

Thinking about the limitations of open development interventions

On 16 December 2010, Anita Gurumurthy took part in the panel organised by IDRC on 'Open Development' at the ICTD 2010 Conference (London, 13-16 December 2010). In her presentation, she argued for how openness would be meaningless unless there were enabling policies both at local and global levels and the open technology architecture was not merely globally present, but also locally meaningful.

What are some of the limitations and problems when thinking about open development interventions? The most serious risk in open development interventions is that they can end up with both an ethical and logical deficit.

Let us look at ethics first.

I am going to quickly tell you the story of ICTD.

In the good old days – which, in information society terms, means the dark ages before the world was 'googlised' and social change could be tweeted – there were ICTD initiatives of various shades and colours. Most of us will recall the small, local e-initiatives, many of them funded by those who were trying to capture local development for their business interests. This old world, as much as it was local and grounded, was closed. We pretty much never bothered about the technological models we used, neither did we think too much about participatory methods. ICTD was technology- and architecture-agnostic. These were the days of descend, more or less 'do it-screw it'.

We did wake up soon and mustered up enough gumption to talk about the big guys whose healthy distaste for openness meant monopolies, oligopolies and a new age imperialism in knowledge and economics. We knew we had to hurry to claim this huge promise of the global commons, of global and open systems, in which we were told we could co-create, co-produce and even co-habit virtually. However, the brave experiments of wikipedia and of the early open science initiatives were not touching real lives on the edges of the network: we did know something was not quite right about the big-bold and the beautiful.

But before we could frame our response, the revolution came and swept us off our feet. Your face and mine were in it. Never mind there were no books, we were finally freed from the tyranny of the big corporates. We were going into a mobility-machine pun, a new kind of space machine which would allow us to keep one foot in the global and take a space trip through the local – sorry, the hyper-local –, enabling us to find and build communities of choice across space.

However, as in all great romantic stories – where there is always someone waiting to spoil the party –, social media theorists – those we only talk about in hushed whispers (the leftist kind) – soon began to tell us that this big, social media space was nothing more than a big shopping mall. Your community life was not as cosy as you thought, neither was it as potentially subversive as you may have imagined. Then, in our space suits, a bit disillusioned and very shaken, we arrived straight into the management building of the Royal Holloway, at 9 am for the IDRC session.

I will stop the story here. What I really want to say is that, in our analysis of the open, we need ethical-theoretical frameworks.

How do we separate crowds and noise from communities and voice? Let us look at one such theoretical model.

There are two axis: one is the technology paradigm, open and closed. The other one is the network paradigm – global/network nodes/centres and local/network edges/peripheries. They give us a grid with 4 quadrants:

1. the closed and global: the corporatist model,
2. the closed and local: the first generation ICTD experiments which introduced local communities to the big corporates (or was it the other way around: those which gave entry for the big corporates to local markets?),
3. the open and global: the wikipedia, cyber art and music, and
4. the often forgotten open and local, which we still need to create and work on.

Without anchoring this in ethics, you are not going to get open development, at best an open society – free, open, global, but also non-territorialised, homogenising and exclusionary, despite all our rhetoric on localisation and inclusion.

Accountability will seriously lack if donors take up openness without looking at the question of locality, human rights and re-territorialisation of development in the network society. And by no means would this mean going back to reject the virtual: it would mean claiming a new idea of the human.

The logical deficit part is complicated, as all logic usually is. In our global, technology-mediated world, the global is always and inextricably embedded in the local, and the local is never a passive object of the global; it is an active agent of change, which shapes the global.

What has this got to do with open development? We want to talk about open research, open learning, open governance, open entrepreneurship, etc. but none of these domains is exclusively local. All are as much global as local. For instance, education is both a global industry as much as a local capability.

Our vision here, in its logic, seems to me to push openness in the direction of global, macro solutions to development, e.g. creating global and macro open data systems, rather than human-mediated local and situated citizen action around local data in the name of the tyranny of the bounded local where corrupt, local officials won't share data.

We are willing to talk about creating virtual spaces for openness and talk about how national policies and governments can take greater initiatives for open data. However, we seem to be strangely silent and (perhaps therefore) irresponsible about what may be for us a pet dog, but is an elephant in the room for those who live with us in this shared virtual-reality and real-virtuality. These spaces are the real spaces in which global tyranny operates through negotiations on development and technology – whether in learning, enterprise, governance, or science – without working on global institutional arrangements.

I would certainly like IDRC to take up thinking on this seriously, because otherwise, this logical deficit can lead to a serious accountability deficit, and we may end up having a certain skew in resource allocations to local development solutions. It is essential to do more than merely intervening for local and national institutional frameworks. We need to work to create a new field to enable the global institutional arrangements to appropriately nurture openness at the local levels. We need both open global and open local; and for this, we need both global and local governance – one without the other would simply be meaningless. The solution therefore to both the ethical and logical risks of open development interventions is the idea of the public: the global public and the local public. At IT for Change, we prefer to use the concept of public over the notion of open. Mere openness can simply supersede the public: what we want is a politically informed and active openness, a reinvented, digitally-commensurate public – not just a state-controlled public.

What is the moral of the story (or my elevator pitch)?

Ethically speaking, you cannot only intervene in the creation of a macro-global transnational open technological architecture. You also need to make a locally meaningful and nurturing techno-social development architecture. Logically therefore, if you want openness to be meaningful to

development, you absolutely need to work at both the local and global levels of architecture of technology and development – however slippery and hard it may be.