Cultivating a Research Discipline for IT in Developing Countries (ITDC): A Forum to close the Mini-Track on IT In Developing Countries

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In the introduction to our track we have already drawn attention to the inequities that exist between the developed nations and the developing world with regard to their levels of access to information. Many of us are attracted to the challenges and opportunities that are presented by furthering the cause of increasing the deployment of Information and Communication Technologies among the less advantaged sections of society, as evidenced by the papers that we have brought to the HICSS minitrack this year. Usually the attraction is derived from the conviction that such technologies are capable of alleviating many of the worst effects of poverty, both at the national and individual levels, and that without help, the world's poor majority will be bypassed by the continuing developments in IT and the attendant improvements which they are bringing to the developed world. However, our efforts are sometimes hampered by a variety of inter-related factors:

Firstly, as a discipline, ITDC is something of a Cinderella pursuit; it is young, undefined, thinly represented among the formal research outlets (HICSS notwithstanding) and seldom perceived as being relevant to mainstream IT/IS research. Consequently, it is not attractive to newly qualified researchers who are trying to establish a reputation and a career in a competitive academic work environment.

Secondly, ITDC suffers acutely from one of the ailments of IS research in general, that of excessive diversity. Those of us with any experience of more than one developing country will be quick to point out that each has its own set of problems that are usually quite distinct from the other. How then can we relate a study of DSS in South Africa to one about the Internet in Mongolia? What can a South African be expected to know about Mongolia which would enable him/her to produce results which would have some relevance to his/her Mongolian counterpart? If there are common threads that can be distilled from such works and then made to contribute to a coherent body of knowledge which we can justifiably name "ITDC", is it possible to generate suitable guidelines for so doing which can be utilised by researchers working in such diverse environments?

Thirdly, many of the issues which are unearthed in our ITDC studies do not contribute to the dominant North American-Business School-Corporation tradition which pervades international IS research. Applying IT to the problems of development is not perceived as a contribution to corporate profitability in North America or Europe. It is not glamorous. Despite the enormous and increasing potential for social payoffs from the application of IT to Development problems, business profitability still drives much IS research, and global business does not have a tradition of looking after society as a whole.

Fourthly, the "discipline" is rarely taught in universities. IS departments are usually organised in Business Faculties, thus separating them from the social sciences and so further reinforcing the Business School tradition. In many universities in developing nations themselves, IS itself is not identified separately from Computer Science or from Information Technology, and even the notion of "development" from a Third World perspective is rarely recognised. Even though the fastest developments in IT these days are occurring among the Internet-related, social aspects of computer use, the teaching of IS in developing countries, where government typically represents half of all IT use, usually inherits its identity from Western, business-oriented, models. Consequently, research in ITDC struggles to find a home.
It is not respected on the resumes of applicants for academic jobs anywhere. Research is often under funded as it depends on aid agencies, for whom satisfying basic needs for food, health and shelter usually take priority. Furthermore, precious little funding is available to send academics from developing countries to mainstream IS conferences such as HICSS. Thus, those for whom we are running the minitrack are also those least likely to be able to attend. Of the seven papers presented in the minitrack, only three are written by authors from developing countries, while four come from North America.

Finally, the major impacts of ITDC relate to its potential for inducing "development", both social and economic, and, outside the Development discipline, few researchers are familiar with the issues or with the relevant literatures, practices and theories. Conversely, most Development practitioners have received little education in the application of IT to Development problems, although they are likely to be well versed in their economic, political and cultural dimensions. Often, it is precisely these contextual aspects of ITDC which are exposed in stark relief when the problems of IT adoption and diffusion in developing countries are addressed. Consequently, research in ITDC which is well founded on appropriate theories, which employs suitable methodologies and practices and which positions itself appropriately within a coherent framework or body of research, necessarily draws on a multi-disciplinary set of skills, itself a problematic requirement for over-compartmentalised university structures.

There is a perverse irony in these issues. While ITDC struggles for recognition in the international IS establishment, we note that many of the findings of ITDC studies unearth the sometimes profound influences which cultural differences, ethnic, national and organisational, have on the outcome of IS initiatives. The cultural characteristics of situations take on a sharp focus when technology from one culture is introduced into another. The irony exists in the contribution which such findings offer to their parent disciplines. In much the same way that it is easier to understand one's own culture after observing another, the IS research community is coming to recognise that cultural and social influences exert an impact on all IS implementations, sometimes significantly so. As a result, mainstream IS research is increasingly turning to the cultural and behavioural contexts of IT in order to explain the differences between success and failure. Additionally, more IS research is being reported which relies on both qualitative and quantitative approaches, and which values human responses and rich descriptions of events. ITDC offers a fertile arena for exposing the influence of such factors on IS implementations and for further development and refinement of the qualitative techniques for revealing them.

The purpose of our Panel, therefore, is to reflect on the HICSS Mini-Track on ITDC within the context of the issues described above so that some positive steps can be identified that can help cultivate a research discipline for the subject.

Some of the issues we wish to address are:

- Can “IT in Developing Countries” be conceived as a coherent body of knowledge?
- What constitutes the “Discipline”. What makes it different from research into the use of IT in developed countries?
- What are the common elements among the papers that have been presented at the conference which might help us to define the discipline.
- What can be done now to attract qualified individuals to our cause and to encourage quality research into the pressing issues in ITDC which are at hand?
- What can be done to foster the development of a cumulative body of research which can be used to advocate the cause of the information poor and to satisfy their need for information?
- How can we raise the profile of the subject among the international research community in order to accelerate the creation and dissemination of relevant and appropriate knowledge and begin to reduce the “information gap”?
- How can the international IS research community be persuaded of the value of research into ITDCs, such that developed countries too can learn valuable lessons?