Chapter IX

Addressing Organisational and Societal Concerns: An Application of Critical Systems Thinking to Information Systems Planning in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

Most current information systems (IS) planning methodologies are focused on achieving ‘successful’ plans, i.e., plans that provide competitive advantage, can be implemented in a given period of time, and that solve the problems of information needs by taking advantage of the latest technologies available. Concerns are technology and business driven and focus on how to get the maximum profit for organisations from investing in information systems. However, this relatively narrow focus can be problematic, especially in developing countries, where the social contexts of IS implementation may require a different primary focus. This chapter presents a methodology for IS planning based on critical systems thinking—an approach that encourages the critical analysis of stakeholder understandings of social contexts prior to
the selection and/or design of planning methods. The methodology presented in this chapter uses a combination of the systems theories of autopoiesis and boundary critique, which deepen our understanding of what it means to reflect on participation, values, and social concerns during IS planning. In the course of applying the methodology in a project in Colombia, an issue arose of the ethics of the practitioner. To address this issue, following completion of the project, we sought to enhance critical systems thinking with Foucault’s notions of power and ethics, which offer interesting alternatives for practitioner self-reflection. Implications for IS planning are derived from this perspective on ethics and power.

INTRODUCTION

In the development of the world-wide information society, information systems (IS) play an essential role: they provide access to opportunities for exchanging information. For nation states, the use of information systems is seen as a condition for survival in a global economy characterised by the management of knowledge as information (Toffler, 1992). For organisations, they provide support for achieving task efficiencies and dramatic reductions in service delivery time and/or costs (Hammer and Champy, 1995). Hence, the process of IS planning becomes important at all levels—international, national, and organisational. Any investment in information systems or technology should be made carefully in order to achieve success in terms of the stated goals of a plan (Andreu et al., 1996). A key aspect in the process of IS planning is the definition of an initiative from a strategic point of view, i.e., considering the possibilities that an information system presents in giving some players advantages over others (Garcia, 1993).

For third world countries, information systems and information technologies have been seen as the means by which they can catch up with the economic development of the first world (Economist, 1996). A new type of society, the information society, can be created to achieve better conditions of life, education, higher employment, and the enhancement of democracy (Information I, 1996; Gore, 1998). However, practical results suggest the need to consider what assumptions are being made when people enter IS planning processes, particularly the relationship that is assumed between information systems and improved quality of life (Friis, 1997; Wickham, 1997).

Most existing IS planning methodologies focus on reformulating corporate strategy with the use of information systems in such a way that competitive advantage is provided for an organisation (Ward et al., 1990; García, 1993; Walsham, 1993; Galvis, 1995, 1998). These methodologies emphasise two aspects:
The Use of Sustainable Business Model Archetypes in the Design of Circular Business Models in the Digital Economy

Digitisation of Youth Work and an Evaluation of Social Media as a Tool in Meeting the Profession's Core Principles in a UK Context