

The role of ICT in redefining rural communities in Kenya and Italy

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Abstract: My research plans to explore the role of ICT in redefining rural communities in extremely different social and geographical contexts: I intend to compare the contribution of ICT to the development of rural, traditionally agricultural, communities in Kenya to that of ICT-enabled impoverished rural areas of Italy. Despite the obvious geographical and developmental differences, I am interested in exploring the parallel efforts of communities working towards environmentally-viable, inclusive and holistic development, harnessing ICT for the creation of new capabilities, participation opportunities and for the re-qualification of rural spatialities. This research is still in its very early stages, and feedback is welcomed

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ICT4D – challenges and opportunities

The potential for an interconnected, inclusive global society, and the reduction of the divide between societies and regions with very different access to ICT is behind the current boom of the ICT for Development (ICT4D) sector. While access to technology is a fundamental prerequisite, interventions often focus more on technological issues than on local needs or appropriate, practical solutions addressing the underlying social, environmental and gender issues facing target users. This was true at the “beginning” of ICT4D, but it is still very true today. One of the reasons I decided to do research in ICT4D was my dissatisfaction with the repeated, similar failures in implementation of ICT4D initiatives, both at local and international level. Part of the reason is the multidisciplinary aspect of ICT4D, and the difficulty of blending perspectives coming from fields as diverse as computer science, information systems and development studies (Heeks, 2008). Despite a more recent surge of a development study perspective, examples of technologic solutions looking for a problem still abound, due to the still dominant computer science side of ICT4D.

Rather than concentrating on the technological aspects of implementation, or on direct correlations between access and economic growth, my main interest in ICT4D lies at the intersection of communication, community and development.

My experience in the ICT4D sector is primarily that of a practitioner, having worked briefly in a e-government initiative led by the United Nations, and then much more substantially as a researcher for Computer Aid International, a leading international non governmental organisation focused on “bridging the digital divide”, primarily by providing non profit and educational organisations across Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America with access to affordable computers.

Despite the challenges and the clear differences between researching in the context of an NGO environment and within the long-term perspective of a PhD, my experience has been so far very valuable in providing me with evidence about a number of successful bottom-up, community-led ICT4D implementations, focusing on specific local needs and solutions linked to ongoing practices, communication flows and social structures.

Which Development?

In the context of a “developed” country as Italy, I look at the contested role of ICT in what Serge Latouche defines the “degrowth society”, which I interpret as the promotion of a society aware of its ecological limits, focused on human development and social inclusion and participation, and less obsessed with economical growth and consumption. Both in Latouche's work and in recent contributions to the debate on degrowth (Shauer, 2008), technology and ICT are analyzed with suspicion, not only because of a certain aversion of Latouche towards technology as an agent of change, but also because of the increased consumption levels and environmental risks stimulated by the information society. While the same paradigm could at first appear outrageous when applied to a country like Kenya, striving to sustain its GDP growth, it helps in challenging the technological euphoria behind many ICT4D implementations, and in identifying the social factors behind the exploitation of the crosscutting potential of ICT.

In exploring the connections between degrowth and ICT4D, I intend to focus on communication and development, and to analyze the role of ICT in providing a platform for a more inclusive, participatory development, allowing communities in both Italy and Kenya to reclaim leadership in development initiatives happening at their level.

Communities and Communication

The use (and abuse) of the term “community” is nothing new in the development sector. However, the availability of ICT tools and solutions for use in developing countries has contributed to a new wave of attention and emphasis on communities, as the next frontier for social change - for example noticeable in movements such as the Community Informatics and the Community Wireless Networks. A number of questions are still to be answered, for instance about the most appropriate communication and technological solutions in support of community development. Perhaps more importantly, how does the concept of “community” change with the introduction of ICT, and how do new communication technologies (especially mobile-based) and patterns affect community participation, cohesion and identity, when compared to “old” ICTs such as radio and print media?

I have decided to work with communities as diverse as possible, in Kenya and Italy, in order to explore deeper underlying issues of participation and mobilization, and also to reduce the bias of ICT4D researchers (and practitioners alike) too often idealizing the opportunities of a certain new solution, which would not even work “back home”. No matter how outrageous it might sound, marginalized communities in Italy and Kenya face today similar challenges, at least in some respects. The need for new patterns of holistic, inclusive and self-sustaining development, balancing the availability of resources with the desire and aspiration for change is common to both rural Kenya and impoverished, rural Italy. Innovation in communication and information sharing, as well as in the adoption of renewable energy and environmentally-sound agricultural practices are all quickly becoming shared goals among extremely different communities.

By concentrating on agricultural issues, I intend to analyze cooperation and community coordination in terms of agricultural production in Kenya, and the emergence of consumer networks for distribution and ethical consumption as a platform to renew community values and participation within the context of rural Italy.

The research is in its early stages, and I'm currently working on a theoretical framework for my work. I have direct contacts with communities working on organic farming as an empowering tool for community advancement in Kenya, utilizing ICT solutions for enhancing the availability of information to their members. In Italy I am very interested in the development of networks of solidarity economy such as the GAS (gruppi di acquisto solidale – groups acting within a community to come together to buy directly from food producers), but I haven't made a final decision on the kind of community I will be working with.

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