Chapter 1
The Contribution(s) of Modernization Theory to ICT4D Research

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ABSTRACT

Since evolving into an established science in the 1990s, the field of information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D) has seen unprecedented and fast-growing rates of publication, curriculum venues, and development projects around the globe. To this effect, ICT4D literature is informed by a variety of theories (e.g., capability approach, livelihoods, participatory development, etc.). In the process of asserting its body of knowledge, however, ICT4D has tended to dismiss the theory of modernization. For example, under labels such as technology fix, technology transplant, a computer per child, etc., the theory of modernization has been equated with the failures of and threats against development. Consequently, the theory of modernization has lost its value among development practitioners and theorists. This chapter assesses the theory of modernization. There is no such thing as a developed nation without modernization. The chapter derives some points of departure for ICT4D research.

INTRODUCTION

Technology has been the product and conduit of human wellbeing throughout recorded history. In recent decades, ICT4D has seen its body of literature grow at an indescribable speed. From a vast array of disciplines, various theories have been imported and implemented in an attempt to best accommodate the goals, scopes, and benefits of development in our poverty-plagued world. Chief among imported theories are the capability approach, livelihoods, participatory development, and modernization theory (Clark, 2006, 2007; Fuchs, 2013; Heeks, 2006, 2007; 2010a, 2010b, 2014c, 2014d; Heeks and Molla, 2009; Harriss, 2014; Jacobsen, 2015; Kleine, 2009, 2013; Mosse, 2013; Potter, Binns, Smith, & Elliott, 2008; Potter, Conway, Evans, & Lloyd-Evans, 2012; Sandum, 2010; Unwin, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d; Williams, 2014). In the meantime, modernization theory has come to represent the failures of and threats against...
development practice (He, 2012a, 2012b; Marsh, 2014; Peet & Hartwirck, 2015). In the same vein, it is not uncommon that development is viewed as philanthropic and/or rural work comprised of small-scale endeavors, with concepts such as micro-finance, small-scale enterprise, micro-credit, micro-loan, etc. For better or worse, the dominance of statistical (sweeping) generalization has left a significant impact on much of the research into ICT4D and its corollary ICT [Information and Communication Technology] (see May, Dutton, & Munyakazi, 2014, p. 50). This chapter is not claiming to dismiss micro-level data, especially with regard to micro-analysis, rather it is calling into question the ways in which modernization theory has been shunned altogether. For example, there is no such thing as a developed society or nation without modernization. The chapter seeks to map the history of development to best capture the moves or patterns in which modernization theory is seen to be rooted.

Background

Development is a concept hailed from a variety of fronts. A glaring example is with Village Phone, a development project founded by Nobel Prize Muhammad Yunus in Bangladesh in 1981 to provide rural women with micro-credits (Aminuzzaman, 2002; Aminuzzaman, Baldersheim, & Jamil, 2003; Bank for the Poor, 2014; Singhal, Svenkerud, Malaviya, Rogers, & Krishna, 2005; Yunus, 2007). The Bangladesh project has been copied and pasted in developing countries around the world. Despite the buzz about rural micro-credits, Bangladesh remains one of the poorest nations in the world, and its human conditions continue to deteriorate (Legge, 2014). Although not the topic of this chapter, micro-credit has been misrepresented and misdiagnosed as the prescription of development required of all societies. More pertinently, Abraham (2011) warned,

*If I were to make the argument that the use of credit cards [micro-credit] led to … the removal of poverty in the US, that will be a fairly laughable proposition… People overpromised in terms of what micro-finance could do… Often in time, people misdiagnosed survival [in rural areas] as entrepreneurship.*

No country has become developed by the mere distribution of micro-credits. In other words, just like any micro-project, micro-credit cannot replace development nor eradicate poverty. As has been remarked about entrepreneurship, micro-credit is only a fraction of, if not a diversion from, what development entails for modern day societies.

To add to the challenge, no sustainable development has ever occurred without broad-based undertakings to improve people’s living conditions. This does not mean that small-scale enterprises cannot make a difference, but that due to its complex nature, development requires authors to think big. With simplistic and charity-limited views of development, ICT4D authors cannot think big. The main reason might be the deification of information access and usage. Looking at the status of ICT4D projects sponsored by the Canadian IDRC [International Development Research Centre] around the world, Diga (2013a) reminded us,

*However, the key assumption underlying this work [ICT4D] – that the poor could be moved out of poverty simply by providing them with ICT and information access and usage – was a limited one. Just comparing the have and have-nots was not enough to understand the broader development issues of poverty. As work in this field moved forward, the effects of ICTs on the lives of the poor were identified as key issues that were missing and that required the attention of researchers in this area. (p. 127)*