

IKM Working Paper No. 9
Summary

Good planning or benign imposition? Innovation, emergence and risk in developmental research: Learning from ICTD.
Final Report. JBS-IKM-BDDG Workshop 17-18 September 2009

In the field of ICT for development there is a general consensus that technology should be seen as a means to an end, not an end to itself. projects. However, development practitioners find themselves wrestling with a fundamental tension between the funders' need for a 'plan' that predicts both the outcomes and benefits of a new technology in advance, and the growing recognition among those at the grassroots level that such predictions often prove ill-founded in practice and that 'plans' tend to change. A two-day workshop therefore set out to explore the implications of this tension for all development stakeholders - especially development policy-makers, research councils and funders, researchers and research users - and plot the way forward.

Generally speaking, projects in the development sector are planned and managed to identify and deliver predictable, predetermined outcomes. This is the ultimate goal of the projects and their outcomes are usually identified and fixed in stone *before* they get underway. This is rooted in the perception that better plans make the implementation process easier. It is also inextricably tied up with funders' demands to see concrete, tangible results for their own accountability purposes. Both development practitioners and funders are sensitive about the issue of accountability. This stems in part from criticisms levelled at the development sector for wasting money on top-down projects and corrupt regimes. The ability to guarantee quantifiable results for a project in advance is one way of staving off such criticisms. It is also more likely to attract funding.

Succumbing to the managerialist approach

This managerialist approach toward development offers a very seductive illusion of control. It uses reassuring terms such as 'harvesting knowledge' and 'guaranteed outcomes' etc.

In addition to the above, a great deal of energy is put into minimizing the chances of 'unpredicted outcomes' in development projects, which are usually defined as 'project risk'. Here, 'risk' is seen as unwelcome; something that inevitably leads to an 'unsuccessful outcome'.

'Unpredictability' and 'risk' could be positive

The workshop participants take the opposite view. They wish to shake up the current status quo, arguing that 'unpredictability' in a project should be welcomed and embraced. Risk, in this context, could be viewed as a highly positive element in the implementation process; one that could potentially lead to more imaginative, sustainable and appropriate outcomes for a development project than those that were originally conceived. The workshop participants therefore set out to demonstrate how the tension between accountable planning on the one hand, and allowing space for unpredictable outcomes and emerging ideas on the other, could be tackled by focussing on risk. They aimed to reach a working (re)definition of 'risk' and identify some of the more immediate implications of such a definition for the way in which technology for development issues is conceived, funded and assessed.

A wall of 'hopes' and 'laments'

During the proceedings, all of the workshop participants contributed to a 'wall of hopes' and a 'wall of laments'.



Wall of hopes

- 1) More debate within academic circles and the funding agencies about the role of intermediaries in the development process.
- 2) Funding agencies will allow research to take more time so that it can include the cycles of failure and success in a project.
- 3) Senior managers will accept that change is possible.

Wall of laments

- 1) A huge investment is still being made in top-down projects, despite a growing recognition of their limitations.
- 2) Researchers worry more about what is, and what is not, a 'sexy' subject. Consequently, they tend to frame their research question around a subject that is more likely to attract funding. In this way, the research agenda is being decided by the market.
- 3) A lot of discussion about 'ICT for development' relates to 'success stories' which are not properly connected with empirical research. There are also not enough discussions on the links between research and policy.

Research gap

The participants also noted that there is not enough research at the grassroots level and this is an important gap in the literature. There seems to be a 'disconnect' between the policymakers and practice, and ground level contextual details/localization. Emergence at the local level is often not recognized and is disconnected from decision-making power structures. Much research on this topic is high-jacked by 'managerialism' and is influenced by management research. There is a need for more social theory to be incorporated in research on ICT for development. This will allow the research in this domain to expose otherwise normative power relations.

The participants are intent on changing the nature of the academic field concerned with this area. They also accept that not all new ideas and situations are the result of emergence: many are the result of expensive, well-planned campaigns by political or economic interests to make change happen in a certain way. However, emergence or the nature of change in general can never be controlled, even if you explicitly try to do it. Therefore emergence has tremendous value. Recent evidence from India shows that if you allow emergence to happen, if you allow people to take ownership and adapt new technologies, then the outcomes are very different, and because of the rapidity of change there is often no other way.

What is all the research for?

One basic question is 'What is all the research for?' A simple answer is 'to inform policy and practice'. However, it is easier said than done. It is the practice element that is more important because the policy can be written and just ignored. So, how do we develop research which is going to have an impact on practice? A clearer understanding of what evidence is needed and how it can be collected and presented is required here.

The next steps

At the end of the workshop, some concrete actions were suggested for those who want to take the process forward: an e-mail list for sharing ideas; blogs, wikipedia, Facebook and structured online discussions; special issues of journals and mainstream media to share ideas emerging from the workshop; a book about the potential impact of emergent thinking on the practice of development and development research; and a debate on these issues at the next ICTD conference in London, December 2010.

About this IKM Summary

This *IKM Summary* provides an overview of the following *IKM Working Paper*:

Adnan Rafiq and Nazish Rafiq (2010) Good planning or benign imposition? Innovation, emergence and risk in developmental research: Learning from ICTD. Final Report. JBS-IKM-BDDG Workshop 17-18 September 2009. *IKM Working Paper* No. 9, January 2010, 29 pp.

http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/File:Working_Paper_9-CambridgeReport.pdf

This *IKM Summary* is produced by the IKM Emergent Research Programme which aims to improve development practice by promoting change in the way the development sector approaches the selection, management and use of knowledge in the formation and implementation of its policies and programmes. www.ikmemergent.net