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Why Politics and Institutions (Still) Matter for ICT4D

Essay by Aaron Shaw, September 26, 2008 in response to One Missed Call?

Ken Banks' provocative contribution to the Publius Project, "One Missed Call" boldly urges the ICT for Development (ICT4D) community to look beyond bureaucracy-heavy, top-down solutions to global poverty and inequality. In a similar spirit, my response to Ken's piece will take the form of a question, critique, and complementary challenge to the ICT4D community that runs somewhat afoul of the Easterly-Schumacher-inspired vision he offered.

Ken echoes William Easterly's disdain for bureaucratic, large-scale approaches to global poverty, calling instead for the adoption of small techno-centric solutions based on principles of Human-Driven Design and deployment by "grassroots" NGO's. Like Easterly, he encourages us to bet on the ingenuity of small-time entrepreneurs to break the world's persistent cycles of poverty. If we identify these entrepreneurs, the theory goes, we can eliminate poverty without the immense waste and inefficiency that plague so-called "Big-D" development projects.

While both Easterly and Banks present compelling, attractive claims, they leave a key question unanswered: **how can ICT4D advocates effectively confront the systemic and structural aspects of poverty or inequality within this framework?**

Easterly's argument takes for granted that well-positioned innovators can overcome institutional constraints at the regional, national and global levels. Indeed, his arguments in The White Man's Burden closely resemble the work of free-market ideologues Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek insofar as he objects to all forms of developmental "planning" as fundamentally misguided. Empirical research in Development Studies contradicts this position, suggesting that the ability of grassroots NGO's and others to deploy technological solutions effectively is overdetermined by the institutional environment within which they act (for a recent example, see Ha-Joon Chang's *Bad Samaritans – The Myth of Free Trade and the Secret History of Capitalism*). Of course, to adapt Margaret Mead's much abused phrase, I do not doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. And yet, such changes are bound to be fleeting in the absence of broader interventions.

The problem, as I see it, stems from the fact that Easterly's proposition is free-market economics with a friendly face – compassionate conservatism in the truest sense of the phrase. Embracing Easterly's vision entails a radical denial that broad political, economic, and cultural structures determine developmental outcomes in any way. The history of global development since World War II offers numerous grounds on which to reject this claim. First of all, the emergence of the United States as a superpower influenced the creation of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the primary institutional frameworks within which development projects took place (until recently). Secondly, the concomitant dissemination of U.S. culture, values, and products has also shaped the ideals and aspirations through which people across the world understand what it means to be "developed."

As a result, **we cannot talk about "development" without referring to the broad political, economic and cultural currents that defined the late 20th century and the processes of globalization.** All contemporary development projects operate in the institutional space defined by this history - and in many cases it is the space itself, rather than the any individual bureaucracy or top-down vision of change that determines what is and what is

not possible for the poor and middle income populations of the Global South.

Contemporary global development paradigms (ICT4D among them) bear the traits of organizational and philosophical predecessors. The Millenium Development Goals represent a continuation of the Big-D development schemes of the 1950's and 1960's, where gigantic multilateral institutions like the United Nations dictated the terms on which the world's poor would modernize. Similarly, the small-d development ideal proferred by Easterly and others places great faith in the ability of unregulated markets and small-scale entrepreneurs to bring widespread economic growth "from the bottom up." This represents a scaled-down version of the so-called Washington Consensus of the 1980's and 90's that saw the dismantling of social welfare systems and the deregulation of financial markets around the world. The results of such "structural adjustment" were catastrophic for the poor, as local elites and multinational corporations extracted spectacular profits at the expense of less-empowered populations.

Both approaches – the big-D and the small-d – are stained by fundamental shortcomings that no amount of revisionism can wash away. On their own, neither will bring about sustainable widespread enhancements in the quality of life for the chronically poor and unstable regions of the world.

As a result, **I challenge the ICT4D community to confront the contradictions of these competing paradigms of poverty and inequality alleviation.**

At a practical level, we cannot simply abandon participation in (or engagement with) large national and multilateral political institutions. Access to fantastic gadgets and services will mean little in the long-run without a corresponding framework to support sustainable improvements in "human capabilities." Likewise (and here I agree completely with Ken), the best intentioned multilateral efforts will fail unless they are grounded in the sort of modular, experimental approach embodied in Schumacher's "small is beautiful" ideal.

Therefore, the ICT4D community (along with fellow travelers like myself) must find ways to split the distance between the Big-D and the small-d. **We must reach out to the small grassroots NGO's and innovators at the same time as we pursue less glamorous forms of political transformation and institution-building.** We must design brilliant, appropriate gadgets and cultivate strong, accountable institutions. Together, these digital and social technologies will enable more people around the world to thrive, facilitating access to knowledge, networks, sanitation, water, and healthcare.

The need for broad political engagement has rarely been more apparent than in the present context. The collapse of the World Trade Organization's Doha round of negotiations and the current global financial crisis provide textbook examples of institutional failures that grassroots intervention alone will not resolve. The lack of consensus at Doha reveals the extent to which existing global governance institutions have failed to meet the needs of low and middle income countries. Meanwhile, the implosion of the housing and credit markets in the United States has illustrated the risks of insufficient coordination between government and the private sector in the face of an obvious, long-standing threat to the collective interests of society. In the absence of sustainable solutions to these overlapping problems, rampant inequalities will likely reproduce and spread, leading to further financial and political instabilities.

In this setting, ICT4D advocates cannot afford to turn their backs on global institutions as critical mechanisms for achieving lasting techno-social change. Of course, analyzing and participating in big bureaucracies such as national states, multilateral governance forums, and international standards committees entails a distasteful degree of compliance with abusive forms of power. In this regard, Easterly's claim that we must be wary of the tendency for these organizations to deliver corruption and inappropriate technologies is on target.

Nevertheless, if we want to avoid "missing the call" for technologies that have the potential to facilitate enhanced access, equality, and prosperity, such political and institutional engagement is more necessary than ever.

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