REVIEW OF DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATIONS' COLLOQUIUM ON AN INTEGRATED NATIONAL ICT POLICY

by Alison Gillwald

The window of opportunity provided by the opening up of the moribund ICT policy environment we have been operating in for over a decade by the Department of Communications National Information Communication Technology (ICT) Colloquium certainly needs to be seized if we are to get ICTs back on the national agenda.

To do so the ICT sector needs to be enabled to make the contribution it should be making to the economic growth, job creation and the deepening of democracy. For too long the sector has been stifled by policy that has resulted in poor access to the full range of services and information required for effective participation by all in the economy and polity and suboptimal use of them as a result of high prices and poor quality, where there is access to them.

So, positive as it was to have the policy environment opened up again and to witness the Department's responsiveness to the National Implementation Plan, the stolid and polite discussion document gazetted for the meeting and the old industrial age structure for the colloquium were concerning. The document seemed to reflect the policy paralysis that has plagued the sector over the last decade; the issues it raised seemingly frozen in some sort of time wrap.

The danger of this as a background document and as the basis for the division of the commission into old-fashioned, vertical broadcasting, telecommunications, postal silos with parallel commissions on content and investment, is that much of the time was spent not asking the right questions and presumably therefore not getting the right answers.

This was reflected in the telecommunications commission which spent hours going round in circles before the commission chair asked whether we were not really talking about broadband and what did this mean?

So we are stuck in our old paradigms and disengaged from international policy discourses. The introduction of next generation concepts and approaches that followed - common in broadband discourse in multilateral agencies and leading national policies for the last five years – were received as novel and innovative. The conceptual liberation from the industrial siloed former

conventional wisdom of broadband not simply as big pipes but as an ecosystem of interrelated networks, services, applications and contents resonated with the commission participants.

While the chairman of the closing plenary described the telecommunications commission's feedback as somewhat problematic having 'deviated from its mandate', the adoption of this approach could be more positively viewed as 'creative destruction'. The outcome provided a far more flexible forward-looking approach in which to envisage this brave new world – one that could accommodate precisely such disruptions and indeed contribute to the constantly evolving ecosystem.

It is this encompassing and flexible approach that makes suitable this framework not simply as one more appropriate to an 'infrastructures' (telecommunications) commission but as a forward looking policy framework that accommodates all the 'old' commissions.

The rationale for doing so is that while acknowledging the integrated nature of all the elements of the ecosystem it would be possible for the purposes of ongoing work on policy to break down the horizontal elements of such a system, rather than into vertical silos, into various commissions or task teams to deal with their particularities while contextualising them in the whole.

Then, for practical purposes what was the telecommunications commission could easily be turned into the infrastructure or network commission, the critical backbone of the ecosystem. Another appropriate division might be services and applications, where policy questions relating to e-and m-government services, e-education and e-health services, mobile money, cyber-security and privacy and surveillance could be formulated. The broadcasting and local content commissions could easily be converted into a single content commission. Content is the substance that flows through the ecosystem - in a value chain analysis, it is the apex of pyramid - driving citizen and consumer take up of services, which stimulates demand for greater bandwidth.

With the appropriate policy incentives and penalties the ICT ecosystem has the potential to create a virtuous cycle of demand and production that enables the flow

of information in the society and in the economy. It will enhance the efficiency, accountability and transparency required for appropriate and sustained development of the economy and society.

Each of these commissions could then discuss the particularities of the crosscutting themes of investment, human resource and skills development, demand stimulation, research and development, innovation, local production and job creation in relation to their area.

At the centre of all of these elements should be users, citizens, and consumers. The degree to which the needs of this primary constituency are met are determined by two overarching elements – the market structure and institutional arrangements created by the policy and legal framework. For the optimal outcomes of such a review, the interplay between state and market in this sector have to be examined on the basis of the increasing body of international and local evidence.

Assessing the appropriate role for the state in this sector is one of the primary policy challenges in South Africa. Rather than a blanket response to state sector relations evident in references to the 'developmental state', what is required is a far more nuanced response by the state to different sectors as a result of the differing production requirements and modes of governance, particularly in as a dynamic sector as ICT.

If South Africa is to meet the needs of a modern economy, fulfil its developmental objectives, build equitable participation in the espoused information society and knowledge economy while becoming globally competitive, it will need to address these challenges in a frank acknowledgement of the failures of the past, clear strategies for the future and the restitution of ICT on the national agenda from which it has been absent too long.
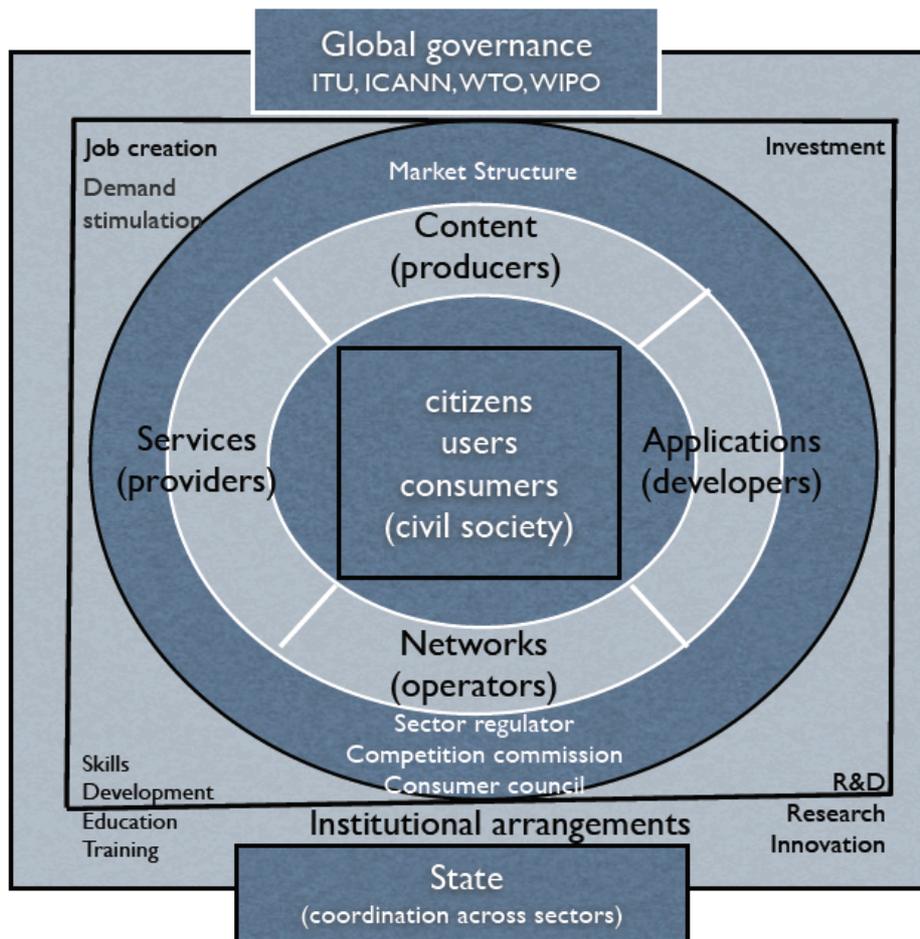

Fig 1: ICT ecosystem framework for Integrated National ICT Policy