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The Author Responds...to the Review by Alfonso Gumucio Dagron

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It is clear that Alfonso Gumucio Dagron and I have different perspectives on some significant aspects of the roles of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in development. Yet, we apparently share concerns about other issues, such as the fundamental importance of participation and sustainability. Unfortunately, he has misinterpreted or misrepresented much of what is discussed in *From Rural Village to Global Village*.

This is not a book about globalisation and technology. It is about information and communication technologies (ICTs) and rural development. That said, rural people no longer live in social and economic isolation.

The title *From Rural Village to Global Village* implies that people everywhere now have the opportunity to participate in the global information environment, ranging from being able to stay in touch with relatives working overseas, to selling their produce with knowledge of prices and demand in global markets, to obtaining better prices or quality in goods they need to buy rather than depending on local suppliers, to getting current educational and professional materials where there are no textbooks or training courses. They can use ICTs to participate in the wider economy or society and to strengthen their own cultures and empower their own communities.

The literature review and case studies in the book come from Africa, Alaska, Nunavut, Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, and the South Pacific, with briefer references to many other projects and studies from throughout the developing world. The book goes beyond this research, however, to consider policies and strategies to extend access. After participating in many evaluations of the impact of new technologies, I concluded that policy was equally important. Little is gained if the use of ICTs turns out to be very effective in a pilot project, but there is no mechanism to extend the reach of the project or to make its services affordable. Thus access must be coupled with sustainability, topics that are addressed in several chapters of the book.

The reviewer misinterprets the analysis of policy in the chapters on strategies to extend access and on restructuring the telecommunications sector. He asks "How could weakened national states enforce regulations, particularly when the whole sector has passed into private hands?" I have not advocated weakening national regulators; rather, I have emphasised that effective regulation is critical to establishing and enforcing the rules of the

game in a competitive environment. Regulation by the public sector does not imply public sector ownership. Publicly owned monopolies have largely been dismal failures in both provision and pricing of services, as the sections on sector management and investment demonstrate.

I do indeed argue for liberalisation – the opening of the sector to competition – which can create significant incentives to increase access and lower prices.

Recent experience with wireless proves this point. There are now more mobile cellular phones than fixed lines throughout the developing world, and, as the book points out, the growth of mobile has been greatest where there is competition, even in the poorest countries. The sections on policy also propose strategies to extend access in regions that are not commercially viable – including service obligations, targeted subsidies such as for schools and health centres, other forms of subsidies, and support for community access through telecentres, libraries, post offices, etc., where individual access is not available.

The reviewer states that the assumption of my book is that information and knowledge are only the privilege of the few. Yet the whole book is based on just the opposite premise. He even quotes – in a footnote – a refutation of that philosophy from the book: "A paradox not fully acknowledged by some developing country leaders is that the inevitable result of investing in information infrastructure is to increase access to information. Telecommunication planners and policymakers in both developing and industrialized countries must recognize that the sharing and utilization of information, and not the mere extension of networks, should be the ultimate purpose of the telecommunications policy reform."

The reviewer also misinterprets the discussion of information brokers or "infomediaries" as evidence that "[it] is assumed that communities cannot manage ICTs by themselves, and need intermediaries to do so." Not so. Much of the book is about participation, and there are sections on project management and the need for training that specifically address community operation and management of ICTs. The purpose of the infomediaries discussion is to point out that even people with little education or knowledge of major international languages can find and share information with help. The analogy I use came from a Ugandan member of parliament who said, "My father sent many telegrams in his life. My father could not read or write". A scribe was able to help his father. There are examples in the book of development workers, librarians and young people helping others in their communities to send messages and find answers to problems such as pests destroying their crops or identification of unknown illnesses.

The reviewer states that there is little critical analysis of donor initiatives. However, there is an entire section on critical issues, which includes "Fads and Funding", "Technology and Free Tickets", "Where are the Users?", "Funding Drives Applications", and "Sustainability".

He also again quotes the book in direct refutation of his own critique: "Hudson acknowledges that 'many ICT initiatives seem overwhelmingly technology driven' because 'they are implemented primarily by technocrats' (p. 76) and recalls the 1970s 'when satellites were too often a solution in search of a problem…"(p. 76)".

Concerning evaluation, my approach is not so much "who evaluates and why?" but how to make systematic evaluation a learning tool for the participants themselves, and not just an external requirement. The chapter includes not only a discussion of the pitfalls of evaluation, but pragmatic tools and strategies for evaluating ICT projects on several dimensions, including sustainability. The chapter also discusses the unrealistic expectations of funders who assume that provision of ICTs will result in immediate, measurable developmental impact.

The reviewer correctly points out that the right to communicate debates are not addressed in this book. What UNESCO said about broadcasting and print media in the MacBride Report in 1980 it is now saying about the Internet. Yes, content is important. But the premise of the book is that with access to ICTs – meaning that they are available, affordable, and that people have the skills and opportunity to use them – there is every incentive to find or create relevant content. Yes, electronic media can diminish cultures and threaten languages. But interactive tools such as telephony, electronic mail and messaging, and the Internet, also have the potential to strengthen cultures and preserve languages. One need look no further than the exchanges at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and elsewhere among aboriginal organisations about strategies to use ICTs for empowerment.

In the Preface (which was not available to the reviewer) I acknowledge that the references are by necessity illustrative rather than exhaustive. I have tried to include those that are particularly valuable in their insights or their approach. Also included is a list of websites that should help the reader stay up to date and seek more depth on various topics. No doubt, I have overlooked some materials that others would consider equally valuable, especially in other languages. What I have written is intended to be a contribution to the field, and by no means the final word.

My development philosophy and rationale for the book are shaped not only by theory but also by what I have learned from people in rural and developing regions. I hope philosophy and rationale come through in what I have written and the examples I have included. I agree with the woman using a telecentre in Timbuktu who wrote: "*L'information est la clef de toutes les portes*: Information is the key to all doors". ❑