

Research Article

Participation 2.0? Crowdsourcing Participatory Development @ DFID

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Abstract

Through an empirical analysis of Amplify, a crowdsourcing platform funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), we examine the potential of ICTs to afford more participatory development. In particular, interactive Web 2.0 technologies are often assumed to enable participation by marginalized groups in their own development by allowing them to modify content and generate communication. We use the concepts of platform politics and voice to show that while Amplify managers and designers invested time and resources to include the voices of Amplify beneficiaries on the platform and elicit their feedback on projects supported via the platform, no meaningful participation took place. Our analysis of the gaps among participatory rhetoric, policy, and practice concludes with suggestions for how ICTs could be harnessed to contribute to meaningful participatory development that matters materially and politically.

Keywords: ICTD, participatory development, crowdsourcing, voice, Web 2.0, DFID

Participatory development has been the subject of longstanding debates in the field of international development. Its radical beginnings lie in participatory action research grounded in Paolo Freire's emancipatory pedagogy (Leal, 2007) and made its first appearance as popular participation in rural development programs in the early 1970s (Vengroff, 1974). It was as Robert Chambers' 1983 call to "put the last first," which sought to bring rural aid recipients into conversations and decision making about their development, however, that led to participatory development's uptake by mainstream practitioners. It quickly became a buzzword, providing a promising way to quell popular discontent with structural adjustment programs and their devastating consequences. In the process, participatory development has become "modified, sanitised and depoliticised"; it also became institutionalized when the World Bank produced the *Participation Source Book* in 1996 (Leal, 2007). Chambers himself acknowledged that the fast uptake of participatory methods led to their "discrediting by over rapid promotion and adoption, followed by misuse, and by sticking on labels without substance" (1994, p. 1441). More critical accounts went beyond this "methodological revisionism" and, from a Foucauldian perspective, showed that participatory development's binary model of power masks and ultimately reinforces everyday oppressions and hierarchies and marginalizes challenges to the status quo (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). In the face of such critique, Hickey and Mohan (2004) attempt to reclaim participation as a socially transformative practice, pegging it to a "wider (radical) political project . . . aimed specifically at securing citizenship rights and participation for marginal and subordinate groups" (p. 1). While some have argued that this is not possible within mainstream development (Leal, 2007), others are looking to information and communication technologies (ICTs) to develop more meaningful participatory development processes and practices.

Chambers (2010) has described the participatory use of ICTs as driving the proliferation and spread of participatory methodologies. From community radio to mobile phones and Web 2.0forDev, he argues that digital

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technologies, when accessible to and usable by the poor, can expand the application of participatory methodologies, and he celebrates this proliferation as “illustrat[ing] the runaway empowering potentials of new combinations of technology” (p. 33). Similarly, proponents of “‘open’ information-networked activities in international development” that have resulted from ICTs’ affordances and the Internet culture see in these activities “new models of engagement and innovation that are more participatory, more collaborative, and driven more by beneficiaries” (Smith, Elder, & Emdon, 2011, pp. iii, v). Their promises lie in the ability of development recipients to more easily access and modify information. This ability to participate in the creation of online content is frequently referred to as “Web 2.0” and when applied to development becomes “Development 2.0” (Thompson, 2008). This links the discussion to longer-standing debates in the ICTD (ICT for Development) literature, which has studied the deployment of digital technologies from computers in telecenters to social media platforms. While the initial hype was followed by realism and critique (Heeks, 2002), mobile phones, open-source systems, and social media¹ are once again fueling technologically inspired hopes. An important part of this shift comes from recipients of development messages now being able to create their own (return) messages with the help of Web 2.0 tools, which has been celebrated as a “paradigm shift” toward more bottom-up and collaborative innovations (Berdou, 2017).

But does ICT-enabled development result in what we call meaningful participation, which goes beyond tick-box exercises and token contributions to predetermined projects? In this article we argue that claims that ICTs afford greater participation need to be empirically interrogated rather than assumed. As Web 2.0 technologies are invested with the ability to make development more participatory—through lower barriers to entry compared to static and nonmodifiable Web 1.0 systems, interactive tools, and easier access—can marginalized people shape their own development more? Can excluded voices make themselves heard and listened to in ways that matter materially and politically? In answering these questions, we problematize the digital mediation of participatory development and show the gaps between a rhetoric of new, ICT-enabled models of participation and the practices and designs to which this rhetoric gives rise. We show that policy and design intent on participation do not necessarily result in meaningful implementation or use by aid recipients. While this might be an obvious conclusion, our empirically grounded study of a high-profile Department for International Development (DFID) flagship program that engaged a world-leading design firm gives our arguments particular salience.

This program is Amplify, a five-year initiative funded by the UK’s DFID and managed by IDEO.org, the non-profit subsidiary of IDEO, an acclaimed international design company headquartered in California (Schwittay & Braund, 2017). Amplify is built around an online crowdsourcing website, where eight development challenges were posted between 2014 and 2018, ranging from improving urban women’s safety, to early childhood development, refugee education, and farmers’ livelihoods, among others. Amplify’s aim was “to engage non-traditional actors such as designers, entrepreneurs, diaspora communities, technologists, engineers and the public at large, and to establish stronger connections with end beneficiaries” (Amplify, 2013, p. 3). Through online collaboration on the Amplify website, these groups were encouraged to develop ideas for new, more relevant and effective products, services, and business models, the most promising of which were supported with DFID money and IDEO design support. Importantly, poor people, constituted as end beneficiaries of the initiative’s outputs, were seen as an integral part of the Amplify process, which aimed “to challenge participation in new ways” (Amplify, 2014a [blog post]). It is this emphasis on participation in an online initiative that makes Amplify a promising place to study whether ICT-enabled development can result in meaningful participatory development.

Our analysis of Amplify is based on three years of online and offline research. Numerical and discourse analysis of the first five challenges examined who submitted ideas as well as their content and progression through the challenges, using data from the posted idea and participants’ personal profile pages. In addition, we analyzed the extensive secondary material on Amplify, which consisted of policy papers, a business plan, program

1. We realize that the popularity of social media platforms has already given rise to debates around their development potential. Because Amplify did not engage these platforms, we cannot contribute to these debates in an empirically informed way.

evaluations, blog posts, and YouTube talks. Primary research has included fieldwork in Nairobi with five winners from a range of challenges, in-person interviews with three DFID managers, Skype interviews with four IDEO designers and 15 Amplify users, and participation in IDEO.org online office hours. In the next section of this article, we examine the implications of Amplify as a crowdsourcing platform for participation on it. In the following two sections, we draw on the concept of voice to analyze two specific instances of participation on Amplify. Global Conversations used an Interactive Voice Response System (IVR) to enable people in India and Tanzania to share their experiences and opinions about children's upbringing, while Beneficiary Feedback was a phase of the submission process that asked Amplify participants to get feedback on their ideas from potential users. In the conclusion, we draw on a summary of the gaps between rhetoric and practice to provide some suggestions for meaningful ICT-enabled participatory development.

A Crowdsourcing Platform to Amplify Development

Members of the public, designers, entrepreneurs, diaspora communities, technologists, engineers, and the end users themselves currently have no cross-sector, development-focused platform over which to interact and exchange ideas. Such a platform could galvanise truly transformational and unprecedented innovation by attracting new sources of expertise with those partners that have traditionally worked in and implemented development programmes. (Amplify, 2013, p. 7)

This quote from Amplify's business plan, which was presented to DFID senior managers to obtain approval for the £10 million initiative, shows Amplify's positioning as a development platform. The revolutionary potential attributed to Amplify by its creators reveals the hopes pegged on Web 2.0 technologies to generate innovations and allow aid recipients to participate in that process alongside other nontraditional development actors. In this section, we show how conceiving of Amplify as an online crowdsourcing platform shapes user participation on it in important ways. By *Amplify users* we refer to those individuals and organizations that submit ideas on the Amplify website and engage in its online process, while we call *Amplify recipients* the people seen as beneficiaries of the initiative.

Platform Politics

The term platform, which has been popularized by technology giants such as Google and Facebook, "is drawn from the available cultural vocabulary by stakeholders with specific aims, and carefully massaged so as to have particular resonance for particular audiences inside particular discourses" (Gillespie, 2010, p. 359). In other words, referring to technology as a platform is not accidental or innocent, but a deliberate choice to achieve specific aims. Consolidating the various meanings of the term around four main categories—from architectural (a physically raised stand), to figurative (a basis for action), to political (an ideological position), and finally, to computational (its most recent meaning)—Gillespie (2010) defines a *platform* as "an infrastructure [or online environment] that supports the design and use of particular applications" (p. 349). In the current imaginary, the term implies neutrality, populism, and progress and is imbued with overtones of possibility and opportunity, such as those found in Amplify's business plan. Platforms evoke a libertarian sense of open and inclusive spaces, which, when transferred into the world of Web 2.0, are interactive by design.

Platforms have their own logics or architectures of participation. This architecture is open, in the double sense of being inclusive and not predetermined (Mudliar & Donner, 2015). As O'Reilly (2014) has argued, "the architecture of the Internet and the World Wide Web are such that users pursuing their own 'selfish' interests build collective value as an automatic by-product" (p. 2). This ensures that "every contribution, however small, adds up to create a larger whole" (Berdou, 2017, p. 20). This virtual invisible hand of the Internet remains severely limited by the digital divide in all its instantiations, but it is such participation-by-default that is often celebrated as ensuring engagement different from the one offered by bureaucracies and markets. This is not only because online participation purports to espouse values such as openness, creativity, and altruism (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006), but also because its low barriers to entry are seen to make such participation accessible to marginalized and resource-poor individuals and groups.

Amplify is one of an increasing number of platforms that generate support for a wide range of social and development causes by mobilizing large numbers of people. Crowdfunding platforms ask their members to

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make small financial contributions, while crowdsourcing platforms “leverage the collective intelligence of online communities” via websites that enable geographically dispersed groups and individuals to collaborate through online interactions (Brabham, 2013, p. xix). Büscher (2017) has shown a general belief among early proponents of “do good 2.0 platforms” that these can “radically change . . . development by using co-creative, interactive web 2.0 technologies to facilitate global connection and communities” (p. 164). This early enthusiasm, echoing the general hype around new technologies, has largely dissipated as virtual efforts have confronted realities and complexities on the ground. Nevertheless, the ease with which such platforms can be set up has led to their proliferation, which in turn has made it difficult for audiences to assess the claims made by the various campaigns about their causes and impacts. Amplify is able to stand out in this crowded marketplace because it is funded and thereby endorsed by DFID and marketed and managed by IDEO.org, which has made a name for itself in the world of design for development (Schwittay, 2014).

Developmentalizing the Platform

Amplify was conceived as a large design experiment, with continuous adjustments to enhance its effectiveness, user friendliness, and relevance (Amplify, 2013). This has significant implications for general participation on the platform, which was structured according to IDEO.org’s human-centered design process of “starting small, prototyping, piloting and iterating in order to design products, services and business models that are most suited to the intended users’ needs” (Amplify, 2013, p. 5). For the first challenges in 2014, Amplify used the original IDEO proprietary platform called OpenIDEO, with its online phases of Research, Idea Generation, Refinement, and Evaluation. This process was built around OpenIDEO’s user base of mainly designers and other creative professionals and students. Over the course of subsequent Amplify challenges, the platform was altered to make it work better for its target users, which Amplify managers had come to define as small, community-based organizations. Their particular needs and ways of utilizing the platform, which were very different from OpenIDEO’s original membership, led to Amplify’s developmentalization.

This process manifested in various ways. Amplify’s eligibility and winning criteria were continually refined and made more visible on the website, and the possibility of winning funds also became more prominently advertised to motivate target users to sign up. In addition, the research phase, which normally precedes all design projects to allow designers to familiarize themselves with a new topic, was abandoned because, according to an IDEO manager, it was unhelpful and confusing to users, who already knew what they wanted to pitch on the platform. As community-based organizations, they were assumed to be familiar with their places of operation and clients and did not need to conduct research. By contrast, eliminating research made it more difficult for users from the Global North to come up with relevant ideas. The remaining online phases were more clearly defined as Ideas, Beneficiary Feedback, Expert Feedback, and Improve, and some of them included in-built downtime when the platform was locked for several weeks. This responded to comments by organizations in the Global South that they felt compelled to be online at all times to show good engagement in the Amplify process, for example by answering questions from other participants or IDEO online managers. They found this difficult because of the cost and slowness of Internet access in many places. Developmentalization here focused on making the platform more appropriate for its target users.

These changes show that platforms provide “highly liquid forms of engagement” because they need to be continually updated, tweaked, and cleaned to stay relevant and appealing (Büscher, 2017, p. 166). This ephemeral nature means that the primary focus of platform designers is on the platforms, and that users as well as causes or recipients can recede into the background. In regard to users this is the result of technological mediation, abstraction, and algorithmization, whereas causes and recipients can literally become less visible or only serve as stand-ins that enable users to engage with each other. These changes can be the result of platforms’ quest for popularity or profitability. In the case of Amplify, it was the value-for-money requirement of the UK government that shaped who was seen as a promising participant on the platform (cf. Shutt, 2015).

One DFID manager explained that because of their fiscal responsibility to UK taxpayers, Amplify’s emphasis shifted from initially supporting blue-sky ideas, no matter from where or whom they came, to funding organizations with a proven track record of implementing projects. This meant moving away from popular assumptions of “the poor as innovators” that would have encouraged poor people themselves to post ideas. Instead,

established organizations serving the poor came to be seen as the platform's primary participants, who should contribute ideas that could potentially win the challenge. Poor "end beneficiaries" became secondary participants who could lend their voices or feedback to improving these ideas, but could not themselves be successful on the platform. On the surface, Amplify's spirit of open collaboration, manifest in its use of a creative common license, continued to maintain an ostensibly inclusive space, while the adjustments that platform managers made along the way ensured that certain users were more likely to be successful than others. This means that the argument that "in crowdsourcing . . . what matters most are the insights, information, ideas and products to which projects give rise, rather than who does or does not contribute, who does or does not talk" only holds true to some extent (Berdou, 2017, p. 21). A platform's everchanging architecture shapes how to participate on it and to what effects.

We have shown how the constitution of Amplify as a development crowdsourcing platform resulted in particular logics of inclusion, exclusion, and participation that shaped the online engagement of its users. Its design impacted how they encountered and experienced the platform in technologically mediated and design-structured ways. These dynamics are often hidden by the "evocative rhetoric of 'you' and UGC [user-generated content] that imply a sense of egalitarianism and support, and in some ways even in the political sense, i.e. giving people a public voice" (Couldry, 2008, p. 50). It is to the concept of voice we now turn to examine Global Conversations, an ambitious, if short-lived, experiment to ensure recipients' participation on Amplify via the direct inclusion of their voices.

Participation as Voice

Amplify works by crowding in as many voices as possible [including] the voices that matter the most. (Wong, 2016, p. 126)

This quote by Jonathan Wong, former head of DFID's Innovation Hub where Amplify is based, shows that one of the central concerns for Amplify managers was to create a space for recipients—whom Amplify called beneficiaries and imagined as rural farmers, female factory workers, or urban slum dwellers—to contribute their experiences of the various challenges to the platform. For marginalized groups, the online and English-only nature of the platform presented significant access challenges, which meant that engaging non-English speakers with no Internet access, through a mix of online and offline activities, became crucial to making Amplify inclusive. For Global Conversations, described on the website as "an effort to extend the reach of Amplify to communities without reliable access to the Internet" (OpenIDEO, n.d.a). IDEO designers used IVR technology to create channels for recipients' voices to be represented on the Amplify platform. This enabled some recipients to share their opinions, but mainly facilitated Amplify users—the individuals and organizations submitting ideas to the platform—to talk to each other.

Theorizing Voice

Many scholars have articulated the connections among development, participation, and voice. For Sen (2001), voice is a key capability that enables development as freedom, while Chambers (1998) sees participatory methods as "enable[ing] poor people to express their realities themselves" (p. ii). Most concretely, Tacchi (2012) argues, "participation happens when voice is appropriately valued in the development process" (p. 653). Defined as the ability to give an account of oneself and thereby participate in various processes affecting one's life (Madianou, Longboan, & Ong, 2015), *voice* has several aspects. First, it is a social process dependent on particular resources and skills. In the case of Amplify that includes the ability to access and use ICTs. Second, to go beyond merely facilitating "voice as process" requires paying attention to responses to acts of voicing and to the relationships created through them (Couldry, 2010). This means that voice calls for recognition as expressed in the exchange of listening, which Couldry terms "voice as value." Third are the effects, including material and political, of people able to express themselves and to be heard (Dreher, 2010).

What is needed is a dynamic conceptualization of voice that ensures that listening is foregrounded to achieve "meaningful voice" (Dreher, 2012). This is not an automatic process and, as too often occurs in development projects, "voicing may be encouraged but nevertheless not be heard. Participatory approaches may

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turn out to constitute 'top-down participation' meaning that development beneficiaries only repeat what they know practitioners want to hear from them" (Tacchi, 2009, p. 170). This characterization echoes critiques of participatory development that expose its institutionalized versions as tick-box exercises that legitimize already-decided projects. This stems not only from its formulaic application, but also from its simplified conceptualization of power that neglects participatory development's potential to "encourage a reassertion of control by dominant individuals and groups . . . the reification of social norms through self-surveillance and consensus-building, and [the purification] of knowledge and spaces of participation through the codification, classification and control of information" (Kothari, 2001, p. 142). To what extent could Amplify and Global Conversations address these limitations?

A Global Conversation?

Global Conversations (GC) designers wanted to create "a model for participation [that would] bring the voices of community-level stakeholders onto the platform, enabling them to participate in developing solutions for their own community" (Amplify, 2014b [blog post]). This was to be achieved through a combination of online and offline engagements, including research trips to Nepal, Tanzania, and India, where GC was tested. Initially, IDEO designers had intended to use SMS messages to obtain recipients' input, but then discovered that texting was not as widely used in India because of challenges posed by limited literacy, high cost, and nonroman characters. Instead, the designers realized that community radio continues to be an important means of communication, one that is often overlooked in discourses of leapfrogging and adoption of new technologies. To connect with their listeners, some radio stations use IVRs, which "might prove particularly valuable in the developing world" because of their affordances for people with language, literacy, or technology constraints (Mudliar & Donner, 2015, p. 367). Amplify designers decided to build GC around this technology.

Advertisements about the Amplify challenge in the form of posters, flyers, radio, or TV spots invited audiences—whom we call GC participants—to call a number. They were then automatically called back so as not to incur phone charges. They listened to a recorded message with information about the challenge and answered questions about their own experiences with the challenge topic. These answers were recorded, transcribed, translated, and posted on the Amplify platform by volunteers. In addition to building channels to include GC participants' opinions and experiences on Amplify, GC designers also wanted to recreate Amplify's sense of collaboration. To this end, volunteers entered Amplify users' responses to the GC posts into the IVR system, with the idea that the original caller would eventually be able to hear them. This form of "participatory IVR" was meant to enable a two-way connection between GC participants and the broader Amplify audience (Mudliar & Donner, 2015). In the following analysis of two GC examples, we show how such participation remained elusive.

Despite its global ambitions, GC was rolled out in India and Tanzania only, during the second challenge, which focused on early childhood care. Amplify profiles for GC participants were set up and managed by volunteers, who also translated and posted their submissions. One Indian profile was called "Voice from the Ground in Bihar," reflecting GC designers' ambition to "enrich the conversation [on Amplify] with real users' voices" (Amplify, 2014a [blog post]). In Tanzania, information about Amplify and GC was broadcast via an educational TV program and a regional radio station. A profile called "Perspectives from Tanzania" was set up "to share the voices and opinions of people from across Tanzania" (Amplify, 2014a [blog post]). It generated 21 contributions, 12 of which received comments online. In response to a radio show on girls' empowerment, a listener stated on the IVR that girls are generally not given priority because they are seen as weak, which affects them mentally. He continued that "I would like the next *Kinana* [in reference to the first (male) speaker of the East African Legislative Assembly] to be a woman with a vision of taking care of the community" (OpenIDEO, n.d.). This post elicited 12 comments on the Amplify website, among others from two IDEO online managers and a winner of the first challenge, who talked about how they were raised by their parents. One Amplify user argued that empowering girls needs the right social conditions, otherwise it could lead to violent reactions, which generated a comment by another user about gender roles.

Because none of these comments engaged the original post, a few days later an IDEO manager posed a direct question back to the Tanzanian GC participants about opportunities available to girls. This was answered

Q: What are your first reactions to today's discussion, skit, and question? Is this important to you?

A: All of us in the community have been disappointed because of the children who've been denied an opportunity to achieve their dreams.

Q: Tell us one example from your community of someone who has tried to solve this challenge. Who is it? What did they do? What is their contribution to the community?

A: Pima's father discovered the dream of his child who wanted to play football, he encouraged him and supported and he became a very good footballer. So now his son became a mirror to the community, and he had succeeded in taking into account the dreams of his son.

Q: What questions would you like to ask people around the world related to today's topic?

A: Our community would like to ask: In the developed countries, how do they recognize the dreams of their children?

Q: How did today's discussion go? What did people in the group agree and disagree on?

A: Our discussion in response to the radio show went well. What we did not agree on was the dreams of the child being parallel to the dreams of the parent. What we agreed on was that it is not good if the child's dream goes against the parent's wishes. This is because the child can like one thing and parent sees that it does not suit the child based on the environment in which the child is in. It is ok for children to go against their parents and caregivers' expectations and dream up their independent directions. What is clear is if an investment is made to listening and actively participate in growing our kids' talent then their "dreams are valid."

Figure 1. Global Conversations post.

by the volunteer who managed the profile rather than the GC participants. Their only other contribution, which probably also came from the volunteer, was a thank you to all those who had provided comments. In this way, the GC post became a facilitator for mainly IDEO-related people to tell each other stories about their own upbringing or exchange viewpoints on gender empowerment. Rather than a conversation between Amplify recipients in Tanzania and the global Amplify audience, this online communication was more of an echo chamber, where Amplify users articulated their views to their peers (Madianou et al., 2015). This was also the case for a group of villagers who remained excluded from the discussion that their GC post generated. Their Amplify profile introduced the 10 women and seven men as farmers, businesspeople, and pastoralists interested in "improving income levels for the ordinary citizenry" (OpenIDEO, n.d.e). They were one of six radio listener groups created from preexisting community groups by Amplify managers during the research trip to Tanzania on the basis of preexisting community groups. A photo posted on the Amplify blog shows men and women sitting around a small yellow radio, presumably listening to the show. After discussing the questions posed during the show, the group leader would call the IVR number from a mobile phone and answer pre-recorded questions in Swahili. One of the discussions was around parents' dreams for their children. The post on the Amplify website recreated the Q&A of the phone call (see Figure 1).

Translated from Swahili into English, edited, and following the Q&A format, the representation of this exchange on the Amplify website is highly mediated and structured. It nevertheless conveys a sense of GC participants' conversation about the challenges of nurturing children's dreams, especially when they differ from their parents'.

GC designers again attempted to create a two-way discussion, asking GC participants to pose a question to Amplify users, represented as "people around the world." This post attracted 11 comments on the Amplify website. Three users responded directly to the question of how parents in developed countries recognize the dreams of their children, talking either about their own childhood experiences or parenting practices. The GC participants seemingly responded to the posts twice by saying thank you, but the response was from the volunteer, who explained that he would relay the replies to the villagers. This shows the difficulties of bridging

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technological distance, which created an incomplete loop that further complicated GC's participatory ambitions. While GC participants received responses to their questions online, which could potentially validate that their voices had been heard (Madianou et al., 2015), these responses might not actually have reached them. Moreover, this act of hearing did not generate any meaningful engagement or dialogue. Interestingly, the GC participants themselves talked about "an investment in listening" as a precondition for validating and actively engaging children's dreams, echoing scholarly arguments about the role of listening in creating voices that matter (Dreher, 2012). On the Amplify platform, by contrast, GC participants were only afforded mediated expressions of gratitude, in keeping with commonly accepted development sentiments.

The exchange in Figure 1 shows how digital traces of GC remain visible on the Amplify platform. This makes it possible to see interactions, including over longer periods, that might become invisible in offline engagements (Berdou, 2017). The enduring nature of these traces shows that, overall, GC participants' engagement was fleeting and transient (Cornwall, 2002), operating in short-term "response mode" rather than as a "sustained project" that is more likely to be listened to (Madianou et al., 2015, p. 3030). The result was a mediated representation of their voices on the Amplify platform, where it was read by several hundred Amplify users. A small number of these users, often connected to IDEO, responded, but it is unclear whether these responses reached the original GC participants. In most cases, Amplify users talked among themselves, without attempting to engage GC participants. This was partly a result of their ability to communicate with each other in a more immediate way, rather than having to go through the heavily mediated and asynchronous process of the IVR. GC participants, on the other hand, had been enabled to participate in Amplify in a token way, without affecting the overall program. This was also recognized by GC designers and Amplify managers, who decided to discontinue the experiment.

Abandoning the Conversation

According to Amplify managers, 6,000 contributions were made via Global Conversations. Nevertheless, they felt that numbers alone did not mean that it had been successful. One DFID manager described the experiment as "too technology-focused" and as "not getting authentic feedback because people were not clear about what they were actually participating in." While it is important to clarify who reads contributions and what effects these would have (Dreher, 2012), the quest for authentic and real voices raises the question of what counts as knowledge. While participatory methods are often assumed to be more effective "in producing what is considered as 'truth' . . . [and] also empowering participants through their involvement in the process," this can nevertheless contribute to reaffirming predetermined agendas (Kothari, 2001, p. 140). Postcolonial critics have exposed the dominance of Western, expert forms of development knowledge, but have also warned that reifying local knowledge can mask internal dissent and romanticize and essentialize poverty (Mohan, 2001). Did Amplify managers make normative judgments about the quality and form of GC participants' contributions? Or did they merely acknowledge that GC had only generated *bare voice* (Couldry, 2010), technologically enabling the process of voice giving or even amplification but not of listening? Their own assessment of GC's limited effects showed the experiment as a "domesticated site of invited . . . participation" that aimed to incorporate rather than challenge, even as its designers demanded more impact (Cornwall, 2002, p. 3).

An IDEO designer explained that it is not sufficient to include the voices of the poor for their own sake, but that they should have material effects. She continued that the GC stories "were not influencing the conversations on the platform" and, most important, were not taken up in the challenge ideas. In other words, GC participant voices were not listened to sufficiently to change the discussions on the platform. Participant voices had been recorded, displayed, and even elicited answers, but they had not been heard in the way Amplify managers saw as relevant or meaningful. This confirms that "while recognizing that giving voice to people is central to any system that aims to be participatory, that does not guarantee that these voices will be heard or will have an impact on structures of power" (Mudliar & Donner, 2015, p. 370). Amplify managers wanted recipient voices to have effects by shaping ideas on the platform. For voice to matter in this way, it is not enough to build technology platforms; other arrangements, including social structures and political processes, must also be put in place (Curato, Ong, & Longboan, 2016). Even though Amplify managers and GC

designers invested time and resources in creating channels for participation, these did not lead to meaningful changes. Ultimately, this meant abandoning GC and redesigning the Amplify process so it included a dedicated, formalized Beneficiary Feedback phase. While this was meant to ensure more impactful participation, with this shift, Amplify managers also asserted their authority to define what counts as participation and what shape it should take.

Participation as Feedback

People are at the center of our design process. During this phase, we want you to go out into your communities and get feedback about an element of your idea. Get creative—use pictures, experiments, or even skits to let your beneficiaries participate in shaping your idea. (OpenIDEO, n.d.a)

This description of the Beneficiary Feedback phase on the Amplify website shows how participation became reframed as Amplify recipients contributing to shaping user ideas on the website. By formalizing this phase in the context of the ongoing redesign of the Amplify platform, recipients were visibly constituted as Amplify Beneficiaries, a category of development subjects that does not exist outside the Amplify space (cf. Escobar, 1995). This in turn influenced what they were “perceived to be able to contribute or entitled to know and decide, as well as the perceived obligations of those who seek to involve them” (Cornwall, 2002, p. 8). It also included a spatial fix as Amplify managers pushed users to leave their offices and studios to gather the voices of these beneficiaries “out there.” Rather than being heard directly, recipient voices were now mediated through users, who, as small, local, and community-based organizations, were assumed to represent recipients’ interests and were therefore well placed to facilitate their participation. Framing this participation as feedback set up a limited approach from the beginning.

Participation in Amplify through Beneficiary Feedback was simplified, technicalized, and formalized. The origins of feedback can be found in systems thinking, where it refers to two or more parts of a system affecting one another. In the above quote, it is used in a general sense of making improvements based on information about a reaction to something. In the development context, this harks back to the World Bank’s use of Beneficiary Assessment as “an approach to information gathering which assesses the value of an activity as it is perceived by its principal users” (Salmen, 1995 as cited in Francis, 2001, pp. 73–74). Beneficiary Assessment deploys market research as a form of data extraction to obtain grassroots views. On Amplify feedback was to be generated with the help of IDEO.org design methodologies and tools, which were made available on the website and consistently advertised by managers (Schwittay & Braund, 2017). Most prominently, each (shortlisted) user had to generate a User Experience Map based on an IDEO.org template. Such a map, which combines written and visual information, asks users to consider how a hypothetical, ideal-type recipient would learn about their idea, make use of it, and be affected by it (see Figure 2).

Food4Education proposed to provide children from low-income families with free school lunches to improve their nutrition and concentration. As Figure 2 from its User Experience Map shows, after taking recipients through a series of steps, the outcome was invariably an improvement in their lives.

Analyzing examples of Beneficiary Feedback from the Amplify website, where they were posted in response to the question “How has your idea changed based on feedback from your community?” shows a variety of engagements. These range from one-off events that used methods such as role plays, theater, or skits, to more conventional community or stakeholder meetings and focus groups, to ongoing engagement activities. Most activities took place offline and differed according to the content of the ideas, the size and type of organizations, and their approaches to development. A very small NGO in Nepal helping farmers to earn incomes from the growth, processing, and sale of herbal products used storytelling, participatory theater, and mock-ups to generate feedback. When it learned that farmers had reservations about carrying large amounts of cash, it added mobile money and checks as payment modes. A large Bangladeshi NGO, which was already working with slum dwellers in Dhaka, used roleplaying about how residents react to house fires in the context of a project aimed to increase their fire resilience. At the other end of the continuum were social enterprises, including for-profit ones that collected feedback from current and potential clients or talked about constant and ongoing dialogues with their customers. A seed company in Zambia decided to stop selling low-cost technologies

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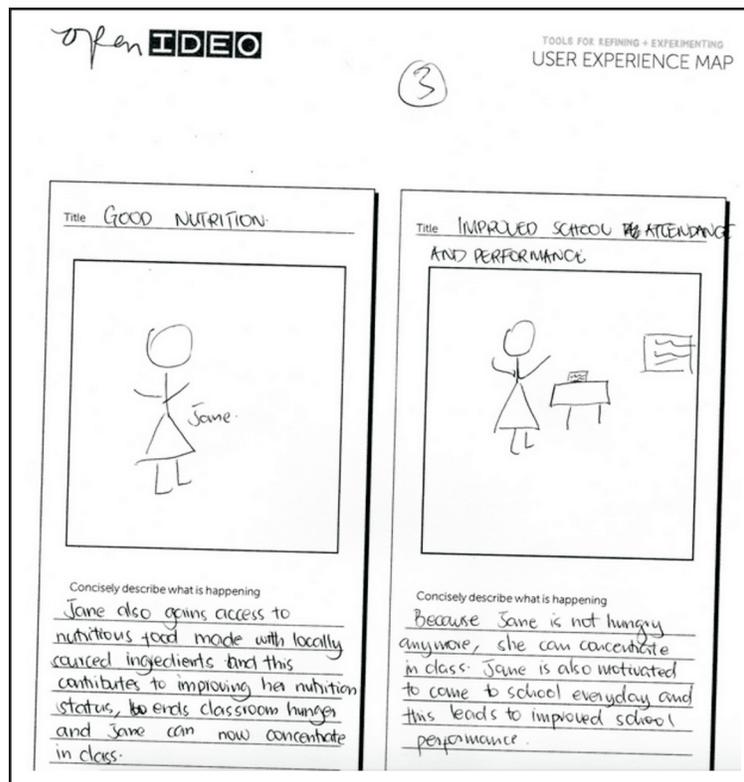


Figure 2. Page from a user experience map created by Food4Education, a winner of the fourth challenge. Reproduced with permission.

and return to only selling seeds after it operated a shop for a year and learned about farmers' purchasing decisions. A technology organization in Indonesia used online surveys to gather user feedback from the members of its peer-to-peer flood alert network in Jakarta.

Between these extremes were the majority of feedback activities that involved meetings, interviews, and focus groups. Staff from a social enterprise assisting low-income residents in Manila, Philippines to retrofit their houses to make them more resistant to climate change met with local leaders and learned that a full retrofit would be unaffordable to most households. The organization therefore adjusted its program to offer incremental retrofits and help people access loans. It also recognized the importance of including local men in the construction process and of developing a manual that would allow households to undertake their

own retrofits. A Kenyan organization working with disabled people conducted interviews with some of its members and realized that community leaders were often reluctant to attend sensitization training for fear of witchcraft or theft of traditional medicines. As a result, training protocols were changed to give stipends and impose stricter confidentiality rules and security protocols. Similar to the use of participatory methods as a management tool, the aim of Beneficiary Feedback was to improve the quality of development projects to ensure that aid funds were spent well (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

Some engagements included the use of prototypes such as mockups, samples, or short videos. Prototypes are a central component of human-centered design, using quick and rough material instantiation of ideas and concepts to gather frequent feedback from users that informs future design iterations (Schwittay, 2014). To support this process, IDEO.org's online tools included a Prototyping Worksheet and a Test Your Prototype and Get Feedback Worksheet. The latter encouraged users to document the results of their prototyping activities as "the Good" (What did people value the most? What got them excited? What convinced them about the idea?), "the Bad" (What failed? Were there suggestions for improvement? What needs further investigation?), "the Unexpected and What Next?" This classification organized feedback into positive and negative comments, incorporated it into ongoing idea development, and tried to account for unintended consequences. Here, participation centered on the application of specific design methods and tools by Amplify users to engage recipients. Such a methodological reductionism has been critiqued for its mechanistic and formulaic outcomes (Chambers, 1994; Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

However, researchers of crowdsourcing initiatives have argued that prototyping "is essential for coordinating the collective response and mobilizing of participation" from their multiple contributors (Berdou, 2017, p. 25). Its rapid approach to research and development was also part of early participatory methodologies, but

has been superseded by a recognition that slower, more careful, and in-depth engagements are necessary to take into account local complexities, power relations, social norms and subject positions that shape participatory development. Pace was certainly an issue on Amplify, with the overall duration of each challenge being four months, leaving little time for the Beneficiary Feedback phase. For Amplify managers, this was less of an issue because of their assumption that the community-based organizations they were targeting already had established relationships with their beneficiaries and therefore faster access to them than outsiders. Because of the limited definition of participation, having only a couple of weeks to gather Beneficiary Feedback was seen as sufficient. In addition to these time constraints were obstacles to engage with structural change.

Beneficiary Feedback did not lead to any consideration of changes to established systems of power and inequity. The Manila residents, for example, were concerned about a potential urban redevelopment project that could affect their tenure and impact their decisions about retrofitting, an issue that could not be addressed within project parameters. Similarly, the Dhaka project revealed the need to install water sources that could be tapped in the event of fire, but because of land prices, space scarcity, and ownership structures such installations were not considered. There are several reasons for this. As a design-driven initiative Amplify was focused on generating technical solutions, a narrow brief that was acknowledged by its managers. They urged users to focus on solutions that they themselves could create. In the first challenge on urban women's safety, for example, the design guidelines contained a call for users to be "policy neutral [and to not] start pointing fingers at governments, civic legislation or other politics. . . . Instead, let's stay focused on other levers we can pull" (OpenIDEO, n.d.c). Such a depoliticized brief resulted in inattention to structural changes, which was reinforced by the constitution of Amplify recipients as beneficiaries and consumers, who were invited to give customer feedback. This recast participation within a market idiom "as an entirely functional, rather than political, activity" (Cornwall, 2002, p. 14). Much like for the users of solar lights in India, customer feedback only allowed for superficial tweaks to the color and look of the lights, but excluded more substantial issues such as the ability to repair them (Cross, 2013).

Beneficiary Feedback was formalized on Amplify as an attempt to ensure that recipient voices would have direct, material effects in shaping the ideas on the platform, according to recipient needs. This happened to the limited extent allowed for by participation recast as fast, formalized, and technicalized feedback. Its token results did not fundamentally alter the course of ideas or engagement between users and recipients on the platform, however.

Conclusion

Our analysis has shown that in the case of Amplify, ICT-enabled development did not result in meaningful participation despite Amplify managers and designers putting efforts and resources in place to create channels through which recipients could participate in the exchanges on the Amplify platform. This was not the participation-by-default ascribed to Web 2.0 technologies, but deliberate efforts at crowding in many and diverse voices through online and offline activities. Global Conversations was launched after in-country research and consultations in India and Tanzania; it enabled recipient voices to be represented in digital traces on the website. When Amplify managers realized this participation remained restricted to bare voice because it had no material effect on the ideas developed on the platform and instead served as a facilitator for Amplify users to talk to each other, they replaced the experiment with a formalized Beneficiary Feedback phase. Here, it was up to the same users, defined as small, community-based organizations, to ensure recipients' participation, with the help of IDEO.org design tools. Although this resulted in small changes to Amplify ideas, these were again limited in scope and achievement, partly because of participation's framing as feedback. Neither initiative contributed to democratizing the Amplify process in the way meaningful voice and participation can potentially do. This persistent gap between rhetoric and implementation, despite concerted attempts to bridge it, calls into question the ability of ICTs to bring about meaningful participatory development. Nevertheless, we want to conclude with some ideas for bringing the two closer.

The limited impact of these two initiatives on the overall Amplify program and process shows that "media technologies are secondary to the social foundations that underpin voice" (Madianou et al., 2015, p. 3034).

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While creating technology architectures that facilitate participation is necessary, this is insufficient and needs to be complemented with social and political changes that address power, inequalities, and hierarchies. Just as in classic participatory development, participation in online platforms must go beyond information provision for the sake of improving predetermined programs. Instead, it should “enable participants to set the agenda and priorities of the enquiry and help participants analyze what they have discovered and decide how to use it in the future” (Berdou, 2017, p. 26). This necessitates a careful consideration of the role, extent, and impact of participation along the lines of meaningful listening. We can take our lead from Cornwall’s (2002) “spaces of participation,” ranging from “domesticated sites of . . . incorporation” to self-created “sites of radical possibility” (p. 3). Web 2.0 technologies can support this range, from crowdsourcing platforms like Amplify to social media campaigns. In both cases lower barriers to entry provided by data access and modifiability can enable marginalized groups to participate, but to result in meaningful changes this participation must result in opening up spaces of control and decision making. As many have argued before us, this includes enabling collective mobilizations. Given the individualizing character of Web 2.0 platforms in particular (Büscher, 2017), special efforts must be made, through design affordances, briefs, and guidelines, to actively encourage policy engagements on such sites. It is also important to recognize that there are no pure spaces, but that all sites of participation can result in exclusions and inequities.

In more practical terms, meaningful ICT-enabled participation would operate along a two-fold continuum. On the one hand, most activities take place in the convergences between exclusive online and offline engagements at either end. Especially in places with limited access to ICTs (broadly defined), online activities should be proactively grounded in the physical world. On the other hand there is the convergence of old and new technologies, making use of more traditional communication means such as TV and radio and current ones such as online platforms, with bridging technologies like IVRs and mobile phones assuming a mediating role. Moving along this continuum depending on local contexts will also facilitate the engagement of marginalized groups in appropriate ways that suit their needs and circumstances. Most important, investments must be made in people before technologies. As our study of Amplify has shown, even with great effort, time, and resources put into the design and execution of Global Conversations and the constant push toward Beneficiary Feedback, the results did not achieve participation or voice that mattered. Rather than better technology infrastructures, tools, or methodologies, ensuring that recipients are listened to by those with the influence and resources to impact their lives and can engage in these changes as active, political participants has the potential to lead to meaningful ICT-enabled participatory development. ■

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