

Evaluation information and communication technology (ICT) projects : A development perspective

Abstract

The potential transformative role that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can play in accelerating ‘development’ has recently generated much interest among donor agencies, researchers and policymakers. ICTs such as mobile phones and Internet-enabled computers are considered inexpensive ways to support health, education, governance and agriculture for the communities of the financially-challenged. It is widely accepted that ICT is an important element of development strategy and significant amount of funds are being allocated to various ICT projects. It has been suggested that such initiatives will create more economic and social opportunities for the community as a whole, and ultimately will help in eradicating poverty.

In this dissertation, through an extensive review of literature on ICT for development, we highlight two potential research gaps. First, there is limited research focusing on the link between ICT and the development construct. A basic assumption in most of the research is that the implementation of ICT/information systems in developing countries will contribute towards development and various issues related to its appropriation and use are researched keeping ‘development’ in the background without detailing it. Secondly, there is insufficient focus on the importance of the social context in shaping not only the design of these projects but also influencing the outcome of such interventions. It is a well-known fact that rural societies of the developing world are a highly stratified. Diversities among them based on caste, religion, gender and landownership might very well influence the use and impact of ICT interventions. The research adopts the human capability aspects of development proposed by Amartya Sen and attempts to look into how access to and use of ICT expands the choices of rural people, adding to people’s ability to participate in the potential benefits that ICT projects aim to bring and how the particular socio-economic context of the individual affects what they want to achieve through the various ICT initiatives.

The methodology of this dissertation is a contextualized, interpretive one, employing the techniques of ethnography at three research sites. We studied three ICT projects: Lokvani in Sitapur Uttar Pradesh, Nemmadi in Raichur Karnataka and Gyandoot in Dhar Madhya Pradesh.

During field work, data was collected through a variety of methods: unstructured and semistructured interviews, focus group discussion, documentation review, participant observation and physical artifacts. These multiple sources of data helped in triangulation by providing multiple perspectives on an issue and enabling cross-checking.

The results of the study indicate that the freedom and opportunities generated from ICT interventions differ greatly across different social groups. In a heterogeneous society, where political, social and economic opportunities vary among individuals due to the differences in their socio-economic conditions such as caste, gender and landownership, our research points out that because of these differences, the impact of ICT interventions is not uniform across social groups, especially the socially and economically marginalized groups. We argue that technology, and particularly ICT designs, need to be sensitive to these differences to achieve the development goals successfully. We draw implications from these cases for development projects in general, especially for heterogeneous societies in the developing world.