

## **ICTs and sustainable urbanisation – enabling the role of civil society**

For over 30 years the Building and Social Housing Foundation has worked to identify innovation in sustainable housing worldwide. Our experience has shown that it is essential to address issues of **equity** as well as environment and economy if urban areas are to be **truly** sustainable. Creating sustainable cities is more than reducing the environmental impact, it is **also** about making them decent and humane places to live.

One sixth of the world's population currently live in slums – their homes are poorly built or non-existent, they go hungry, there is little or no sanitation and they easily get sick. The people living in slums are frequently stigmatised and not perceived as citizens. I suspect that no one in this room lives in these conditions.

### **Why should we address this and what can ICTs do about it?**

I would suggest - for reasons of social justice .... These are human beings we are talking about. **Also**, to achieve the Millennium Development Goals ..... one of which is to improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020. **But in addition** by addressing issues of inequality and exclusion we can reduce conflict and crime. To put it bluntly, if the rich want to live more safely and happily in their cities, they need to address these issues of inequality and give all citizens a stake in the future of their city. And here I am not just talking about cities in the global South, but also cities of the North where the socially excluded live in crumbling and rotting urban areas and the rich live behind ever higher walls and stronger gates.

### **How can ICTs help to erode these inequalities and create more socially sustainable cities?**

Firstly, I would say that it is important not to overstate what can be achieved with the use of ICTs. 80 per cent of the world's population have never made a telephone call. Rice and vegetables do not fly through cyberspace and ICTs do not provide security of tenure or basic housing. Nevertheless, ICTs can significantly improve the quality of life in our urban areas and enable civil society, including the poorest citizens, to take a greater role in their city.

**Two key areas** in which this can be done is by **facilitating community empowerment** and **improving urban governance**.

#### **Community empowerment**

The increasing use of mobile phones, email and the internet helps to develop and support community participation and activism in poor communities. They help local communities to get themselves **organised**, as well as keeping in touch with other communities facing similar problems. Support can also be more easily called upon in times of need, for example in Buenos Aires, the community-based organisation, MTL, was able to rapidly summon media representatives and protestors to prevent homes in shanty settlements being illegally bulldozed. **Electronic banking systems** facilitate the easy operation

of community-based savings and credit schemes which enable slum dwellers to save money and improve their homes and living environments.

### **Improved urban governance**

Recent advances in ICTs provide opportunities to transform the relationship between governments and citizens, helping to improve urban governance. A range of different information and communication technologies can be used to make local governments more efficient and effective, as well as more accessible to the citizens. These include

- Computerised government services. For example, by creating and maintaining records of land and property ownership, local governments are able to maximise their property tax income. Making these records publicly available helps to avoid corruption in land transactions.
- ICTs can also be used to decentralise government services and increase public access to them. For example, the **23 Citizen Service centres in the state of Bahia, Brazil** where federal, state and municipal agencies come together in a single location (often a shopping centre or public transportation hub) to offer the services citizens most frequently need and use – such as identification cards, official work permits, drivers license, criminal record verification. Mobile vans also visit the most deprived areas to encourage uptake of these basic citizenship documents. All of this is made possible by the computerised record keeping by the different agencies in the city. This brings tremendous time savings to citizens and cost savings to the government. Another example, is the Bhoomi project for **computerisation of land records** in Karnataka, India which means that farmers can now obtain a copy of their land records in two minutes rather than 30 days, enabling them to raise credit from the bank within five days rather than three months. Over 7 million registrations have been completed to date and the data is securely protected with a biometric fingerprint system. Opportunities for palm greasing to speed things up are also eradicated.
- ICTs create greater possibilities for **interactive decision taking and e.democracy**. For example, city of Curitiba where there is a sophisticated system of citizen feedback including telephone hotlines, free public internet terminals, city referenda and public petitioning. The participatory budgeting process pioneered in Porto Alegre and now used in many other cities around the world is facilitated with ICTs.
- Promoting transparency of government activities is vital in encouraging good urban governance – ICTs can really help here by enabling the sharing information - for example, by publishing the results of city council meetings and decisions,

ICTs are providing many opportunities to encourage active citizenship, to allow greater access to the city and improve urban governance – all helping to make cities more sustainable places in which to live – for both rich and poor alike. Thank you.

