Position Paper: Critical Practice and Critical Intent in ICT4D research

by Tony Roberts

Prepared for the "Researching for Change in a Globalising Asymmetric World", workshop at the Critical Alternatives conference, 17-18 August, 2015 Aarhus, Denmark.

1) I have worked as an ICT4D practitioner in Central America and Southern Africa since 1988. I lectured in New Technology and Society for four years at the University of East London before founding and serving as CEO of Computer Aid International for twelve years. Computer Aid has provided quarter of a million computers and other ICTs to not-for-profits, mainly in developing countries. Since 2011 I have been a full-time doctoral research in the ICT4D Centre at Royal Holloway, University of London. My PhD involved participatory action research with a women's ICT4D organisation in Zambia to learn whether their use of participatory video enhanced critical agency for development. I presented a paper on critical approaches to ICT4D at IFIP9.4 in Sri Lanka; I was lead author of the 'Participatory Video' entry in the IEDCA encyclopaedia and, in September, I will present a paper taking a critical look at 'Amartya Sen's ontology of Well-Being and Agency' at the HDCA in Washington. I sit on the board of three ICT4D organisations in the UK and Zambia which focus on the use of ICTs in relation to the environment, gender and civic activism.

2) With regard to the reframing of ICT4D, I offer the following points:

a) The field of ICT4D is fragmented between different academic and practitioner approaches, journals and conferences. To some extent this is desirable and unavoidable, however all factions might be expected to benefit from increased cross-fertilisation and collaboration.

b) The field of ICT4D is techno-centric and techno-cratic; it is focused on the technical and dominated by a technical elite and by technical discourses, in ways that mirror and reproduce asymmetries found in wider society. In terms of means and ends, much ICT4D research is concerned with the instrumental technical proficiency of particular ICTs as the means of development, but is insufficiently concerned with which ends of development it is that people have reason to value. Influential reviews of the field of ICT4D have identified a general failure to define the kind of development that ICT4D is intent upon (Walsham and Sahay, 2006, 2013; Kleine 2010) and a problematic reliance upon uncritical assumptions about the relationship of ICT to development (Avgerou, 2008, 2010). It has been argued that this uncritical, technically-driven approach (Chamberlain, 2012), which limits the agency and participation of 'intended beneficiaries', is partly responsible for ICT4D's high failure rate (Heeks, 2002; Gao and Gunawong, 2014).

c) Rather than starting with technology and looking for development problems to solve, a more critical approach to ICT4D could start by engaging in critical dialogue with people about their disadvantageous situation, unequal social relations and the structural power interests that give rise to and sustain under-development and social injustice. Such a dialogue could be the critical means for disadvantaged people themselves to discern their development intent i.e. which kinds of developments they have reason to value, what structural constraints and opportunities they experience, and how they wish to act in order to transform them. Only after having arrived at this participatory and critical determination of their choice of critical practice and critical intent should deliberation turn to whether and which technologies might further those aims.

d) By this account, ICT4D must be critical in at least two respects, in its intent and in its practice (ends and means). To inform such a theory-practice my own preference is to draw for inspiration on

the critical practices of scholar-activists from the global South such as Fals-Borda (1998), Freire (1972), Longwe (1991) and Tandon (2008) and on the work of critical feminists such as Molyneux (1985), Young (1993) hooks (2000) and Buskens (2014, 2015). Their work can help us to appropriate and innovate a critical theory-practice that is transformist in its intent and emancipatory in its practice. This is not in any way to negate the real value of non-emancipatory and non-transformist development initiatives, which in my opinion are complementary processes. Whilst the intent of Aarhus, as I understand it, is to identify 'critical alternatives' that are emancipatory and transformist, in practice broader development action will necessarily be comprised of elements that are conformist, reformist and transformist (Buskens, 2014, Roberts 2015).

e) In my most ambitious imaginings, scope exists for a an alternative critical theory-practice of ICT4D that is capable of unifying critical scholars and practitioners across different ICT4D fields - including those of Community Informatics, STS, Information Systems and beyond – around a human-centred, critical-agency-based theory-practice of ICT4D that has 'transformist potential' (Young, 1993).

3) I commit to reading all accepted position papers before arriving on the day.

Kind regards

Tony Roberts

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