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Where are the Indigenous ICT for Development researchers: Marginalised or Uninvited?

Luiz Antonio Joia, Robert M. Davison, Antonio Díaz Andrade, Cathy Urquhart

Introduction

ICT for development – ICT4D – is a growing academic area that is increasingly accepted in the disciplines of Development Studies and Information Systems. However, there is a paradox that resides at the heart of ICT4D – the majority of researchers in this area are not, in fact, from the developing world. Are they marginalised in the field, or just uninvited? Below we give four viewpoints; First, The Indigenous Researcher in a Developing Country; Second, the Indigenous Researcher in a Developed Country; Third; The Non-Indigenous Researcher in a Developing Country; Fourthly, the Non-Indigenous Researcher in a Developed Country.

Questions That Need to Be Asked: The Indigenous Researcher in a Developing Country

There is an interesting peculiarity in this area as, interestingly, most of scholars researching ICT4D in developing countries are neither native to developing countries nor live in this region – at least, not any more. The fact is that the bulk of the body of knowledge relating to ICT4D in developing countries is developed by both non-developing countries natives and developing countries native academics that are now living in developed countries.

These facts deserve some in-depth reflection.

Without detracting from the unquestionable academic merit and research contribution of these thought-provoking scholars – whether from developing countries or not – working in universities based in developed countries, a question needs to be raised: Why has most research about ICT4D in developing countries not been developed by indigenous scholars who live and work in developing countries?

Naturally, this is not an excuse for creating a turf war or a research area monopoly. But, what is the difference, if any, in living in a developing country or abroad to address the role ICT plays in the Global South's development? How might indigenous scholars know and address the *right questions* concerning ICT4D in developing countries? What does *development* mean for indigenous researchers? While cross-cultural research addressing ICT4D in developing countries is truly important, does the word *development* have the same meaning for Brazil and India, Mexico and South Africa, and so forth? How can indigenous researchers take advantage of cross-cultural studies regarding ICT4D in developing countries? And finally, why don't indigenous researchers address these questions themselves? Is management education at odds with local realities? We cannot accept the concept of "Bottom of the Pyramid Marketing" as a way of legitimising the poor as poor, but rather as a way out for generating wealth and equity for developing regions.

Are not indigenous researchers trained well enough to do so? Would it be possible to run a critical management education that seems to be lacking in developing countries in order to tackle these issues? These are important questions.

A Privileged Position: The Indigenous Researcher in a Developed Country

Academic initiatives require appropriate levels of funding and, undoubtedly, there are major disparities in terms of access to funds between the so-called developed and developing countries. For instance, the overall expenditure on research and development is well over 3.0% of the gross domestic product in Japan, Sweden, Finland and South Korea – in Israel it even reaches 4.2%. However, it only reaches 0.9% in Brazil and India, two of the largest emerging economies nowadays¹. Although we do not know for sure how much of this expenditure goes into military projects, we suspect they absorb a big share of the budget allocated to research and development. It is against this background that scholars in the developing world conduct academic research.

In the Global South, academic researchers are usually affiliated to universities. On the one hand, in the case of public universities, the – insufficient, we might add – funds for research are largely provided by government, which may be complemented by limited private money. On the other hand, tuition fees make the main source of income for private universities. However, this income, for the most part, covers operating costs, while the difference makes the profit, which is, ultimately, the *raison d'être* of private organisations; little money is channelled to research initiatives.

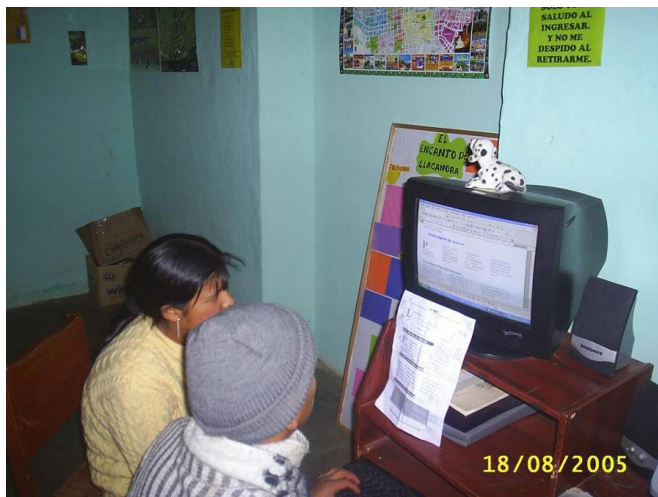
In the particular field of information systems, this is a discipline that is taught mainly in business schools. Consequently, the content of information systems courses gravitate towards how information and communication technology (ICT) can contribute to achieve the bottom line of business organisations rather than how ICT tools can help bring development to disadvantaged communities. If it exists, the arena of ICT for development (ICT4D) might be under the umbrella of development studies as a sub-area of specialisation.

Certainly, there are information systems scholars who are passionate about ICT4D in the developing world. It is undeniable that indigenous ICT4D researchers are better equipped to understand the nuances of particular meanings – e.g., “*guanxi*”, “*indigenismo*”, “*mātauranga*”, etc. – than researchers who are not familiar with local contexts. However, some institutional factors do hamper their research endeavours. While research activities are highly respected and likely to increase academic esteem, their rewards might only be realised in the long term. In contrast, teaching activities offer immediate rewards, by bringing higher income opportunities based on extended hours of teaching, and almost immediate recognition because of the exposure lecturers get through their interaction with a relatively large number of students. Limited access to academic databases, scarcity of funds for conducting fieldwork and the restricted resources for dissemination of results only serve to make things more challenging for the researcher. Moreover, those based in the developing world still face the challenge of theorising for a mainstream, global academic audience, which may not recognise the value of local forms of knowledge. These predicaments can only be exacerbated by the almost insurmountable hurdle for non-English speaking researchers imposed by the fact that the global academic audience expect to see their work presented in English. In these circumstances, conducting research in a developing country is far from a priority. Rather to the contrary, it becomes a heroic endeavour.

Thus, expat indigenous ICT4D researchers, those based in the developed world, are in a privileged position. Not only they have better access to funding for conducting research but also are aware of the expectations of the global, English speaking academic audience, while being cautious about the risk of favouring well established (maybe imported) theoretical perspectives at

¹ Source: Batelle. (2010). 2011 Global R&D Forecast, retrieved from <http://www.battelle.org/aboutus/rd/2011.pdf>.

the expense of local understandings. Moreover, they are in an advantageous situation that can make possible articulate collaborative research links between the developed world and the Global South. The Special Interest Group on Global Development (SIG GlobDev) of the Association for Information Systems and the Working Group 9.4 – Social Implications of Computers in Developing Countries – of the International Federation for Information Processing provide excellent opportunities for these joint initiatives. In addition, ICT4D specialised journals – e.g., *Information Technology for Development*, *Information Technology and International Development*, *African Journal of Information Systems*, *Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries* – plus some special issues in other information systems journals can be used as platforms for disseminating the findings of collaborative ICT4D research projects.



Living on the Edge: The Non Indigenous Researcher in a Developing Country

For the last twenty years, I have made my home in Hong Kong, a thriving and dynamic city on the Southern edge of China. Much of the research that I do takes place in the Chinese context – where I am a frequent visitor. The regularity and frequency of my visits allows me the privilege of seeing what happens on the inside – yet with the eyes of an outsider. What I find most

alarming, at least from a research perspective, is that the insiders (the researchers living in China) generally do not have an inside perspective at all. All too often, they see China as they think others would like them to see China – the others in this case being journal editors and reviewers. This means that the research they conduct more closely approximates to outside norms – the things that they think the outsiders might be interested in – and less frequently reflects the actual inside situation. If they, the insiders, have been trained and professionally socialised overseas, then they are all the more prepared to see China through an external lens – the lens of the research methods and epistemologies that they learned overseas, the lens of the research problems that they have been (mis)lead to believe would be of interest to an outside audience.

This is a problem, because there is so much in China (and indeed in any other developing context) that simply cannot be seen from the outside. The irony is that the insiders really ought to be in an excellent position to correct this view and show us the inside view, identify the constructs that are relevant to organisational practice on the inside, etc. Yet they do not! Have they forgotten their inside self? Have they marginalised themselves – not to be insiders at all? Have they mainstreamed themselves, not to be interested in what happens on the inside, paying attention only to the world outside, perhaps illustrated with inside data, but never informed by an inside perspective?

For instance, *guanxi* (relationships that are based on norms of mutual obligation and reciprocity) is utterly central to Chinese life, notably in business contexts. For many jobs, it is simply impossible to work if you do not have good *guanxi*. This means that in many studies of organisational life in China, *guanxi* should be a significant construct that is all too likely to exert a significant impact on various aspects of behaviour. Unfortunately, it is rarely the case that *guanxi* (or other constructs in the Chinese culture) are analysed at all. Instead, a Western model is simply plonked onto a Chinese context, Chinese data is collected – and some assessment is made as to whether the Chinese data fits the Western model. That is OK to a point – but what about the unique features of the Chinese context – they are not studied at all!

This kind of self-marginalisation is really counter-productive. We lose a valuable opportunity to learn something new. Why does it happen? Perhaps the insiders think that the outsiders are not interested in anything Chinese – at least in terms of research constructs? But that somehow Chinese data is OK. Or that a universal view of the world is better than a particular view, so we should always analyse universal constructs in our models? But what is universal about a model that was founded on US norms?!

I would argue that every country is equally interesting, but if the insiders will not tell us, then the outsiders have to go and take a look by themselves. The advantage is that as an outsider, I can be more easily surprised – because everything is new and unfamiliar. However, as an outsider, I will also miss things that I just do not see or hear – because of a lack of familiarity with language and culture. There is no ideal solution. If only the insiders were more interested in the inside – and if only the outsiders could persuade the insiders to do just that.

Partnership not appropriation: The Non Indigenous Scholar from a Developed Country

As someone who is neither indigenous to a developing country, nor living in a developing country, I recognise that I am essentially ‘outside’ the phenomena I am researching, however

passionate I am about it. I do appreciate that the outsider view is helpful when researching other countries, but I also know that there are issues of context and culture that I may not understand. As a woman in a predominately male academic environment, I am sensitive to issues of marginalisation and appropriation. As a female in a male environment, I have experienced both being on the outside, and having men take credit for my ideas.

So, how do I avoid doing the same to my indigenous researcher colleagues in the area of ICT4D? First, I'd suggest that, ideally, non-indigenous researchers should partner up with indigenous researchers in ICT4D. From a research perspective, this ensures that valuable, cultural context is not lost or misunderstood; from an ethical standpoint, partnering up with an indigenous researcher avoids the charge of colonialism or appropriation. It also gives an opportunity to rebalance the imbalance that has been noted; the non-indigenous researcher can support, mentor and provide developed world resources to the indigenous researcher.

Second, if we are serious about indigenous researchers having a voice in ICT4D, rather than having a voice imposed on them from outside, we need to ensure that voice. How can we do this? From a research perspective, one thing that I think is important is to make sure that any transcripts in the indigenous language are analysed in that language – translating to English first, then analysing, effectively strips away context and meaning. We can also ensure that we take photographs of the research setting. Nothing is more effective in conveying the stark inequalities between developing and developed countries than a photograph, yet photographs rarely find their way into academic work. From an ethical standpoint, we can consider carefully issues of author name order on the finished research article. Such things matter in academia. So here is another chance to rebalance imbalances; we can take the opportunity to put the name of our indigenous research partner first. If not for our indigenous researcher partner, would we have the same quality of access to the setting? Probably not.

In conclusion, I'd like to see a world where ICT4D research is produced in developing countries. It has been demonstrated time and time again that local solutions work, and that imposed solutions do not. As a non indigenous ICT4D researcher, I feel I have a lot to contribute – but only in partnership.

Contributors

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