Sustainability and the Future of eDevelopment

There are frequent concerns about the sustainability of e-development projects: those using ICTs for socio-economic development. Put simply, a sustainable e-development project is one that endures; continues on without stopping.

Sustainability is not the same as success. To understand that, we must see that success for an e-development project means "most stakeholder groups attain their major goals and do not experience significant undesirable outcomes"[i] It is quite possible, then, for a project to sustain without delivering goals for most stakeholders; i.e. without being successful.

But sustainability is still important because unsustainability is a form of failure. So sustainability is not synonymous with success, but it is necessary for success. Only sustainable ICT projects can support long-term socio-economic development. And sustainability is a particular issue for developing countries given what is often a strong initial reliance on external support; support that will not last for ever and which can undermine sustainability when withdrawn.

So, what makes an e-development project sustainable? Three things:
- *Capacity*: the project must match the available resources on an ongoing basis; these include money, skills, data and technology. This makes a project usable.
- *Utility*: the project must keep meeting the needs of at least some stakeholders; it must continue to be useful to someone. This makes a project used.
- *Embedding*: for long-term sustainability, the project must be "institutionalised" – embedded in the rules and norms, culture and values of its setting. This makes a project used as a matter of routine.

Of the three, utility is perhaps the centrepiece. If some key local stakeholders continue to find the project useful, they are likely to facilitate the capacities, and support the embedding. And finding it useful isn't necessarily about the information or services it provides. Utility could come from income generated, or political goodwill created, or modern image sustained, and so on.

Two other processes should be highlighted.

First, "adaptation". Sustainability is about fit: matching project design and local capacities; matching project design and local needs; matching project design and local institutions/values. Creating that fit will typically require a process of adaptation: changing the design and/or changing local realities. Sustainable projects often think in advance about the how, who, when and what of adaptation.

Second, and related, "appropriation". If local stakeholders can appropriate the e-development project – take ownership of it and undertake their own adaptations – there is a greater chance of that project enduring. Sustainable projects often think in advance about the how, who, when and what of local appropriation.

One final jargon for you – "externalities" – the longer-term, broader, often subtle impacts of a project. Here we see two sides of an argument:
- One theme of this and other eDevelopment Briefings has been to downplay externalities: to argue that use of ICTs in development should be more attuned to markets, demand, and immediately expressed wants; for that's the way to short-term success.
- The counter-argument is that short-termism delivers only incremental gains which might, in any case, be left to the private sector to provide: instead we need a long-term vision of ICT's externalities and transformative impact. Short-term sustainability challenges are not a reason to give up on this long-term vision.

A key question, then, emerging from this argument: if your e-development strategy or project is currently an ugly duckling, how can we determine now whether it will grow up to be a beautiful swan, or a lame duck? If a project is currently unsustainable, how do we know if we should:
a) keep supporting it because it will ultimately deliver significant development gains? or
b) abandon it because its unsustainability is a signal that it is a wasteful and inappropriate investment?

There's no simple answer here, and the outcome will not simply be determined by rational evidence. To adapt Alan Bennett: "eDevelopment debate is not a discussion of facts or figures; it's a performance." It may be the best performers not the best evidence, then, which determine e-development's future direction.

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[i] Heeks, R.B. (2002) *Failure, Success and Improvisation of Information Systems Projects in Developing Countries*, IDPM Development Informatics Working Paper no.11, University of Manchester, UK http://www.manchester.ac.uk/idpm/dig