ICT4D in China and the Capability Approach: Do They Mix?

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ABSTRACT

For more than a decade, the Chinese government has poured copious resources into rural informatization as a means to increase agricultural productivity and rural economic growth. Such efforts so far have not produced definite results in rural areas, but increasing economic inequality and rising environmental threats have already forced the government to rethink its growth-centered development policy. Indeed, recent government releases clearly state the resolve to departure from the “GDP obsession” of the past. Meanwhile, the past three decades saw the rise of a powerful alternative development approach—the Capability Approach (CA), which focuses on empowering individuals and sees economic growth as one element of well-being. Given that the CA can potentially help devising a more coherent and holistic framework for Information and communications technologies for development (ICT4D), this paper examines the compatibility between the Capability Approach and the top-down socialist approach towards rural informatization in China. Built on two case studies of rural informatization in rural China, the present paper identifies potential obstacles to the adoption of the Capability Approach and discusses policy implications and suggestions.

Keywords: Bureaucratic Culture, Capability Approach, China, ICT4D, Rural Informatization

INTRODUCTION

To close the widening gap between urban and rural China, since 2006 the Chinese Central government has launched a series of high-profile projects aiming at building the “Socialist New Countryside”. One key element among these initiatives is rural informatization, where Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are promoted as means to improve rural productivity and increase rural income. The overwhelming emphasis of these programs on productivity and income clearly reflect the materialist orientation and the development philosophy deeply-rooted in the Chinese socialist ideology of the past thirty years. However, as rising environmental concerns and economic inequality threatens social stability, the Chinese Central Government has signaled a rethinking of its philosophy on development.

Meanwhile, international agencies such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program have increasingly adopted the Capability Approach (CA), a holistic development philosophy developed by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (1987, 1999, 2003). Contrary to the traditional focus on income and economic indicators, the CA sees people’s well-being as ends and advocates empowering rural population by helping them to develop the capabilities

DOI: 10.4018/IJICTHD.2015010104
to live a fulfilling life of their own choice. This drastic difference between the CA and China’s emphasis on income and productivity begs the question: do the different philosophical orientations suggest incompatibility between the vision of the Socialist New Countryside and the CA? Through examining rural informatization projects in rural Guangdong, China, the present study analyzes the project designs and outcomes through the lens of the CA and identifies obstacles to the adoption of the CA in China’s rural informatization efforts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Laying the foundation for the CA analysis, the first part of this Section describes the Capability Approach and the second part reviews recent literature covering China’s rural informatization efforts and outcomes.

The Capability Approach

The Capability Approach and its Strengths

Conventionally, welfare economics measure well-being in terms of either economic indicators (such as wealth and income) or utility (such as happiness or satisfaction). Sen developed the Capability Approach in the 1980’s as his work on development and inequality led him to conclude that these conventional measures of well-being were inadequate and a more holistic evaluation framework was necessary. Since CA was developed to address the inadequacies of conventional measures, it is best to introduce CA by examining the shortcomings of conventional measures and comparing CA with these approaches.

Wealth and income are the mostly commonly used proxies for well-being because they are quantifiable, which facilitates interpretation and comparison. However, these indicators tend to lead to confusion between means and ends: while wealth and income are just means to achieve well-being, people often are blind-sighted and seek them as ends in themselves. In fact, well-being, while generally correlated to wealth and income, also depends on many other factors. For example, in many developing countries the obsession with economic growth has led to environmental threats and increasing inequality, which tend to undermine well-being.

On the other hand, utility-based measures of well-being can also be misleading because they can be affected by structural inequalities. Put differently, those who are deprived often accept the injustice because there is no other way for them to survive with inner peace. However, just because the poor say they are happy with their simple life does not mean such situation is desirable or just.

Focusing on capability avoids the shortcomings of both conventional approaches. By defining capability as “a person’s freedom to choose between different ways of living”, Sen (2003) extends well-being measures beyond monetary terms but factor out structural inequalities. As the core concept of CA, the meaning of capability is worth elaboration. In explaining capability, Sen (2003) defines functioning and capability jointly and compares them:

A functioning is an achievement of a person: what he or she manages to do or to be, and any such function reflects, as it were, a part of the state of that person. The capability of a person is a derived notion. It reflects the various combinations of functionings (doings and beings) he or she can achieve. It takes a certain view of living as a combination of various “doings and beings”. Capability reflects a person’s freedom to choose between different ways of living.” (Sen, 2003, p. 44)

For example, functionings include things ranging from being a lawyer or a political activist to reading three comic books a day. Functionings should cover a wide range of possibilities that people may value, and capability is what allows people to choose among all these possibilities. In this example, literacy is one such capability, so is basic nutrition, among many other things. Obviously, the set of functionings and capabilities can be subjective, and this is a strength as well as a weakness of CA (more on this later).
State Aid Control in the Broadcasting Sector: Has the Right Balance been Struck between Competition and Public Service Broadcasting?
www.igi-global.com/chapter/state-aid-control-broadcasting-sector/64941?camid=4v1a

Differential Impacts of Social Presence on the Behavior Modeling Approach
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