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SELF-MARGINALIZED OR UNINVITED? THE ABSENCE OF INDIGENOUS RESEARCHERS IN THE ARENA OF GLOBALIZED ICT4D RESEARCH

ICIS 2011 Panel Statement

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Abstract

Information and communication technology (ICT) tools are ubiquitous and pervasive in our work and daily lives. In this context, the utilization of these tools to bring development to disadvantaged groups emerged as a promising research field – ICT for development (ICT4D) - a few years ago. Although it is hard to pin down the exact number, a review of the existing literature on ICT4D indicates that the bulk of research published in this area comes from the so-called developed world. In this panel, ICT4D researchers coming from five continents will present their views, while trying to shed light on why ICT4D research has been dominated by Western, non-indigenous researchers.

Keywords: *Development, ICT4D research, indigenous researchers, non-indigenous researchers, Western discourses on ICT4D research*

Introduction

Recent surveys show that developing countries are home to approximately 80% of the world's population. This datum alone should be enough to justify the importance of this region. However, nearly 50% of the inhabitants of developing countries live in dire poverty, without access to clean water, adequate housing and education. In line with this, some time ago a debate arose regarding whether or not developing countries should invest their scarce monetary resources in information and communication technology (ICT). This research area – broadly described as ICT for development (ICT4D) – has attracted increasing interest from both scholars and policy-makers. Nonetheless, there is an anomaly in this area as, interestingly, most of scholars researching ICT4D in developing countries were neither indigenous of developing countries themselves nor even live in developing countries. This panel aims to address two

main questions: Why have indigenous scholars in or from developing countries not developed most research about ICT4D in developing countries? What needs to be done by the academic community to engage, support, collaborate and partner with indigenous scholars and academic institutions in developing countries?

Controversial Issues and Panelists' Positions

This panel addresses the vexed question – why is information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) research dominated by Western, non-indigenous researchers?

ICT4D research has grown quickly since a debate arose regarding whether or not the developing regions should invest their scarce monetary resources in information and communication technology – cf. Davison's et al. 2000 discussion on the inevitability of developing countries to leapfrog into new age ICTs. This debate has moved on, as it has since been largely agreed that ICT implementation is of paramount importance for developing regions (see, for instance, Avgerou 2003). The crux of the matter is not whether ICT must be implemented, but rather which ICT endeavors and innovations should be chosen to contribute to the region's development. The ICT potential for the development of regions is no longer in doubt, as several scholars have expounded on the developmental impacts accrued from ICT in public administration (see, for instance, Macadar and Reinhardt 2002; Silva and Figueroa 2002; Joia and Zamot 2002; Mariscal 2003; Romo-Rodríguez 2005; to name but a few).

However, it is also true that ICT projects in developing countries striving for the development of the region are far from being a universal success, as several have fallen short of their intended outcomes (Avgerou and Walsham 2000). Most of these undertakings have attempted to tackle the digital divide between the "haves" and "have-nots". This gap, formerly a direct consequence of social, economic and educational inequalities, became an enabler of the very inequalities that generated it, in a kind of vicious circle fostered by positive feedback. Based on this reality, it is not difficult to perceive why research on ICT4D has attracted increasing interest from both scholars and policy-makers. Consequently, various outlets (see, for instance, the *Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries* at www.ejisdc.org), the journal of *Information Technology for Development*, working groups (such as the *IFIP WG 9.4 – IS in Developing Countries* at <http://is2.lse.ac.uk/ifipwg94/>), and even special editions of leading journals (e.g., *MIS Quarterly* special issue on Information Systems in Developing Countries) have addressed this theme.

Nonetheless, there is an interesting peculiarity in this area as, interestingly, most scholars researching ICT4D in developing countries are neither indigenous to nor resident in that region (even if they are former residents). The fact is that the bulk, perhaps over 80%, of the body of knowledge relating to ICT4D in developing countries published in the mainstream IS journals is developed by both researchers from non-developing countries and indigenous researchers from developing countries, who are now living in developed countries.

We can quote, as an example, the very fact that the *Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries* has just one Latin American scholar on its extended editorial board, (editors and associate editors), although this region is home to approximately 10% of the world population and possesses nearly 10% of its wealth. The editorial board of the *MIS Quarterly* special issue on Information Systems in Developing Countries included 16 academics – nine of whom were based in the United States, three in the United Kingdom, two in Norway, one in New Zealand and one in Hong Kong (Walsham et al. 2007) – but none from developing countries.

These facts deserve some in-depth reflection.

Without detracting from the unquestionable academic merit and contribution to the IS research environment made by indigenous scholars working in universities in developed countries, a question needs to be raised: Why has most research about ICT for Development in developing countries not been developed by indigenous scholars from developing countries who also live and work in those developing countries?

The word "development" only seems to make sense in line with the paradigms of the developed countries, rather than the developing countries, as a type of Institutional Perspective to legitimize this research

(Mignerat and Rivard 2005). Naturally, this is not an excuse for creating a “turf war” or a “research area monopoly”. The panel will debate the following issues:

- What is the difference, if any, between ICT4D research conducted by a scholar living in a developing country, as opposed to a scholar living in a non developing country? Is ICT4D primarily a ‘Western’ discourse?
- What are the perceptions of the quality and significance of ICT4D research and its contribution to broader discourses in IS?
- How might academics know and address the "right questions" concerning ICT for development in developing countries? What are the particular issues a non-resident or non-indigenous researcher should address when doing ICT4D research in the field?
- What does “development” mean for Academia (Escobar 1995)? While cross-cultural research addressing ICT for development 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 scholars take advantage of cross-cultural studies regarding ICT4D in developing countries (Stahl 2006)?
- Is there an e-government model adequate for developing countries, itself, or must practitioners and policy makers mimic the models from the developed countries (Ciborra 2005)?
- Finally, why don't indigenous scholars from developing countries address these questions themselves? Is their management education at odds with their own realities? Aren't they trained well enough to do so? Would it be possible to run a critical management education (Grey 2007) that seems to be lacking in developing countries in order to tackle these issues?

These are important questions not just for developing countries, but also for the whole developed world, as multinational companies are keen to have a current market for their products and services in developing countries. We cannot accept the concept of “bottom of the pyramid marketing” (Prahalad 2004) as a way of legitimizing the poor as poor, but rather as a way out for generating wealth and equity for developing regions. ICT has a role in this and it is a role that this panel intends to address.

The panelists' positions and views on the aforementioned controversial issues are outlined next:

Luiz Antonio Joia (Chair) will state that this panel does not intend to deny the potential role of ICT for development initiatives, but rather to criticize the apolitical managerial determinism supporting much of the development discourse, and the lack of critical management research undertaken by developing countries regarding ICT adoption. By adopting an uncritical approach to ICT4D, most developing countries gain access at the expense of substance. They can buy other countries information, but they cannot generate their own. They fail to make the connection between information and development. They receive information and they expect to receive development, without working to make development in their own image. Furthermore, increasing adoption of ICTs appears to suggest that anything can be done, anytime, anywhere. Such a technological deterministic view is also imbued with rationalist and managerialist assumptions of how work and business processes can be managed in the new and global economy. Globalization is put forward by governments and the corporate sector as being inevitable, irresistible and all-powerful. ICTs are described as a path for developing countries to embrace development – as defined by developed countries. Thus, he will address in this panel the very need of a critical management education that challenges the anglo-saxon concept of development as well as ICT determinism, and place studies of ICT for development in developing countries context.

Robert Davison will contribute from two perspectives. Firstly, as the editor of a journal devoted to IS research in developing countries, he will reflect on the kind of research that is submitted to and eventually published in the journal. Secondly, as an IS researcher who lives on the fringes of and frequently travels to a developing country (China), he will reflect on his own etic-emic perspective of how an outside researcher can make a valid contribution to knowledge about events on the inside. In this way, he will assess both the difficulties and the affordances associated with undertaking research as both a non-resident and a non-indigenous researcher, all the while cognizant of the limitations of Western ICT4D discourse. His personal approach to this inside-outside dilemma is to learn how to jump into the sea, not merely fish from the

shore, identifying the key practical and theoretical issues that prevail on the inside and, as far as is possible, living as a native not as an outsider.

Antonio Díaz Andrade will discuss the challenges scholars from developing countries, mainly from Latin America, face to conduct and produce ICT4D research. These challenges can be classified into three strongly interlinked, yet distinctive, categories. The first one represents the scarcity – sometimes unavailability – of resources to conduct research. Not only financial resources – needed for the fieldwork expenses and quite often for translating the research output into English – are in shortage but also, and more importantly, time. The second challenge is related to organizational constraints, which by and large prioritize teaching responsibilities over research activities. Although producing research is regarded as desirable and largely celebrated when successfully achieved, day-to-day pressures direct scholars to spend their energy on teaching. The third challenge is related to the fact that ICT4D is not part of the mainstream topics within the IS discipline. Even though several ICT4D initiatives have been undertaken in developing countries, which could provide an excellent opportunity to conduct research, they have not attracted the interest of indigenous researchers in enough numbers.

Cathy Urquhart will discuss her experiences in ICT4D research and possible ethical dilemmas that might arise for a non-indigenous ICT4D researcher. For instance, should non-indigenous researchers ever conduct research in a developing country without an indigenous partner? How does a non-indigenous researcher ensure that indigenous researchers get sufficient recognition and mentoring through the publication process, and ensure that the indigenous perspective is given voice without distortion? How can the research process itself ensure that voice? What might be the issues when translating and analyzing data that is recorded in the indigenous language in the field? What other ethical issues might occur for the unwary non-indigenous researcher?

Muhammadou M. O. Kah will discuss the research infrastructure challenges faced by ICT4D researchers who are conducting and producing research but located in developing countries. The challenges of capacity and competency gaps are unique to these ICT4D researchers based permanently in developing countries who are not commuting or transient ICT4D researcher. He will attempt to share perspectives of the opportunities and the dynamics of context, culture, values and the diverse and unique utilization of ICTs which influence quality of life, communities, society, and poverty with positive and negative implications. He will further discuss the opportunities presented by indigenous ICT4D researchers located in research environments whose outputs, albeit quality and rigor issues, offer to the outside research community a unique perspective and insight that cannot be invoked cognitively by non-indigenous ICT4D researchers conducting ICT4D research from a distance or ‘transient researchers’ interested in ICT4D who come in with different cultural and contextual lenses. In addition, he will discuss the challenges faced by indigenous researchers in their capacities and competencies to access diverse tools, approaches and apply research methodologies and rigor with their unique perspectives and data sets which will yield expected quality research output resulting in wider acceptance and circulation in mainstream peer-reviewed publications. He will make an attempt to differentiate between the diverse kinds of ICT4D researchers who are seemingly homogenous but quite different with unique differences in perspectives and context, which ultimately influences their research output. Thus, he will conclude by recommending an intervention approach/framework including implementation of an ICT4D curriculum which provides the needed knowledge content in ICT4D as well as a strong built-in research and methodology competencies to enable development and transfer of the missing tools for these indigenous ICT4D researchers. These interventions will enable these indigenous researchers to unleash their unique insights and foresights in ICT4D resulting in valuable contributions and more substantive collaborative partnering with non-indigenous researchers interested in ICT4D across the World thereby enriching ICT4D literature and knowledge.

Panel Structure

The chairperson will run the panel in a very flexible manner. It is expected that scholars from developing countries as well as from developed countries will take part in the workshop. Furthermore, we are especially interested in inviting and encouraging the interaction with practitioners and policy makers as well as doctoral students from developing countries.

Panelists will have time allocated to put forward their viewpoints related to the theme. Thereafter, a discussion among the panelists and between the audience and the panelists is expected to occur.

The intention is to create a dialectical environment, in which scholars both from developing and developed countries will compare their standpoints and raise their own questions. The same approach will be used to compare ideas and questions put forward by scholars, policy makers and practitioners.

Biographies

Luiz Antonio Joia is an Associate Professor and Principal of the *e:lab* – Research Laboratory on e-Government and e-Business at the Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration of Getulio Vargas Foundation. He is also an Adjunct Professor at Rio de Janeiro State University. He holds a B.Sc. in Civil Engineering from the Military Institute of Engineering, Brazil, and a M.Sc. in Civil Engineering and a D.Sc. in Production Engineering from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. He also holds a M.Sc. in Management Studies from the Oxford University, U.K. He was a World Bank consultant in Educational Technology and is an invited member of the Technical Board of the *Working Group WG 8.5* (Informatics in the Public Administration) of the IFIP (*International Federation for Information Processing*). His research interests lie on IT for Development, e-Government, e-Business, Strategic Use of IT, and Actor-Network Theory. His home page has more details: <http://ebape.fgv.br/en/faculty-members/luiz-antonio-joia>.

Robert Davison is an Associate Professor in the Department of Information Systems, City University of Hong Kong. His research interests primarily focus on the use of social media for knowledge sharing in Chinese firms. He is also editor of the *Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries* and is involved on the editorial boards of the *Information Systems Journal*, *MIS Quarterly* and *Information Technology & People*. His home page has more details: <http://www.is.cityu.edu.hk/staff/isrobert>.

Antonio Díaz Andrade is a Senior Lecturer in Business Information Systems at Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand and Visiting Professor at ESAN University, Peru. Antonio is actively involved with the ICT4D research community as an author, presenter, teacher and reviewer. He is passionate about the interplay between computer-mediated information and people and how the former can improve the living conditions of the latter. Antonio obtained his PhD degree in Management Science and Information Systems from The University of Auckland. He holds a MBA with major in Information Systems and Telecommunications and a BEng in aeronautical-mechanical engineering. His home page can be found at <http://www.aut.ac.nz/profiles/business/senior-lecturers/antonio-diaz-andrade>.

Cathy Urquhart is Professor of Digital Business at Manchester Metropolitan University. She has two major research interests – ICT4D and grounded theory. She is an Associate Editor for *Information Technology for Development* and a Senior Editor for *MIS Quarterly*. Her home page can be found at <http://www.business.mmu.ac.uk/staff/staffdetails.php?uref=430>.

Muhammadou M. O. Kah is Vice Chancellor and Professor of Information Technology & Communications at The University of The Gambia, West Africa. He has been recently appointed as the Coordinator of The Gambia's Science, Technology & Innovation Policy and Science Park by the President of The Gambia. His current research interest is ICT4D and exploring ways in ICT's and Innovations contribute to poverty reduction, economic growth and development, and enhance quality of life for developing economies and communities as well as improve government processes and organizations in developing economies. He serves on the editorial board of the journal of *Information Technology for Development* and others. His home page can be found at <http://www.profkah.com>.

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