Where are Information and Communication Technologies for Development situated?

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Context sensitivity is growing in information system research widely speaking. This is particularly important in information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) research, because of the remarkable differences between contexts of design and target contexts of implementation and actual use. Nevertheless, context cannot be reduced to the physical and social surroundings of where information systems are placed, and where researchers collect data. This is because developed economies and developing contexts distinction is increasingly blurred. Moreover, it is difficult to distinguish aid from other kinds of cooperation efforts. For example, if aid is oriented to promote economic development encouraging ICT entrepreneurship, public sectors may rely on ICT resources from the private sector. Therefore, foreign aid needs to be contextualized far beyond local contexts. This makes ICT4D a unique policy domain: the distance between designers and beneficiaries is large, unlike other national policy domains, where the distance between the governed-governing is smaller. The relatively small distance between the governed and the governing in democratic polities allows for incremental adjustments to ICT and policy design to align policies and implementation.

The remarkable distance among actors and stakeholders involved in ICT4D is not only geographical, but also relates to the uncertainty in quantifying benefits, and the stereotyping of beneficiaries from the perspective of the 'givers'. How do they manage the uncertainty caused by their large distance to beneficiaries? Rottenburg (2002, 2006) argued that by designing projects and making them accountable to procedures, actual results –often quite unpredictable- are left out of the juridical accountability. This way, political instability, social restlessness, cultural norms are overlooked, whereas measurable indicators (number of computers, of people trained, of courses, etc) gain the front stage. Such situation helps in explaining the fashions in ICT4D (knowledge-based development, capacity building, pro-poor measures, MDGs oriented actions), most of which did not manage to sediment in developing contexts. This trend resembles foreign aid policies, where every roughly 10 years, new trends emerge: institution building (50s-60s), institutional strengthening (60s-70s), human resource development (70s-80s), capacity building/development (80s-90s), good governance and strengthening civil society (90s- early 00s), and now good enough governance (see WRR report, 2010 and Kühl, 2004).

We think that:
- identifying relevant contexts for ICT4D research, without taking for granted the usual dichotomies local vs. global and social vs. technical, and

- posing due attention on the actual doings in place across those scattered contexts

can help in furthering the understanding of ICT4D and related phenomena, and provide reliable basis for recommendations in policy and development.

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