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REFLECTION

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Some 20 years after its foundation in 1996, the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), definitively closed. Over the years, IICD proved that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can accelerate socio-economic development and that a methodology based on principles such as multi-stakeholder engagement, demand-driven approach and local ownership, is key to integrate and sustain ICT-enabled activities. IICD investments in enabling individuals, organisations and networks to adequately serve the ICT needs of local stakeholders resulted in conducive environments with experienced partners well suited to offer cost-effective and locally relevant ICT-enabled solutions. Based on the experience of the former Managing Director, this story explores the impact of the organization, some five years after its closure. It also expresses her opinions and shares ideas related to the importance of knowledge sharing for preparedness in a post-pandemic world.

Introduction

The International Institute for Cooperation and Development (IICD) was founded in 1996 with the support of the former Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation, Jan Pronk, a visionary who anticipated the importance of the Digital Revolution for low- and middle-income countries. When I met him at IICD in early 2013, he told me that IICD might very well be the last piece of heritage still left from his development cooperation policy. He was convinced that communication and collaboration were paramount to spur development. Sadly, in 2016, some 20 years after its foundation, IICD officially closed down.

Over the years, IICD has indisputably proven that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can accelerate socio-economic development. In addition, however, a methodology based on the principles of multi-stakeholder engagement, demand-driven approach and local ownership, has shown to be key in integrating and sustaining ICT-enabled activities in low- and middle-income countries. IICD's investment in individuals,

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organisations, networks and communities of practices resulted in conducive environments with experienced partners well-suited to offer cost-effective and locally relevant ICT-enabled solutions. In short, IICD made possible that the ICT needs of different local stakeholders such as farmer organisations or teachers were adequately served.

IICD-next

In 2014, IICD prepared itself to become more independent from grants. IICD would transform into IICD-next, a not for profit, not for loss social enterprise made up of similar-minded organisations from the South and the North dealing with ICT4Development (ICT4D). It was premeditated that IICD-next would foster the self-reliance of local partners, making IICD as such, obsolete on the long term. IICD-next embodied an innovative approach to reach scale and create impact by supporting the local digital ecosystem, in particular by filling the gap of the so-called missing middle. In many low- and middle-income countries, there is a wide gap between large international corporations offering ICT services and products (for example, IBM and Accenture) and local ICT-skilled individuals. Often, large corporations and national governments outsource their IT challenges to large ICT companies, while small companies design robust solutions at a low cost for institutions that cannot pay for the services offered by the large IT companies or want a tailor-made solution. Though many of these small local companies have very good ICT skills, they often lack experience working on larger scale projects nor do they possess the credibility of larger corporations. In order to improve the situation for smaller ICT companies and local ICT-skilled individuals, IICD-next aimed to address the missing middle issue. Especially, around 2014, many donors started promoting entrepreneurship for youth, organising hackathons and giving small funding to support individuals. Although all of these examples were well-meant and useful, they did not tackle the fundamental issue of the lacking middle segment that is very much needed for scaling.

At IICD, we learned that to reach impact with local people, it was better to focus and support the growth of the 'missing middle'. Based on IICD's focus on people-centred capacity development in the use of ICTs, the IICD-next network would have applied IICD's ICT-led social innovation approach to co-create and co-deliver smart combinations of proven ICT solutions (products and services) and to favour scaling-up. The proposed solutions would have been developed together with the local partners and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), based on an in-depth analysis and understanding of the needs of the client and the specific local environment. Furthermore, relying on its large international network of partners from the private, public and non-profit sector, IICD's social enterprise would have prioritised investments in cross sector collaborations to stimulate growth of local markets in low- and middle-income countries.

IICD-next would have pursued programme development opportunities in collaboration with local partner networks and regional brokers by seizing on their particular capabilities,

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specialisations, networks and markets. By ensuring responsible and sustainable use of the technologies, through skills training, coaching and mentoring services, the ICT investments would have been better capitalised. These services would have been focused on e-readiness, use of robust and local relevant solutions and change management. All combined, these approaches would have supported a stronger middle segment (SMEs) and favoured sustainable changes.

As a consequence of the 2015 European 'refugee crisis' (during which close to one million people came to Europe fleeing war and persecution in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq) a quick shift in policy priorities from the Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation took place. Unfortunately for IICD, this led to a decision to reallocate funds that were not already committed. The implementation of IICD's transformation which would have taken place in 2016, could no longer take place. As such, the IICD Board of Trustees decided to close down the organisation, not because its work became irrelevant or had deteriorated but simply because without the financial support from the Dutch government, IICD had insufficient funding for a smooth transition. Ironically, three years later, in 2019, the very same Dutch Ministry for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (BHOS) launched its digital agenda for Trade and Development Cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019), in which they shared digital opportunities for global prospects and stated their importance for low- and middle-income countries. Unfortunately, a lot of knowledge that might have been very useful for the design and implementation of the Dutch Digital Agenda, was lost during the unexpected fast closing down process of IICD. Some people even spoke of an incredible 'knowledge destruction'. From this experience we learned (albeit the hard way) that good (political) timing and secured funds are imperative to remain a front-runner and innovator in the development field, as long as the environment is not enabled enough.

The IICD legacy

That said, good ideas never die. Many of IICD's local partners of whom most never depended on IICD funding, are still around, grow their businesses and surf the digital wave. And, multiple former IICD staff members are still operative in the development sector, where they bring the IICD spirit and way of working to other organisations and promote and support wise ICT4D approach. Maybe one could say that IICD bears resemblance to a phoenix, the mythological bird known to be reborn from its ashes after death? That is to say, the end of IICD had also a very positive impact. It enabled the accelerated spread of the IICD-approach and it ended up sowing seeds of digital interests in many other organisations in particular throughout the Netherlands.

Many documents produced by IICD and based on project experiences were gathered on the IICD legacy website at www.iicd.org. Multiple other IICD records proved to be a source of inspiration for many, such as the article with recommendations on ICT for a greener economy to the Dutch Platform Rio 20+ (IICD, 2011). Of course, IICD was not the only organisation working in the ICT4D field (but one of the oldest ones) and several other actors joined forces

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and together worked to produce, for instance, the Principles for Digital Development (undated). Many of them were already applied by IICD and described in 2014 in a peer-reviewed chapter presenting the major challenges, commonly faced in implementing ICT4D projects (Figuères et al, 2014).

Another of IICD's realisations was developing capacities, specific skills and competences that are needed when working with ICT in the development sector. For example, Data4Development (D4D) as part of ICT4D, was and is much more than monitoring and evaluating projects in order to report and be accountable. In the same way that one needs a gender expert or a capacity development specialist, data and ICT4D experts are needed to make the role and importance of data in (development) work not only understandable but more effective and efficient. However, as many specialists felt isolated in their own organisation, where they often were the only person involved in data and digitalisation activities, it became clear that the creation and maintenance of the community of practices was very important for these experts and their work.

This brings us to one of IICD's strengths: its determined knowledge sharing approach. IICD persistently supported and enabled its networks and community of practices, also when other organisations and institutions refrained from doing so. For many donors 'impact' and 'sustainability' are decisive features when allocating funds. Unfortunately, it is often complicated to show the impact of such networks and communities of practices. They are intangible and even today frequently donors still prefer to fund assets (visible results on the short term: fast track development to fix an issue) than to support knowledge development processes also known as slow track development (investment in people who will address and solve issues on the long term).

Supporting processes and professional communities, as opposed to prioritising short term outputs and checklists, means taking bigger risks and having the capacity to continuously adapt by monitoring processes, since outcome and impact cannot always be made fully clear from the start. However, IICD's approach allowed networks and community of practices to be creative in their work, to develop activities based on the real needs of their members and adapt depending on feed-back loops, using the knowledge and experiences of networks and communities of Practices.

Where do we stand now?

Luckily, the networks and community of practices initially spurred and supported by IICD and partners to facilitate knowledge exchange proved to be more resilient than anticipated and allowed for a certain continuation after IICD discontinuation. Once part of the community of practices people continued to share knowledge and experiences. Today, numerous reports and policies recognise the importance of digitalisation and data and ICT for

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the development and humanitarian sectors. As an example, in his recent data strategy, the UN Secretary-General stated that:

> …a better use of data - combined with approaches founded in UN values and human rights - are integral to our future and service. (…) Starkly and powerfully, the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates how critical data use, with a human face, is to protecting lives & livelihoods. (UN, 2020: 2)

Additionally, ICT-led start-ups are mushrooming with many (private and public) funds dedicated to entrepreneurship development, and they make use of the creativity of young people all around the world. The number of SMEs in the 'missing middle' niche is also growing, but they should be supported even more. They can provide services to the big companies (sub-contractors) and give work to a much larger group of individuals that are not entrepreneurs themselves. As such, the potential for sustainable job creation and for impact at scale is higher.

Implications of the pandemic

One can see that during the last years a transition starting to take place, away from developing fancy ICT-based apps and solutions, and towards a more general understanding of the power of ICT and data and need to work at a much larger scale. Today, data is increasingly understood as a strategic asset for development, if and when accessible. But data without knowledge and experience to understand and assess its value does not mean much for development. The importance of human knowledge and experience to give meaning is paramount. One of the things we learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that the Global North was not prepared for the unexpected. The 'Global Risks Report' (World Economic Forum 2020), published mid-January 2020, indicated that infectious diseases only ranked 10th in the top ten risks in terms of impact. In the top ten risks in terms of likelihood it was not even mentioned. Two months later perspectives changed completely. From the COVID-19 crisis we learned (if needed) the same lessons as the lessons we should have learned from the climate crisis: our actions have undesired and unexpected consequences that are often out of our control. And we are not living in a world under control.

But one main difference between both crises is that the effects of the pandemic are also felt by people in the Global North. As a result, many people are now preparing for the unexpected by recentralising science, data, information and knowledge at the heart of our decision-making process. To fight the pandemic, most countries have transitioned to basing their political decisions on the latest available scientific knowledge with the aim of saving human lives and economies. As it has become clear from fighting COVID-19, actively learning on the go from day-to-day practice and experience is paramount to booking success. Reliable data, knowledge sharing, collaborating and communicating turn out to be crucial skills for making effective decisions in times of crisis.

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Disturbingly something else became also visible during the pandemic: disinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories can develop and spread very fast, confusing people's sense of reality. We know that often people are not taking decisions based on data, facts and evidence. Human beings are making choices based on emotions, whether they are informed by knowledge gained from data, facts and correct information or not. Trust and sense of belonging are fundamental for the well-being of humans. Therefore, IICD has always intended to create an atmosphere of openness where exchange and knowledge sharing amongst local partners, shareholders and employers went hand in hand with a feeling of belonging and interpersonal trust. This is another reason why it is so important for communities of practices to decide on a code of conduct or a set of values for its participants to abide by and avoid unacceptable behaviour. It also prevents a community of practices to slide down to and potentially become a conspiracy group. As rightly stated by the USA's former President in his farewell address (Obama 2017), digital bubbles can be dangerous for human development:

> We retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighbourhoods, or on college campuses, or places of worship, or especially our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. In the rise of naked partisanship and increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste, all this makes this great sorting seem natural, even inevitable. And increasingly we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it's true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there.

So, what will be the 'new normal' in a post-pandemic world? How can we be prepared for the unexpected in a world where we cannot always trust data, facts, information and knowledge? And, as learning capacities to adapt are at the heart of preparedness, how can we get insights and develop wisdom if we are not even sure from what data, facts and information to learn? What groups, networks or communities can we create where trust and belonging enable us to act in an increasingly uncertain and precarious world? In the past there were many institutions, such as the family, the school, the factory and the church enabling the building of trust and belonging. And although there certainly are many such institutions left in place, their influence, in at least high-income countries, is decaying. Since trust is built on knowing the people you share space with, a place, especially in an educational context, is defined by its community's shared values in which communication and tone are paramount. The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that a sense of belonging can be quickly created and does not have to be in the physical world. It can also be a virtual place.

Conclusions

This is why, in my view, purpose-based networks and community of practices are so relevant for the future. They combine the sense of belonging and trust of the participants to the process of learning and sharing. Furthermore, they are constituted of people that are rooted in

daily evidence-based practices, allowing us to continuously do a reality check of the facts and information on the ground. It is about people we trust and about places where clear and respectful communication foster collaboration. A community of practices breads a culture of learning, mutual accountability and shared responsibility. The role of the 'mother organisation' in supporting the community of practices is therefore to eventually make herself obsolete on the long term. IICD aimed at nurturing the community of practices until the latter became self-sufficient and as long it serves the purpose. To that end and in order to survive, communication and collaboration have always been essential. But it takes time.

In the digital environment of a post-pandemic word, new communities of practices will spring of institutions and/or (informal) interest groups and will help us to be better prepared for unexpected change. We have to support them and prevent bubbles of comfort taking over. And, we have to sustain places where knowledge can be shared, beliefs can be challenged and where people can grow in a safe environment. I truly believe that (informal) communities of practices will complement the traditional institutions and offer us additional possibilities to better communicate and collaborate in a fast-changing world, full of unexpected events.

About the author

Caroline Figueres received an MSc. degree from the French National School of Engineering for Water and Environment (ENGEES) in 1985. She has a broad range of experience of working in Europe and developing countries, particularly in Africa and Asia. Caroline worked for French and Dutch consulting companies in the water and environment sectors, starting the French branch office of a Dutch consulting company in France (IWACO-France part of Royal Haskoning Group). While working at the UNESCO-IHE Water Education Institute in the Hague, she gained a high level of expertise and experience with knowledge and research institutions, training, education, capacity building and learning. In January 2008, Caroline was appointed Managing Director of IICD, a not-for-profit organisation specialising in empowering organisations to develop and implement ICT solutions relevant to their needs. Email: cfiguereswork@gmail.com

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