

## Information and Communication Technology for Development

### Research Voices from Africa

#### International Federation for Information Processing (IFIP)

#### Technical Commission 9 – Relationship between Computers and Society

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Whoever has been involved in development activities, at some point faced a latent but omnipresent tension: is it acceptable to apply development knowledge, as a set of activities and expectations originating from developed economies in the contexts of developing countries? Does this exercise considerable power influences? And, can there be, or even stronger, should there be alternatives? On the research side, one may provocatively question if developing countries are a test bed for Western theories of development. Some critics, including Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson in the nineties, and more recently, Dambisa Moyo—be it from a different perspective—have accused development projects of impeding people in developing countries to develop their own way (“I don’t see why Bono should be the one to determine

Africa's economic policy" Moyo declared). Are there other stances and alternative voices on development from developing countries themselves?

One area which has attracted worldwide attention since recent years concerns Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D). The aggregate set of ICT types promises to improve conditions in developing countries in a variety of manners. Actual results in most developing countries, and especially in Africa, are however not astonishing. Where did the promise fail, and why did existing knowledge about the ICT potential to support development fail? Is it because the mainstream model of conceptualizing and implementing ICT4D is not applicable in the African context? Or, it is that the African approaches to ICT4D have been surpassed? In other words, what are the alternatives to dominant approaches?

Already in the early stages of ICT adoption, context has been advocated as a crucial -but overlooked dimension- in ICT research. Because of enormous differences between the ICT design context on the one hand, and the implementation and use context in developing countries on the other hand, context has become even more relevant for research activities under the ICT4D umbrella. In organizing this gathering, we aimed at moving one step further: it has to be noted that it is rare to find ICT efforts as endogenous production of developing countries. Often, we hear about ICT in Africa, yet rarely about ICT from African voices. Indigenous knowledge has largely been overlooked, making endogenous development elusive. We highlighted the importance of gaining a broader view on ICT4D by including substantially the actual settings of ICT implementation and use. We invited and supported authors and texts that voiced ideas and thoughts which may divert from established assumptions about the way ICT contributes to economic growth and social developments, and from established views of best practice on ICT implementation and socio-economical change. This meant considering the specific African contexts in the building and development of more independent views.

Therefore, we present in this volume contributions that highlight discontinuities between African context and ICT4D mainstream paradigm. The authors reframe the potential role of information technologies within Africa, and between Africa and the rest of the world. Several do not take formal organizations for granted, but look at actual organizing processes. We propose these works to readers, as a basis for reframing strategies of ICT implementation and use in

Africa, and beyond. Most of the papers are well grounded empirically, and are all aimed at explaining actual African contexts from within, before making recommendations. After years of research in ICT4D, we welcome an increasing sensitivity for methodological issues and reflexivity. All these three aspects can contribute to a more endogenous development, not only theoretically.

Organizing this workshop and collecting alternative views has not only been a learning experience about the variety of domains covered by contributors, but also a significant step towards alternative views. Indeed, many fields are covered: beside the more “traditional” focus on governments and health, ICT as infrastructure for business and economical development, gender issues, mobile technologies, agriculture are gaining attention more than in the past. GeoICT, as a subset of ICT, is addressed in a number of papers as well.

As a final remark: this meeting, and the associated proceedings, aim at openings in new directions, rather than proposing answers to big ICT4D dilemmas. As we realized that African voices in the field of ICT4D are hardly found in publications, we took a step back: first we wanted to open up to a wider palette of contributions from a variety of experiences also beyond the academia. This way, we hope to start a regional forum in East Africa as a place of understanding the African relationships with ICT, and related changes. By providing a forum for discussion of approaches and findings from Africa, we look forward for establishing a more solid research network.