

A short movie about ICT

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The current *Harper's* magazine has an article called "Valkyries over Iraq: the trouble with war movies." It discusses the making of *Jarhead* (a movie about Gulf War I, opening Friday in the U.S.) and how soldiers form their view of war from their memories of war movies, including anti-war films like *Apocalypse Now* and *Deer Hunter*.

I began thinking about a documentary that would never be made: the life of an ICT project. It is of little interest to most people, any more than a movie about plumbing would capture a large audience. But we are a small, specialized audience so come into the viewing room. This is a rough cut...

The movie begins with an office scene: a few program officers sitting in a meeting room in Ottawa or Washington or London or The Hague or Geneva. It's getting near the end of the fiscal year, and there is some money left in their budget for another pilot project. They know that if it is not spent, it will be hard to justify an increase for their agency in the next budget cycle.

One officer who has attended many conferences on poverty and knowledge management and ICT says he'll make some calls to people who might have some good ideas. Another officer has spent time in short visits to poor countries, including the handful blessed with substantial existing project funds from her agency. The country she has in mind is of strategic importance to her government either because the president has changed his ways and has renounced corruption, is on a path to democratic elections, has opened its markets to firms from abroad, or has agreed to joint military exercises in the north of his land.

What follows are short scenes of non-profits and contractors pitching ideas to the program officer: a wireless network for indigenous groups, a mobile computer lab, barefoot doctors with PDAs in favelas, a literacy program using a new cheap computer with a no-cost operating system. The most appealing ideas happen to be for places in Asia and Latin America, but the agency is focused on Africa. The chosen NGOs oblige and submit two-page proposals for pilots in Africa. After a quick turnaround and a nod of tentative approval from the program officer, the NGO contacts a local "champion" or consultant in-country. Everyone is enthusiastic about the idea of a new ICT pilot project. New technology, more money to spend.

The local contact meets with an underling from the Minister's office. This person is neutral about ICT and is more focused on surviving within his government bureaucracy, but he assures the champion that the ministry will offer staff and in-kind support. A final proposal is written.

The NGO and the government work out a budget to use up available funds. Computers, Internet connection fees, a new Land Rover, travel expenses (in-country and for a few international conferences), training for the people involved, and an evaluation by a consultant from the donor's country. The software will be open source or pirated.

Scenes of the Land Rover loaded with new gear (customs had to be given something extra to clear the shipments) headed into a rural village or urban slum. Young people carrying the gear to the school, community center, health clinic. Celebrations: dances, speeches by the donor, the mayor, the minister, a ribbon cut. Then training classes. Intense focus on the instructor. Excited faces gathered around the computer screens. A good start.

The project has lift off. High demand, not enough places for everyone. Yet there are problems. The town/barrio leader puts one of the computers in his house "to prevent theft." Electricity is a problem. The computers sometimes sit idle until the NGO provides a backup generator using expensive fuel. Still, the project is making an impact. Theft is not a problem. The locals have "taken ownership."

Young people testify to the changes it is making in their lives. A professional demonstrates how he is less isolated now that he can communicate with colleagues. A farmer shows what he has learned about a crop, a sick animal, an insect infestation. The project hums along...

The NGO representative begins to worry about where money will come from to keep the project going. In spite of the perceived benefits, the ministry is not interested in budgeting to support the project. There are arguments among the parties: the donor country, the NGO, and the ministry. The ministry wants the donor to extend the funding. The donor says no. The locals are encouraged to come up with a plan to raise some money. There is talk of matching funds, but locals have a lot of energy and little extra money and what they raise is not sufficient.

They enter ICT contests in distant lands, hoping for recognition. They hear of other grants but don't have the resources to apply. The pilot project is winding down. Priorities have changed and the funding agency is now concentrating on some new aspect of ICT. The NGO follows the money and prepares the transition from the current project. The locals find money to pay a former student to take over the project. He dreams of working in the capital but will take this position for a while.

The computers are showing their age. The dust and heat are taking a toll. Most are still working at the end of the project. Others sit in a back room. There is no money for repairs or for the Internet connection any more. The Land Rover is now an addition to the ministry's motor pool. The evaluator has come and gone. Her report sits in the inboxes of the program officer, the NGO, and the minister's liaison. New pilot projects are being hatched.

Back in the village or barrio the project building is dark. The doors are locked most of the time. A girl is sitting at a table in her kitchen. In her school copybook she is writing her email address over and over, just so she won't forget. Maybe she will go online again some day and see if her new friends in the capital and in Canada have written her. It might happen, but the fiscal year is coming to an end. New projects are coming.

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