Editorial

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$10 Million For Your Thoughts?

Suppose you had $10 million and wanted to use it to improve ICT performance in the developing world—who would you give it to? Many institutions struggle with how to best spend their money to meet global ICT goals, so this is not an idle question.

Consider some of the institutions that are regularly burdened by that task. Google.org—the philanthropic arm of Google—started a year ago but is still trying to answer this question. At the World Bank's global ICT grant-giving division, infoDEV, the new director will now need to decide how to move the program in new and continually productive directions. Bilateral agencies like USAID and the ever-innovative IDRC are constantly facing the challenges of how to stay relevant in a rapidly changing field and learn from their past experiences. Even the hoary private foundations like Ford, Rockefeller, and Carnegie have cautiously begun investing in ICT for development, especially focusing on higher education in Africa (witness their Partnership for Higher Education in Africa). Finally, there is always the elephant in the corner of any discussion of corporate philanthropy, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is continually reformulating its sophisticated giving strategies, strategically incorporating an extraordinary financial inflow from Warren Buffett.

No doubt many people have ideas about how best to spend $10 million on IT and international development. But does anyone have a clear sense of best practice that meets all of the desiderata of sustainability, scalability, impact, relevance, collaborative approaches, and egalitarian results?

In the case of *ITID*, regularly reading dozens of submissions covering a multitude of issues has helped us develop our own views on how we might spend such a lump of money (should anyone offer it to us!). Witnessing a lot of failures and, happily, some successes over the past few years, we unlearned a bunch of certainties we thought we knew and learned one or two new things.

Our authors have said, and we agree, that you can't just drop a computer into a village and expect the simple presence of technology to eliminate local inequality or solve economic or social challenges. We unlearned that all you need for access to technology is a good wired or wireless connection; you also need skills, money, incentive, international connectivity, and supportive public policy. We unlearned the old chestnut that telecenters are always wonderful; indeed, most don't survive, and usually collapse because of failures in financial, technical, social, political, or institutional sustainability.

Another big lesson we unlearned, just after the dot-com and telecommunication bubble burst, was the delusionally optimistic notion that institutional support for ICT4D would be infinite, robust, and enthusiastic (recall the vaporizing commitments from the Okinawa G8 Summit). Alas, today there are fewer institutions enthusiastically supporting the field or supporting it with the consistency and imagination we saw in the past.

Finally, we have learned that if you are donating $10 million, or just $100 for that matter, there is absolutely no single best practice to advance IT for international development. (Indeed, we both have learned this lesson through personal experience with cookie-cutter approaches that have lead to quick failures.) The Holy Grail of best practices only emerges when the question is properly reframed, to wit: Under what circumstances can activity X or Y be considered a best practice in context Z for population A or B?

As we move from the cheerleading enthusiasm of the ICT4D roaring 1990s to the reactionary pessimism of the early 2000s—when nothing seemed to work—to the synthetic smart-experimentation stage of today, we can expect the following results and learnings:

- More attention will need to be paid to capacity building as communities and countries move up thevalue chain and require increasingly sophisticated skills to integrate and implement their ICT4D plans.
- South–South sharing of ideas and principles will be necessary.
- Crossing professional and disciplinary barriers will be essential. For example, development specialists can communicate and learn from radio network engineers (and vice versa) without undue signal-to-noise ratios.
- We need to continue to nourish a global epistemic community.
- We need to continue to radically rethink what is meant by ICTs in the context of development (i.e., What is a computer? What is a network? What is a phone?).
- We need to continuously refine and improve our theoretical approaches and our practices for monitoring, assessment, evaluation, and feedback.

ITID is proud to have provided a place for both learning and unlearning about the field of ICT4D. As we move forward, we hope the journal will be a platform from which others can learn the discipline's best practices and will help all of the relevant institutions construct a truly revolutionary donor strategy.

This special issue, which enjoyed the extremely skilled guidance of our guest editor Richard Heeks (University of Manchester), is an example of an effort to help people unlearn, relearn, and learn anew the dynamics of ICT use in developing countries. Heeks and his colleagues provide us a set of conceptually explicit and powerful theoretical frameworks that are applicable to IT and development. Heeks offers in his editorial the play-by-play on the issue's contributions, and we are happy to, with our gratitude, leave that in his capable hands.

We look forward to another forthcoming special issue, in which we will publish the best papers from the International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development, which was held in May 2006 at the University of California, Berkeley. Here, too, the authors (under the disciplined guidance of our guest editor Kentaro Toyama) provide myth-killing reports on the failures and successes of local projects and programs from around the developing world, concentrating on their technical aspects.

Both of these special issues are part of our ongoing efforts to bring readers the best analyses that bridge the social sciences and engineering. Please share your thoughts on our latest issue—or what you would do with $10 million to invest in ICT4D — by sending a letter to the editors at *itid-ed@mit.edu*. In the meantime, anyone with $10 million burning a hole in their pocket, please note that the *ITID* editorial office is accepting checks at the address listed on the website!

Sincerely,
Your Impecunious Editors