

Position Paper: People-Focus, Sustainability, Diversity and Respect: For a better ICT4D research field

By Dorothea Kleine

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- 1) I have worked in the area of ICT4D research for over 16 years, with work ranging from policy analysis and theoretical work to participatory action research, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. I have published widely on development, technology, choice, sustainability, youth, and gender and my most recent book is *Technologies of Choice? ICTs, Development and the Capabilities Approach* (MIT Press, 2013). I have conducted collaborative research with local communities and practitioners, as well as advising UNICEF, UNEP, EuropeAid, DFID, GIZ, the private sector and different NGOs.

I am Reader in Human Geography and the Director of the Information and Communication for Development (ICT4D) Centre at Royal Holloway, University of London (www.ict4dc.org). This multidisciplinary centre brings together 10 academics and 13 doctoral researchers, and runs the Masters in Practising Sustainable Development (including the ICT4D specialism). Our aim is to conduct top-quality research for and with poor and marginalized communities in the global South and North and mentor responsible future research leaders. I am a former Managing Editor of the *Information Technologies and International Development* journal and serve on its Editorial Board, as well as on the ICTD conference series Senior Programme Committee (2012 Atlanta, 2013 Cape Town, 2015 Singapore). In 2010, Tim Unwin and I chaired the ICTD2010 London conference which saw a record number of mixed stakeholder open sessions, practitioners attending the conference, and scholarships for academics and practitioners from the global South.

- 2) I will structure my comments in two ways – some pertaining to the framing of the content of ICT4D research, and the others to the way we conduct ourselves doing research in this field. Both aspects are closely linked.

In terms of content, I would argue that the following three (and more) about-turns should be included in a reframing of ICT4D:

- a) People-centred: After decades of ICT4D research, there is still too much action research going on which starts with the “T” and focuses on it as the “solution”. However it is well-documented in the literature that logically and morally, we should be focusing on identifying the intended “D” first. This should preferably be a holistic approach to development. My own choice is the capabilities approach (Sen 1999) which sees development as an expansion of the substantive freedoms people have to lead the lives they themselves value. Further, it is by now a common observation in publications from both technical and social science ICT4D colleagues, that “getting the technology right” is not the main challenge, but successfully impacting the specific socio-technical-economic-political system is.
- b) Diversity and open-endedness: Sen’s capabilities approach is radically pluralist in its approach, recognizing that different people value different presents and different futures. Participatory approaches can help us make the lives that people themselves have reason to value visible. Many ICT4D actors have specific technical products to offer or funder aims to follow. The field needs to be more attentive to the diversity of aims from different stakeholders, map them, and negotiate them. This is by its very nature messier than top-down funder priorities and we urgently need progressive funders who understand this (Kleine 2011). Local people and communities are our key partners and it is vital for high-quality, ethical and sustainable ICT4D research that their aims are our key focus and not under-recognised in a priori goal-setting or later ignored in implementation.
- c) Within ecological limits: As I have argued in *Technologies of Choice* (2013) the current systems we inhabit, as well as any changes to them we desire, are bounded within the ecological limits of our planet. Like many other fields of research, ICT4D needs to wake up to this simple but momentous

fact and adjust its timelines, understandings of development, resource demands, narratives of failure and success, understanding of its own importance etc. to recognize this reality. The forthcoming Sustainable Development Goals may help reflect on this.

Now let me turn to the way we conduct our work:

d) Combining a hunger for change with realism. I would argue that there is too much grating hubris in the discourses of ICT4D. This is not just evident in the language of “techno-entrepreneurs” seeking to roll-out their latest ICT4D intervention in the global South. It is also evident in the language of emancipatory and even “revolutionary” ICT4D. Informed by decades of development studies, many of us have argued to remember the power of existing structures in our deeply unequal world today. To quote from the call for this workshop “The asymmetries of the world are currently mirrored in the aims, practice and outcomes of too much ICTD research”. This should not surprise us. What we need to ask is how much and then how we can change it. The “how much” question is important in order to not fall into the traps of hubris, frustration and recrimination. Even if we are hungry for change, I agree with Buskens (2015) and Roberts (2015) in accepting that not only transformative, but also reformist ICT4D research has value.

e) Accepting, and coping with, normativity. In the past I have been among those calling on ICT4D researchers to be clear about their “D”, what they mean by development (Kleine 2010). While I absolutely still support this as a key element in our discussions, I also see that in parallel, as a field, ICT4D has to develop the maturity to tolerate divergent normative framings. Perhaps Amartya Sen’s idea (2009) that you don’t have to agree on what perfect justice is but concentrate instead on what is some of the greatest injustice, is a good way forward. For instance, the underrepresentation of scholars based in the global South in ICT4D research is an injustice which is troubling a broad coalition of actors of different normative persuasions.

f) Respect. More listening before judging. In academic research, we are trained to think critically, to find flaws, to dismantle overclaims and PR, and call out what is not up to the “state of the art” in our field. (On the other hand, public discourses by NGOs, companies and indeed funders are frequently characterized by hype, self- and other-congratulations, simplifications and lack of criticality). But our academic habits can get in the way of multi-stakeholder, multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary dialogue. Multi-perspective conversations need more listening with the aim to learn, tolerance of repetition in order to explain, and gentleness when there are misunderstandings. Participatory action researchers, including myself, might be reasonably good at carefully listening to research partners and participants who rarely get a voice, but may struggle to show the same patience with powerful stakeholders whose voice is very well audible and often structurally amplified. To move ICT4D research forward, we need to continue to strive for a culture of respect and express criticism in a way that allows people to stay at the table.

Having said that, in order to achieve transformative change, in an age of multiple media channels, including social media, activist colleagues who aggressively challenge the status quo and the powers that be in public have an important role to play in coalitions for social change. In the spaces of ideas exchange and research sharing across different stakeholders and cultures, however, we need a kinder and more respectful tone.

3) I commit to reading all accepted position papers before arriving on the day, or more likely, linking in remotely from the London Hub.

With best wishes to all for a fruitful workshop,



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