Internet for Development?

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1   Introduction

In March 2018 Sir Tim Berners-Lee, known as the founder of the internet, wrote about connecting the world [1]. He stated that the other half of the world still needs connecting. With the other half he means mostly development countries that currently know low percentages of inhabitants connected to the internet. By not being connected to the internet, Berners-Lee thinks that current gaps that are there between development countries and for example European countries will only rise further. Although this might sound as a logical step to help development countries further, we also live in the time of post-developmentalism, in which we found out that development work doesn't always benefit the people in development countries. In this essay I will reflect on the idea of Tim Berners-Lee to connect the other half of the world, and i will try to point out some of the risks that come along with his ideas, and how we can cope with those.

2   Post - developmentalism

As Tim Berners-Lee's ideas fit well within the idea of development theory, I will first talk about post developmentalism. Just after the second world war, development theory was introduced. This theory represented the idea that certain parts of the world where fallen behind other parts of the world. The parts that were fallen behind would need help from the further developed countries in bridging this gap. Development theories has had some development itself over different decennials. Where it first focused on technological transfers, it would later on move more towards humanitarian aid, and the creation of markets.

In the 80's post-developmentalism started to get form. The idea arose that the thought of developing countries could also just be a way of showing power over other countries, rather than actually trying to create a better world. As an effect, the sort of projects that were started during the earlier years, would not be able to actually help those countries in a way that the people themselves would want, but rather forced countries to become alike -western- countries. As a result one thought that perhaps it would even be better to leave those countries alone, rather than interfering with their own developments. However this idea was also quite drastic, especially as most development projects seem to be created out of the best intentions of people. Some see the sustainable goals as a cure to the post development view. However the idea of post development is not yet completely overcome [2].

In the next chapter I'll reflect on the ideas of Tim Berners-Lee and try to place them within these theories.

3   Internet as priority

An important question when connecting the other half of the world would be whom will connect them? As so far these connections have not yet been established by the countries and their inhabitants

themselves, it would be a logical step to look to foreign countries, and in specific western countries. I believe that in order to further connect these countries to the internet, some external help will be needed. This is where this objective would become a development project for a western country. However, with that, also the criticism of post development theory comes in mind.

Plenty examples exist of development projects with the intention to bring internet to rural parts in Africa, that ended in big failures. However, the part that is often forgotten, is that not just the initiative might have failed, but when those projects fail, also promises to local communities are broken. Those might even end up in a worse situation where they have become partly dependant on systems that for example only partly work.

So yes, the people that are currently not connected might be behind. However, when trying to fix that we might introduce even more problems. As an example, the electronic tax fund system in Uganda [3]. This was an attempt to create easier digitised tax refunds through a simple form. However this project partly failed resulting into even more time spent on tax refunds, as now both an electronic and physical form have to be filled in . This is not just the case for ICT development projects, but quite often in general development projects fail[4]. So as a result the ones that already were in need, will be even more in need. Those numbers of failed projects make the question ones again arise: shouldn't we just stop trying?

Another question that arises is whether the internet connection should really be the priority. Would bringing internet really help a community where the is an urgent need for clean water, or food. Although internet may not be the top priority in such cases, and the money might have been better spend on another project, I do believe that there is some benefit in bringing internet to those areas, as long as they come hand in hand with other projects. I believe that it is therefore always important to think about local priorities when setting up an ICT4D project, and that it is the responsibility of us to make sure that we only set up projects in areas where internet indeed could be considered high in the priorities.

4 Dependency of Western Technology

Besides the importance of thinking about the priority of a current development project, I believe that there is another thing that should be considered more structurally: dependence of western technology. Although Tim Berners-Lee has been a profounder of free internet, in which there are no large companies dependencies, and each individual could be part of it, this is not what happens to be the case for the internet. From the beginning internet has been a western technology which was focused on latin alphabet. Only the last 20 years the standards have been changed in such a way that for example Arabic letters could be easily shown on a website with utf-8. This is just one of the plenty examples which show that the internet is a product that is currently adapted to its users. As those users are currently mostly from western countries, but as also the industries are all western companies, we could consider the internet a western technology.

Bringing internet to African countries thus means introducing a new dependency on western countries, and moreover, western companies. While African countries are still recovering from the colonial history by western countries, I think it is important to realise that creating a new dependency on western countries might not be justifiable, and fits right into the post development theory.

Once again I think that it is very important to realise that we might be creating this new dependency. I also think that we can't overcome the fact that internet can also bring a lot of good things to those countries, and therefore it should not be disregarded either. However, to overcome the dependency, I believe there is just one way to do so. I think that it is important to create a development platform in those countries. As soon as the development of the internet includes those countries, and is done by those countries, the internet might become less of a western-countries dependent technology. Therefore I believe that for each ICT4D project it is important that not just the way the technologies is explained to inhabitants of a country, but that there should also be created a platform with developers that have as much knowledge as we currently have on the created technology. Even more, ideally there

would be a step in ICT4d to create platforms from which people can create projects for their own country. These project could have foreign funding, but would be made in their own country. Recently those kinds of ICT4D projects are taking ground. For example a project in Zambia had a focus to both create an internet service, but also create a platform from which new ideas could be worked out [5]. So there are ways to overcome the dependency of western countries with a project, and build on creating a more robust base for a countries own technological development.

5 Conclusion

We talked about the idea of Sir Tim Berners-Lee to connect the other half of the world to the internet. This idea as a goal for development work might touch in some cases the old-fasionned development theory on which post-developmentalism funded their critism. Also there have been numberous projects in which the ambition to connect rural African areas to the internet turned out to be greater than the ambition to actually help those countries. I discussed two important factors that should at least be considered when setting up an ICT4D project to reduce the critism of post-developmentalists. At first I believe it is important to realise the lower priority of connecting to internet above other fundamental needs. Don't spend money on a project when there are more fundamental goals that need money too. The second important step is to create a development platform for the created projects. To prevent countries for becoming even more dependent of western countries it is important that they become part of the development of internet, and thereby internet becomes also a part of them. This way one day we might become equally dependant on current development countries, as they are from us.

References

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