Editorial: Understanding local social processes in ICT4D research

The Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) community has, over the years, actively investigated the role digital technology plays in human development, as evidenced by several events (i.e., specialised conferences as well as tracks and workshops as part of mainstream conferences) and articles published in numerous outlets, not to mention the ones published in the *Information Technology for Development* journal since its inception in 1986. The progress ICT4D research has made is undeniable and its contribution to 'make the world a better place' – as Walsham (2001) frames the immense challenge that occupies our community – should be celebrated. Indeed, the Information Systems (IS) field is increasingly paying more attention to ICT4D studies, which have slowly yet steadily moved from the margins to the mainstream. For many years, the *Information Technology for Development* journal was a lonely platform for researchers to understand the implications of digital technology on development. Now, it is not uncommon to read works on digital technology and human development in mainstream IS outlets and even see special issues on topics related to human development – e.g. "Digital technologies and social justice" (*MIS Quarterly*) and "Digital Responsibility: Social, Ethical, and Ecological Implications of IS" (*Journal of the Association for Information Systems*) – just to mention the most recent ones. At this stage, we believe it is pertinent to pause and reflect on ICT4D research achievements by paying special attention to local realities. Ultimately, understanding digitally enabled development requires local interpretations (Unwin, 2009), which can only be achieved by deliberately appreciating the conditions in the field.

Studying ICT4D involves scrutinising the extent and scope of changes a technological artefact produces on development (Zheng, Hatakka, Sahay & Andersson, 2018). Development, understood as the opportunities individuals enjoy for exercising their agency (Sen, 1999), recognises dignity as an attribute inherent to their human condition (Nussbaum, 2011). However, the notion of development can be contentious and subject to political agendas (Escobar, 2012), where dominant actors subtly – and sometimes openly – promote models of development that might be alien to a particular context (Pieterse, 2010). Moreover, technological progress constantly reshapes the meaning of development (Qureshi, 2013).

By leaving behind a technologically deterministic stance, which informed studies in the early days (Sahay, Sein & Urquhart, 2017), contemporary research demonstrates that the developmental processes, which technological artefacts are supposed to instigate, often fail due to the mismatch between the conceptual design and the local actuality, what is known as the 'design-actuality gap' (Heeks, 2002). Technological innovations cannot simply be transplanted from one context to another; digital innovations need to be studied in the social milieu they are deployed (Avgerou, 2008). ICT4D does not happen in a vacuum; contextual conditions matter (Avgerou, 2019; Davison & Martinsons, 2016).

Discerning contextual conditions and careful consideration of theory are conducive to understanding the local meaning of development. Theorising is a social practice, an act informed by the socio-cultural conditions of the time (Horkheimer, 1982). The phenomena that inform ICT4D research directions portray specific ways of valuing and thinking that are typically informed by discourses from 'developed nations', and which often ignore local contexts, culture, and historicity (Ndhlovu, 2017). 'Imported' conceptualisations often fail to account for the different ways of knowing (Connell, 2014), making the simplistic one-to-one translation of categories, paradigms, meanings, and reasonings from one context to another a pointless exercise (Chakrabarty, 2000).

Papers in this Special Section

The studies included in this Special Section scrutinise local social processes in different geographical locations. They offer a nuanced understanding of how contextual conditions shape the unfolding of ICT4D initiatives.

The first paper in this section, entitled "ICT initiatives for vulnerable groups in Brazil: Intended and Unintended Consequences during the Covid-19 Pandemic" is co-authored by Tavares et al. (2024). By applying a theoretically pluralistic, multilevel framework developed for the context of emerging economies (Pozzebon & Diniz, 2012), the authors scrutinise the interplay of government services, private organisations, and citizens in two socially driven ICT initiatives: social protection and public education. The analysis of the data gathered through observation, public sources and a nationwide survey on technology use during the Covid-19 pandemic reveals that public policies are shaped by social groups, negotiation mechanisms and technologies in practice.

The second paper, authored by Brown et al. (2024) is titled "Data collection in the Global South: Practical, methodological, and philosophical considerations". The authors highlight in their work the challenges of adopting Western-focused practices for research and data collection in the Global South. Their analysis showcases that such challenges can be overcome by adopting methodologies that draw and are specifically designed for contextual specificities of the field. By doing so, it is argued that the resulting theories and findings will be specific and sensitive to the uniqueness of the context.

The third paper is authored by de Lemos Collinson and Sahay (2024), and is titled "Introducing digital health information systems in post-conflict Mozambique: A historical perspective". The authors are specifically focused on Health Information Systems (HIS) and their implementation history, to enable the situated understanding of the technology and its institutionalisation. The field of investigation is Mozambique, and the authors unravel the history of implementing a digital platform for public health management in the country. The analysis reveals the institutional processes that shaped the HIS implementation, the contradictions around them, and the institutional pressures influencing decision-making, all of which are contextualised within and moulded by the post-conflict conditions.

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