

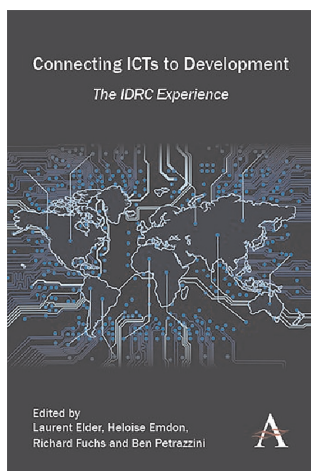
Book Review

Connecting ICTs to Development: The IDRC Experience

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Laurent Elder, Heloise Emdon, Richard Fuchs, and Ben Petrazzini (Editors), *Connecting ICTs to Development: The IDRC Experience*, London, UK and New York, NY: Anthem Press, 2013, 298 pp., \$99.00 (hardback).



Although the editors specifically deny that this book is a historical account,¹ it only narrowly escapes that label. The book *does* attempt to consolidate some 15 years of International Development Research Centre (IDRC)–sponsored action research on ICT intervention projects undertaken in three main global regions, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. This “Herculean” (the editors’ words) effort does give the book the semblance of an epic, engrossing, all-encompassing exposition of the key concerns, actors, and events relevant to the IDRC’s ICT4D community. The book reports on the work of an IDRC-created thematic grouping identified as “Information and Communications Technologies for Development” (ICT4D), an acronym which has since gained widespread appeal in the academic research community (Heeks, 2006). ICT4D has also become associated with research that makes a technologically deterministic assumption of a clear link between investment in ICTs and development outcomes (Raiti, 2007). Such critiques have led to attempts to redefine the academic field in a broader sense, incorporating all studies that consider ICTs in a development context (Burrell & Toyama, 2009) or in developing countries (Avgerou, 2008).

A key differentiator claimed by this book is that the IDRC’s ICT4D research agenda was about ICTs *for* development not *on* development,² i.e., about harnessing the capabilities of ICT interventions to advance a development agenda by working closely with beneficiary communities. Hence, IDRC’s objectives were to enable new ways of working (e.g. new modes of production, new ways of creating value) that would be embedded in local practices. This explains the book’s two-pronged approach, focusing first on policy change to enable access, then on new ICT-enabled practices (work, communication, services). This approach aligns well with calls for ICT4D research to consider a “broader political economy of developmental ICT” (Thompson, 2008, p. 2) and to investigate sustainable approaches to ICT-enabled developmental projects (Mansell & Wehn, 1998). One such approach in the development literature and ICT4D research area may rest with community participation (Bailur, 2007). The book also attempts to map out the IDRC-specific ICT4D research field which, the author of the introduction to Part I admits, initially comprised a “hastily assembled, rapidly grown, multidisciplinary team of development professionals” (Elder et al., 2013, p. 17). The collection succeeds in highlighting the complexity of such an undertaking, but this has already been a highly debated topic of scholars in the field (Burrell & Toyama, 2009).

The primary audience for this book includes two groups: ICTD (to use the broader concept) academics and

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1. “This book is not a history. Rather, it is a documentary or ethnography of a particular time in the business of foreign aid” (Elder, Emdon, Fuchs, & Petrazzini, 2013, p. 1).

2. See page 177 of Elder et al. under the section labelled “Research for Development Outcomes.”

CONNECTING ICTS TO DEVELOPMENT

development professionals. The former would benefit from a timely review of the field from an influential organization that has helped shape practical ICTD programs and measure their outcomes over more than a decade. Such a perspective permits reflection on past efforts and recognition of open problems, suggesting opportunities for further research. The latter would benefit from the detailed documentation of best practices, methods, tools, and techniques used to implement, monitor, and measure projects and their outputs. Within a context of ongoing debates questioning the role that ICTs play in development (Avgerou, 2010; Silva & Westrup, 2009) and critiques of major donor organizations' failure to adequately address ICT-led development (Mansell, 2010), this collection of edited work, presented in a balanced and comprehensive manner, provides a much-needed basis for reflection on sustainable approaches to development through ICT interventions and the practical limitations of such projects. A third relevant readership for this book would come from those who participate in the formal and informal institutions and regulatory bodies involved with developing and enacting ICT policies. Although the book is targeted at a research-focused audience, the level and pitch of the dialogue is such that any person at the regulatory, policy, or administrative level can read this book and gain insightful information.

The book carries a clear message that, regardless of the social and technological innovations made possible by ICTs, development outcomes would be unlikely to ensue without embedding these interventions in a sustainable manner in the social and political institutions of the adopting country. Although this is not a new argument (Avgerou, 2010), the book demonstrates how the micro practices enabled by ICTs at the individual and community levels become implicated in institutional change. The second powerful message that emerges from the book is that institutional changes such as democratization, deregulation, enlightenment, and open innovation do not automatically arise from the spread of ICTs. Instead, these outcomes emerge only through concerted actions based on evidence that demonstrates how ICTs enable benefits. These messages are supported by carefully collated data showing longitudinal depth and broad geographical coverage, encompassing a multitude of methodological approaches. This book presents ways in which those benefits can be determined systematically. As such, it is effective in carrying out its objective of being "a foundational building block in what will continue to be a space—both inside and outside IDRC—to build an understanding of how to achieve equitable, sustainable and inclusive development outcomes using ICTs" (Elder et al., 2013, p. 22).

The many strengths of this book have been alluded to above: Its comprehensive and data rich coverage presents a variety of perspectives through the eyes of the practitioners on the ground, embedded in the particular development context. There are few books that engage so thoroughly with research of this type. The book's other major strength lies in defining the field. Few books on this topic attempt to map out the various reference disciplines that converge to produce the backdrop in which ICT4D makes its contributions. What I found particularly interesting and relevant to field defining was Chapter 7's discussion of the boundary work occurring in creating the e-health research area. For practitioners and academics, this is a useful reflection on negotiations that take place when a new field evolves. The discussion also provides a basis for problematizing and theorizing about field-defining activity in ICTD research. ICTD research is generally hampered by lack of access to project outputs since they may be informal published material, buried as part of a shelved report or inaccessible due to lack of permission to the contents and so forth. This book refers to such material as "grey" literature, and has admirably addressed its access by providing a roadmap from the IDRC archives. Finally, the book gives researchers new directions for progressing ICTD both explicitly by illustrating new areas for investigation (e.g., crowdsourcing, open data) and implicitly by recognizing that although there are parallels for this research in established Western outlets (e.g., ICT adoption, ICTs and productivity, etc.), unexplored subtleties arise when these same phenomena are viewed from a different socioeconomic context.

One weakness in this collection is the occasional tendency to evangelize about the benefits of ICTs in marginalized societies. This perception is reinforced by the use of terms such as "heresy," "orthodoxy," and "beginning and end" (as in alpha and omega). In reading the book, I felt a critical voice was lacking, unlike more incisive expositions on ICTD (e.g., Unwin, 2009). There is little discussion about the effects of power and politics on ICT intervention decisions and the roles of stakeholders with vested interests (Schech, 2002; Silva & Westrup, 2009). I believe there could also be a better balance between the success stories and the failures. Often due to the socially constructed nature of ICTs, it is difficult to understand failure: The reasons may be

elusive, hidden beneath many layers of interpretation. Hence, work that does engage with failure is sometimes more helpful than work which predominantly chronicles success, as this book does. One of the first and most influential books on ICTD documents case studies of failures to advance our understanding of the field (Avgerou & Walsham, 2000). The book is also atheoretical, although it does admit this from the beginning. It seeks to consolidate and expose grey literature but not to engage in problematizing the findings, which seems a waste of such rich data. In another critique, this book is mostly silent on literacy, both in terms of people's ability to read and write and in terms of the more recent term "digital literacy" (Koltay, 2011). This impediment could represent a major barrier to the adoption and diffusion of ICTs in the very communities that ICTs are expected to serve. Barriers of gender, poverty, language, etc., have been addressed thoroughly but literacy is (surprisingly) only briefly mentioned. Future editions could incorporate this theme more meaningfully. ■

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