Abstract

A Knowledge-Based Society (KBS) as public policy concept is based on presumptions and promises of positive social and societal effects of information and communication technologies to social development. The concept of KBS is not unambiguous and therefore in this dissertation work first a history and different interpretations of KBS are covered. Different kinds of interpretations of KBS are presented among others by utopists and futurists, business men, economists, civil servants, and sociologists. One can not speak about one single monolithic picture of the KBS, but according to a relativistic epistemology there are many socio-culturally specific and differentiated meanings of it. The KBS can be understood as like a new digital economy, virtual communities, technological artifacts, social utopias, and new social organizations.

In the social scientific studies of KBS central is to understand a relationship between technology and society. In linear models technologies are producing direct causal consequences to society, in technology deterministic thinking these are even unavoidable and self-directing. In this study I understand this relationship however according to a theory of social constructivism of technologies as a process, where applying and developing of technologies are shaped by social processes, interactions and actors. Even democratic and social applying of technologies is possible in a process of social shaping of technologies, where users of technologies are affecting the technologies in participatory planning processes. Affecting to the applying of technologies socially is connected with a social and equal development of the KBS and a preventing of social exclusion. Therefore I highlight too literature and theories of social exclusion in the KBS. The next research questions have motivated my work:

1) How the social equality, the fairness and the expedients of advancing them is understood in policy programs of KBS?
2) How the social equality and the fairness can be advanced by measures of individuals, communities, a public sector and a market economy?
3) What are the experiences of North Karelian development initiatives in the social development of the KBS?

The empirical research targets are EU's, Finland's and North Karelia's KBS strategies and policy programs as well as four North Karelian KBS development projects with social goals. Research methods are macro level discourse analysis and ethnography of development projects. In ethnography I combine both quantitative and qualitative research methods using a principle of methodological triangulation.

The development of KBS in Finland is based on one-sided technological deterministic conception, in which framework it is difficult to implement alternative development models. Behind this one-sidedness is an elite's commitment to the liberal market economy and the markets as a guiding mechanism of society, an organizational resistance of new technologies and a fixation of professionals and technocrats towards their own preferred
technologies. The alternative of social shaping of technology and civic oriented society would require an awareness raising of KBS, a using of participatory social planning methodologies and community informatics initiatives in real physical communities. A special support should be organize for elderly people and people working in changing work life. The construction of socially supportive service systems should be based more on the end-user feedback and the social shaping of technology. The contents of KBS may not be one-sided and one-directional entertainment spreading in the broadband networks but the more social and democratic KBS model is needed.