

Chapter 5.17

ICTs, Empowerment, and Development: Articulating Grassroots Analysis Through Participatory Approaches

Hannah Beardon
ActionAid, UK

ABSTRACT

The digital divide has its roots in the political and power dynamics that underlie all inequality. It follows, therefore, that the response from the development sector should be rooted in learning from the long experience of tackling inequality and unequal power relations in many other fields. This chapter draws on the example of the Reflect ICTs Project to show how participatory theories, tools, and processes can be applied to ensure that ICT initiatives fundamentally address power and empowerment issues rather than ignoring or, worse, exacerbating them. The project methodology is described and some findings shown, in an attempt to show how attention to the human communication dimension of ICTs can make applied technology more sustainable and appropriate for poor communities in their struggle to access their rights.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be an empowering force, providing access to rapid communication and timely information. According to a recent study of ICT for Development (ICT4D) projects in Africa, access to communications technologies can improve people's livelihoods, access to services, agricultural practices, participation in government (and government's accountability and transparency), incomes, voice, security, social relationships, and health.

Where people are struggling to access even their most basic needs, such as clean water or school for their children, information and communication technologies may not appear to be a priority. However, within a rights- or empowerment-based approach to development, there are many types and levels of work: whether to enable

people to access their rights; to influence policy makers; to enhance communication between actors; or to develop new methodologies, tools, and resources. Information and communication are at the heart of all these. As such ICT4D can be an important part of the empowerment process, if (and only if) explicitly placed within a wider movement to achieve equity and social change through access to and realisation of human rights.

Learning from the Past

The so-called digital divide is a term which, although of relatively recent coinage, deals with concepts and problems of long-standing in the development world. For the divide between those who can avail themselves of ICTs for rapid and efficient communication and those who suffer from lack of timely and reliable information has at its root the same dynamic as any other gap between rich and poor, have and have-not, exploiter and exploited. As such, the same theories and practices which have evolved in the development sector in the past 50 years also have great significance for the field of ICTs for development or empowerment.

This chapter draws on the example of the Reflect ICTs Project to show how participatory theories, tools, and processes can be applied to ensure that ICT initiatives fundamentally address such gaps rather than ignoring or, worse, exacerbating them.

The project, which has been running pilots in Burundi, India, and Uganda since 2003, highlights in its methods and findings the importance of recognising politics and power relations at all levels, and of forming transparent and effective partnerships between different actors in the field. Here, some of the methods are shared and their applicability to different contexts discussed, based on a review of some of the perspectives and theories underlying the work.

BACKGROUND

Participatory theories, such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Learning in Action (PLA), have evolved over the last two decades to enable and encourage a shift in relationships within the development sector. This means away from a traditional paternalistic donor/beneficiary paradigm towards a situation where the traditional targets of development — the poor, women, older people, refugees, and so forth — could become the drivers of change in their own environment. Values such as equality, empowerment, solidarity with the poor and marginalised, and gender-equity are explicitly held at the heart of such approaches.

Participation is the vital ingredient in the PLA process (Ruland, 2003). Participation is understood as a process, not an event, whereby local people undertake their own analysis, reflection, and action. Theories, tools, and methods have been developed to understand and deal with the dynamics of power, confidence, and culture that create elites, amplify some voices, and drown out others. It acknowledges the ways that built pedagogies constrain some learning practices and enable others, and the works to create dimensions that catalyse empowerment through participation (Monahan, 2000). The most famous include visual and oral methods for facilitating appraisal, analysis, and planning. Examples of such tools and reviews are available in a number of literatures (Wilcox, 1994; UNDP, 1997; Belgeonne & Brookes, 1999; Allen & Kilvington, 2001; Allen, Kilvington & Horn, 2002; Bates, Bruce, Doig, & Gitonga, 2002), including Communication and Power (CIRAC, 2003), on which this project is partly based.

The focus on group dynamics and power relations is not simply an objective one, but involves a transformation of our own roles as researchers and practitioners as well. This relationship is transformed from one of doing, directing, or

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