole. The implementation of the E-Sri Lanka ICT master plan is somewhat reviewed in a UNDP report. Titled the "Regional Human Development Report, Promoting ICT for Human Development it looks at the ICT establishment in Sri Lanka.

The report makes recommendations on further usage of ICT for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The report on the onset is speaking some sense but what its parameters do not allow is to review the simple issue in Sri Lanka is that we have not achieved the peace that would act as a catalyst of development in all spheres. With all due respect to the compilers of this report we should be looking at using ICTs both on national and international level to bring about a positive framework of peace at least parallel to achieving the MDG objective

There is a few non-profit making organizations involved in peace building efforts in conflict zones using ICT. *Infoshare* is such an organization which still is working in Sri Lanka as well. It has a unique web tool which is called a "virtual negotiation table." This enables actors or key players in a conflict to come together in a neutral virtual space and go ahead with negotiations without being physically present in one geographic location. Though the actual importance of such a device may take time to be accepted as formal practices in negotiations, it demonstrated the power of ICT to cut across barriers or factors creating deadlock in negotiation processes. ICT play a huge role in conflict situations with the emergence of transnational Diaspora movements. The significance of Diaspora Creole communities can be far reaching, and attention has focused

on media that make them possible. They are typically flexible, even opportunistic communities ranging from assimilationists to labor migrants and exiles fixed on homelands from which they are partly detached. Partly detached, they form alternative communities, partly through alternative communication. Thus, the historian Benedict Anderson showed (1991) that print capitalism fostered among the creoles of early modernity, the altered senses of community that congealed into modern nationalism. The process began on the peripheries and reached homeland centers as recoils. Transnational Diaspora web sites did contribute heavily to internal conflicts but they also did prove to be catalysts in certain peace efforts. The Diasporic websites in the Balkans did clearly play a huge role to bring back peace to the region. As the Baltic States were plunged into chaos with the disintegration of Yugoslavia as ethnic and religious clashes brought in new conflicts. The Croatian, Serbian, Albanian and Bosnian diasporic websites with their enhanced email bridge system made the peace building efforts easier as there was a consistent movement for peace on the web among people who belonged to the diverse conflict parties.

This article emphasizes very briefly the power of ICT in creating new grounds, situations and communication channels to facilitate peace building efforts in conflict domains. The Sri Lankan context is of no difference, the space for interaction within cyber space is comfortable and less intimidating. Thus what the writer proposes is not to make a total shift of the negotiating space or process of the stalled peace process of Sri Lanka. Instead use the ICT medium to gain maximum leverage for breaking deadlocks by keeping an online channel open and maintaining a rapid flow of information both ways. ICT has the potential to link up with the diasporic groups and can be installed as a conduit to the global civil society who also is a key player in the local peace effort. Thus this calls for the rethinking of the ICT policy of the state while designing mechanisms facilitating peace through the country's premier ICT agency.

Notes

- 1 Armistead, White and Hoffman have contributed immensely to study of new trends in approach to terrorism and national security. They also have identified the role of ICT in the sphere of terrorism.
- 2 Force Multiplier is a new concept which is emerging the study of terrorism and especially with the information revolution the whole approach to terrorism has changed. Thus concepts like information operations even have succeeded modern notions of information Warfare
- 3 Top officials of the ICTA claim that they have earmarked various projects under E-Sri Lanka but are still a waiting anding to launch them. Peace building according to them has been discussed but still no project outline is drawn on this dimension. The contradiction that emerges in this context is the grand narrative of the E-Sri Lanka policy and the limited capacity of operational potential of the ICTA.

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