

Book Review

Seeking a New Link Between ICTs and Human Development

Manuel Castells & Pekka Himanen (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing Development in the Global Information Age*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014, 384 pp., \$45.00 (hardcover).

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This book sums up its core ideas thus: We live in an information age built on an ICT-based revolution in information and communication with networked organizations and global interdependencies. That information age is changing the means by which development happens to “informationalism” or “informational development.” This requires a redefinition of development in which dignity is the central goal. The means of informationalism and the goal of dignity can have a two-way synergistic relationship, which can be either enabled or undermined by social and institutional factors.

Reconceptualizing Development in the Global Information Age presents these ideas via a sandwich structure: a top and tail of three summative chapters with a filling of seven case study chapters from various contributors. Those case study chapters are intended as empirical tests from several national settings of the “hypothesis” that informational development (means) and human development (goal) can be mutually reinforcing. But that doesn’t look like much of a hypothesis. How, for example, would you falsify it, given that the authors allow for the mutual relationship to be undermined by institutional factors? For example, if ICTs lead to development benefits; hypothesis proved. If ICTs don’t lead to development benefits, that’s because of institutional factors; hypothesis still proved. This is not a view that allows ICTs and informationalism any direct negative associations. The rare acknowledgment of evidence on this—for example, in relation to ICTs and learning—is quickly swatted away. And don’t expect to read here about the cyber ills of the world: online pornography, online gambling, cybercrime, cyberterrorism, digital monopolies, etc.



Informationalism and “Dignity as Development”

Regardless of how it is worded, the central novelty of the book lies in the connection between the new means and new goal of development. Of themselves, these are not particularly new. The idea of informationalism has been built over many years of work—particularly by Manuel Castells—to outline a new paradigm of economic and, to a lesser degree, political and social activity.

Likewise, despite the new “dignity” label, the guts of ideas about development presented here are well-trodden and strongly influenced by Amartya Sen and the related stream of work on human development. Thus, the chapter “Rethinking Human Development” seems to think rather than rethink it. At times there are glimpses of how this might be more than a restatement of Sen’s capabilities ideas: as an integration of rights-based approaches to development that links the universality of rights with the subjectivity of capabilities-centered development; as a means of addressing the new forces that impinge on capabilities and functionings as a result of global informationalism; as a struggle between foundational models of organizing and identity.

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Unfortunately, none of these is successfully pursued, although they do offer promising directions for future pursuit.

The final chapter, "Dignity as Development," has another go at saying something new about development. This is much clearer than its predecessor and is blessed with a practical Dignity Index that draws together indicators taken from other sources such as World Development Reports and Human Development Reports. But this still has shortcomings. First, around dignity. Dignity is the central new contribution this book claims to make to our understanding of development: It's right there on the book jacket recommendation, "This book will definitely make Dignity the most creative and respected word in the twenty-first century's vocabulary."

Yet the explanation of the term (after multiple false starts in the previous chapter) seems to boil down to this: "Dignity means the worthiness of every human being" (p. 293). And that's basically all you get. No arguments or analysis to back this up. Just an assertion that it's the foundation of development values and ethics, and then a jump to implications that are not directly dignity-related. For example, the reminders that freedom is both a responsibility as well as a right and that we need a Universal Declaration of Human Duties to complement that on Human Rights. Or the claim that dignity is multicultural, based on a series of quotes, not one of which mentions dignity. Or, the argument that happiness is too narrow a measure of development. So there could be the basis here for something deep and original in our understanding of development but, as yet, the case is unproven.

Tellingly, Castells and Himanen's volume appears to rely on a single source from the literature on dignity; a book—missing from the reference list—by Michael Rosen that is cited only once and related only to the etymological and other histories of the word. Of the literature on dignity I know nothing, but even I can use Google Scholar sufficiently to see there are many philosophical contributions on the topic, none of which has been used here.

The second shortcoming is the lack of enough tangible links between development-as-dignity and ICTs/informationalism. If this book is intended to be anything, it should be an argument about how and why our understanding of development needs to change as a result of the emerging information revolution. It's clear that: "The challenges of global change require an intellectual renewal able to associate human development with informational innovation and . . . with the needs of the network society theory" (p. 269). But informationalism takes a back seat in discussing dignity as development to the extent the few mentions of it could easily be removed. So again we are left with the notion of a promising but unfinished project.

Linking Informational Development and Human Development

To be fair in terms of novelty, informationalism could well be new to readers from development studies (though I fear too few of them will read this book, and those who do will learn relatively little about it), and Sen's ideas on development will be new to most readers from Internet/ICT studies (though not to many of us who work at the intersection of these two—the subdiscipline of development informatics—where analysis of ICTs through a capabilities lens has been the focus of articles and books for some years). But the core novelty of the book rests on the interrelation between informationalism as the means of development and human development as its goal. The authors thus assert, "the central question in development policy nowadays, in all contexts, is the relationship between informational development and human wellbeing" (p. 13).

You might struggle to convince most development policy makers or development studies academics of that, but the first chapter provides brief support for this claim. For example, that informational modes of production must be spread right down to the base of the pyramid; that the benefits of the new economy must be redistributed rather than just captured by informational elites; that the full power of digital technologies must be turned to the problems of environmental sustainability. At the least, these are positive messages that ICT4D practitioners and development informatics researchers can deploy: that what we do sits at the center of the future of development.

The wider strength of—and evidence for—these messages could certainly be a whole lot more solid. This rests largely on the case study chapters, which, as with most edited books, are something of a mixed bag, although their diverse geographical origins are a positive reflection of the fact that development is a global phenomenon: that every country in the world is "developing."

The messages of the case studies are—too briefly—outlined in the first and last chapters; that you can't have effective, sustainable models of informational capitalism without committing to invest heavily in human development (education particularly) and that the connection between these two depends on the nature of political and cultural institutions.

This is clearest in the case of South Africa, where an elitist political economy combined with a lack of collective identity and purpose lead the virtuous circle of informational means and development goals to exist only for a small elite and not for the majority. The chapter on China directly addresses the virtuous circle, but argues that a growing culture of mistrust arising both online and offline creates a rupture between informational and political/human development, so that China's impressive growth in ICT usage and information industries has not been matched by changes in political autonomy. In particular, the growth of online fraud and deception and declining trust in Internet-based information present an uneasy vision of what might be our global future online.

The message is less clear in cases like Silicon Valley and Finland and Costa Rica and Chile where we are, roughly, asked to ignore the surface data of success to accept there is a negative politico-cultural undertow that will drag them down sooner or later if not addressed. For the two Latin American chapters, the informational components of all this felt forced—like a slight and shoehorned addition to justify their fit with the book's title. In the Finland chapter, the main focus—an interesting argument that the welfare state needs reworking into a "wellbeing society"—makes little or no connection to ICTs and informationalism. And we get only an occasional glimpse of the implications of informationalism. One example is AnnaLee Saxenian's claim that the new era demands a new skillset since "successful innovation requires [a] recombination of changing capacities, rather than mastery of any fixed capacities" (p. 36). But readers are then left to themselves to work out what the policy implications of this might be, implications that would require looking beyond the old strategies for development of human and fixed capital.

This reflects a broader issue that in most chapters, any messages that emerge—particularly those of relevance to digital development—are largely the result of the reader's own do-it-yourself analysis: The book lacks and needs a clear, strong chapter that synthesizes the case study experiences on the basis of its core thesis, and deepens them via—for example—analysis through a political economy or institutional theory lens.

Seeking a Conceptual Framework

Finally, what about operationalizing these ideas, particularly for development informatics researchers seeking a conceptualization? The book claims that it has presented a "social science theoretical framework" in Chapter 1. If that's so, I must have missed it. The first chapter offers a whole series of triads that could form the basis of a framework—economic, human, institutional (p. 10); economic, social, political (pp. 14–16); economy, wellbeing, sustainability (p. 18)—before we are told, "For any given society, the critical matter would be how to integrate the three dimensions: informational, human/collective, and human/personal" (p. 20). In other words, there is no consistent or recognizable framework from this content.

One reason ideas proliferate without being tied down is the allergy to their graphical representation, an allergy that reaches a low point in justifying the case study selection via a two-page textual description of a two-dimension space, when a diagram should so obviously have been used (Table 1 took me two minutes to create, and the authors are welcome to borrow it if the book goes to reprint).

Table 1. Sample Contextual Framework.

		Level of Informational Development		
		<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
Level of orientation to human development	<i>Low</i>	South Africa	China	Silicon Valley
	<i>Medium</i>		Chile	Europe
	<i>High</i>		Costa Rica	Finland

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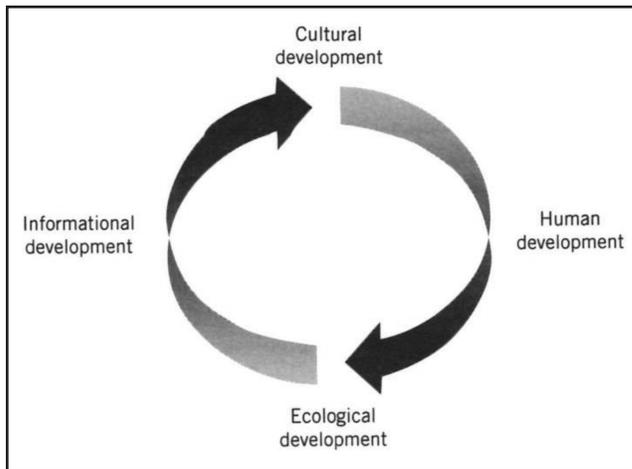


Figure 1. Model of development in the information age.

There are some clearer frameworks in the final chapter, some of which form the basis for the Dignity Index, but they are simple. For example, the “model of development in the information age” is shown above in Figure 1. It gives a useful summary and overview, but could not form the basis for any academic research without significantly greater depth.

All of this is a pity. A strong cast of intellect has been gathered in this book, and the case studies are sometimes insightful and interesting. The challenge the book sets is valid and pressing: the need for a new understanding of development as both Global North and South are increasingly inducted into digital models of economics, politics, culture, etc. And it is exciting and stimulating in presenting a broad canvas of ideas. But what it

produces—an argument about dignity and human development and an argument about the connection between informationalism and human development—is, as yet, a work in progress.

Those wishing to fully understand how ICTs relate to human development and those looking for an operationalizable framework to connect the two will have to await further outputs from these authors. Or, better still, look elsewhere—for example at Dorothea Kleine’s book *Technologies of Choice?* (MIT Press, 2013), which presents a much clearer explanation of Sen’s ideas, modifies those ideas specifically with ICTs in mind, delivers all this as a comprehensive new framework, then shows how it can be applied. ■

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