

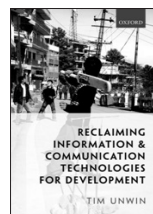
BOOK REVIEW

Reclaiming Information and Communication Technologies for Development

Tim Unwin

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Before examining the specific content of Dr. Tim Unwin's book, this reviewer needs to point out two stylistic devices of his writing, both of which add to the clarity and robustness of his discussion. First, throughout the text Unwin draws on his personal experiences to add to his analytic thinking and to the pronouncements of other experts. He sets these comments off in a different type font to help the reader understand that these observations are drawn from those experiences and are more editorial in nature. For example, in making the point that it is necessary to understand that technologies by themselves cannot contribute effectively to development, he, in italics, says "*I distinctly recall visiting schools in Africa... when all too often there would be a bright new computer... that would be placed in a position of prominence on the head teacher's desk, but because the head teacher had not been trained effectively in its uses, it remained under its dust cover, used rarely if at all*".

The second device is to alert the reader that they will soon encounter some specific points, and which he helpfully numbers. For example, "Three

aspects of this shift from voice to data in the context of mobile technologies are of particular interest...." Then follows: "First... Second.... and Third.... clearly laid out in succeeding sentences or paragraphs. This helps the reader keep on track. It is a useful device that frequently is repeated in the book.

Unwin starts with a sharp indictment about the role of information and communication technology (ICT) in the world, noting that over the last twenty years, rather than reducing poverty, ICTs have actually increased inequality, and they have had a negative effect on development. To achieve the potential of ICTs, stakeholders need to think about changing the ways they think about and implement ICT policies and practices. Unwin explicitly draws on Critical Theory as a rhetorical device that emphasises critiquing and changing the phenomenon in contrast to only understanding or explaining it. Thus he starts out citing an author who refers to the "manic rhetoric of digital utopians", and who decries the failures of many ICT initiatives, arguing that there needs to be a people-centric view of social change if technology is to be used effectively

to deliver on development goals that go beyond economic gains. Rather than be targets of development, the author argues that the marginalised need to be involved in “the conceptualisation design and implementation of projects from the start. “Unwin supports that author’s comments arguing that far too many ICTD initiatives, though perhaps well intended, have been concocted by a university or corporate research and development laboratory that is far from the reality of the lived world of poor and marginalised people (PMP). Unwin further asserts that ICTs *have contributed* to inequality. Besides drawing on other experts, the book reflects Unwin’s interpretations and his own experiences molded over a period of 15 years. These have lead him to the belief that ICTs have been instrumental in creating greater inequality in the 21st century as governments, the private sector and civil society are all tending to use the idea of development to promote their own ICT interests.

However in his first chapter Unwin softens the indictment tone somewhat by suggesting that the book’s insights might lead to helping shape a fairer and more just world through the appropriate application of ICTs to the interests of the PMP. Early in his discussion Unwin asserts that a prevailing and unfortunate view in this century is that development above all should be concerned with economic growth, and this was a major factor in shaping the Sustainable Development Goals. He, however, directs attention to the view that inequality, freedom, and capabilities need to be at the centre of concerns with using information and communication

technologies for development (ICT4D), not economic and political benefits for the influential. Because the PMP are not typically a significant focus of the ICT private sector, governments must play a major role in serving the PMP. Furthermore, Unwin says, it is necessary to go beyond the technology itself to have an impact; we need “to focus primarily on the intended development outcomes rather than the technology”.

Unwin devotes considerable space (Chapter 2) to exploring the characteristics, opportunities, and social complications related to emerging technologies, especially mobile devices. While offering greater services to many, advanced technology mobiles may be out of the affordable reach of poorer people, and thus increase the inequalities that exist for the poor. Unwin further explores the software side of technology noting the importance of Open Educational Resources, which are content and digital resources available largely through the internet and the web. While offering extraordinary learning opportunities across the world through digital connections and at a relatively low cost for some consumers, there are troublesome issues: though they can provide impressive learning resources, OER have an “insidious aspect” of undercutting the viability of local content producers and local content industries. The chapter includes explorations of the next generation of digital technologies including 5G mobile, the Internet of Things, incubators, digital hubs and app development. There is caution in this future. Unwin reiterates his concern that technologies are not neutral innovations; they are developed

with particular interests and intents and that these are more likely for benefit of profit enterprises rather than for PMP. Furthermore, it is the wider social and economic (“structural”) contexts including economic and political power that matter in bringing about development. So we need to recognise that while ICTs can be very effective accelerators of change, it is imperative that unless structural changes are addressed, technology will only increase inequalities. Unwin also reminds us that older technologies such as radio may be more sustainable and they “are still often the most effective way of providing information and entertainment for poor people”. He also reminds us that appropriate and affordable content are key factors in helping PMP gain benefit from the new technologies.

Unwin explores the roles of businesses in the private sector such as Google and Facebook in contributing to information and communication services that will help PMP, but he concludes that, while offering considerable potential, they have primarily benefited those who have access to and can afford connectivity to broadband services that are not affordable to all.

Unwin devotes a chapter to the international policy arena. Here he notes the absence of PMP and women in forums dealing with ICT4D. This results in a void of understanding about the poor. He holds a dim view of policymakers who he believes “generally have a shallow understanding of what poverty is really like”. He contends that governments favour the interests of the private sector rather than those of PMP. Regarding international

attention to ICT4D, Unwin is concerned that the Sustainable Development Goals give less attention to ICT4D than did the expired Millennium Development Goals. The only direct reference is in a target of Goal 9, and he expresses disappointment that ICT4D was not given greater visibility with a goal specifically and exclusively devoted to ICT4D. Unwin observes that “this represents a serious failing of relevant UN agencies and international organisations to raise the profile of ICT4D sufficiently strongly during the SDG lobbying process....” After exploring the involvement of various stakeholders in the digital world, he finds little evidence of participation by poor and marginalised people. In one of his personal notes (in his italics), Unwin reminds us again that “*If ICTs are to be used by poor people truly to transform their lives then they must be involved as key stakeholders*”. A key theme throughout the book is that it is crucially important to employ ICT4Ds with rather than for poor and marginalised people. And it is partnerships including the private sector, civil society, and the public sector using a wide range of skills, inputs and a holistic approach that provide a more promising outcome — but it is a complex challenge.

Another factor in the development dynamics is the issue of regulation which has, Unwin says, favored the telecommunications and private sector without significant concern for poor and marginalised people. This applies particularly to dealing with spectrum issues. Likewise, there is potential in the application of Universal Service Funds to make access to telecommunications

more affordable, but these have yet to fulfill their potential for changing systemic inequalities. Unwin calls for “a fundamental reappraisal of regulatory frameworks to reduce inequalities”. This extends into recognising and containing the negative potential of the “dark side” of the Internet such as its use for illegal drugs and pornography, and the “insidious all-pervasive domination of human life by machines”.

Unwin notes that the communication technologies do not have some kind of power of their own. It is people who control and drive them, and that it is imperative that there be global discussion and debate in the international arena about the moral dimensions of these technologies. The issues go beyond connectivity. Using the World Economic Forum 2016 as a reference, he identifies four main areas where action is required: “extending infrastructure, making access more affordable, increasing the skills and awareness necessary for people to use the Internet effectively, and developing locally relevant content so that people can clearly see benefits from its use”. Underlying much of Unwin’s answer to the challenge of ICT4D is the argument that the problem lies not in the technologies themselves but more with the attitudes and approaches adopted by all those engaged in trying to serve the interests of the poor and marginalised. Their focus needs to be more on the

building of partnerships across all actors — government, civil and private — with a fundamental reorientation of action and research toward PMP’s empowerment rather than on economic growth. It is a matter of shifting from top-down to bottom-up.

In this book Unwin has addressed a wide range of issues and entities that affect the potential of poor and marginalised populations becoming partners in using digital technologies to alleviate poverty and provide opportunities for a better life. He builds a strong case standing atop 21 pages of expert references and published resources. It is a volume that should guide and inspire leadership and reorientation across many bodies. This reviewer would add to this great contribution by suggesting that universities could play a significant partnership role in helping the poor and marginalised become lively actors and stakeholders in ICT4D initiatives. Building communication for development into students’ curricula and fostering their engagement in partnerships with communities outside the university campus could be a promising step toward meeting the empowerment challenges that Unwin discusses in this valuable book.

R.D.C.