Chapter XVII

Facial Social Risks in IT Development in South Africa–Learning from Scandinavia

Helana Scheepers
University of Pretoria, South Africa

Lars Mathiassen
Aalborg University, Denmark

South Africa is undergoing a number of changes, which has an effect on every aspect of society from the workplace to everyday life. South Africans need to reflect on this situation and determine how to proceed. The purpose of this article is to consider the development and implementation of information technology, one particular problem area, in this broader context. The article draws an analogy between the trade unionist systems development tradition in Scandinavia and the possible application it might have in South Africa. The article describes the situation in South Africa, presents the trade unionist approach to systems development, and describes the underlying principles that have been identified by Scandinavian researchers. It then evaluates these principles from a South African perspective and discusses the possible uses they might have in the South African situation.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa (SA) of today is an emerging society. The emergence of new beliefs and values create both uncertainty and a number of expectations. One of the expectations is for social democracy within a society, which is characterized by heterogeneity, no tradition of social democracy, and a high level of illiteracy.

The expectation for social democracy is described in the SA Bill of Rights (1996): “Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice
and fundamental human rights; improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person.” A further expectation is that of a people-driven process. The SA Reconstruction and Development Program (1994) states: “Regardless of race, or sex, or whether they are rural or urban, rich or poor, the people of South Africa must together shape their own future. … It is about active involvement and growing empowerment” and “Above all, the people affected must participate in decision-making. … It is, rather, an active process enabling everyone to contribute to reconstruction and development.”

One of SA’s biggest challenges is that the society is heterogeneous in a number of ways. Some of these are differences in nationality, race, language groups, and religions, as well as a third and first world dualism. Each group has different expectations, values, beliefs, and ways in which to evaluate situations that lead to a high degree of complexity (Kriel, 1996) and a high level of conflict in social life.

This dualism is reflected in the SA information technology (IT) environment. The spectrum of the IT environment ranges from the highly sophisticated, for example, in the banking environment at the one end, to the opposite extreme of both computer and general illiteracy. The expectation is that further development in the use of IT can contribute to solving SA’s general problems with education, and a great deal of attention is given to this specific topic by government and private organizations. The IT environment in SA is, however, largely influenced by the system rationalist viewpoint of IT in which efficiency plays a major role. The system rationalist viewpoint does not take into consideration situations where a number of different groups with differing viewpoints are involved, and the probability of conflict is high (Kling, 1980).

A further complicating factor is that IT is seen as an important resource in socio-economic development in third world countries (Avegerou & Madon, 1995). This poses a number of opportunities and threats that should be taken into consideration by the developing countries. The difficulties as identified by Avegerou & Madon (1995) are that a number of imperatives are imposed when developing countries participate in the international system; large numbers of individuals and groups are further marginalized; dependence is promoted instead of interdependence; self-determination is neglected; and there is a likely domination by a single culture. To address these difficulties technology should be implemented by delinking the technology from the source and allowing the local context to determine the implementation (Amin, 1990). The question, however, is how this should be done in more practical terms.

The emerging situation in SA and the importance of IT for SA has an effect on the way in which IT systems are developed and adopted. Furthermore, IT can be used as a tool for emancipation in SA. One of the requirements underlying the SA science and technology policy, as identified in the White Paper on Science and Technology (Department of Arts, Culture, Technology and Science, 1996), is by promoting an Information society that serves SA’s needs but does not echo that of other countries. The SA government has thus promoted the importance of IT at governmental level, thereby establishing an important social force for IT development in a developing country (Korpela, 1995).

Although the SA government has identified ethical and policy proposals for IT development, no concrete implementation issues have been identified (Korpela, 1995). SA needs to be proactive in identifying how the community’s information needs should be identified and put into practice. There are a number of research and development traditions within IT that SA could turn to for some inspiration on how to fulfill the expectations outlined above. These traditions should be based on democratic values with a strong social flavor, and they should explicitly include the objective of emancipation. The Scandinavian
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