OWNERSHIP, PARTICIPATION AND CROWD-PROGRAMMED INITIATIVES: TOWARDS A DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM BASED ON BENEFICIARY-LED AID.

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Ownership, Participation and Crowd-Programmed Initiatives: Towards a Development Paradigm based on Beneficiary-Led Aid.

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Abstract

This paper makes the case for a development paradigm shaped and determined by the people affected directly by aid and assistance programmes: in essence, it is a call for beneficiary-led aid (BLA). Over the past two decades, input from beneficiaries has become increasingly important in the design of development programmes. At the same time, the donor model remains one that is top-down, agenda-driven and expert-led. Similarly, the use of information and communications technology (ICT) by donors in the interests of facilitating closer engagement with beneficiaries has been ongoing for over a decade. However, while the ICT4D (information and communications technology for development) model has generated a great deal of enthusiasm within the donor community, the approach has yet to generate a discernible paradigm shift where the provision of aid and assistance is concerned. Taking inspiration from initiatives both within and outwith the field of development, we explore the extent to which crowdsourcing offers a route through which to revolutionise the meaning of 'participation' in an aid context, for beneficiaries, donors and development experts alike.

Introduction

The provision of development aid has been – despite nearly two decades of 'ownership', 'participation', and 'partnership' involving beneficiaries – an expert-led enterprise. Aid agencies, staffed by experts well schooled and trained in various aspects of aid delivery, have traditionally determined the direction and allocation of funding streams in a 'top-down' manner. However, advances in the last decade mean that changes in the way that aid is provided might be ripe for reconsideration. As information and communications technology (ICT) becomes ever more advanced and readily available, even amongst the poorest of communities, so the opportunities for accessing the 'wisdom of beneficiaries'[1] becomes more practicable. Accordingly, what 'participation' should mean, in both practical

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[1] With apologies to James Surowiecki's *Wisdom of Crowds*.

and normative terms, is the key focus of this study, one in which we advance a case for beneficiary-led aid (BLA)[2].

We define BLA as a process through which aid and assistance programmes are determined and materially designed by those at which they are aimed. It differs from participation in that there is no *a priori* design of the 'listening process', and beneficiaries are trusted by donors and agencies to make decisions, rather than simply to offer input. For this to work, the capture, in a meaningful sense, of beneficiary views must be possible. Initiatives like Mission 4636 in post-earthquake Haiti, and the Map Kibera Project in Kenya (http://mapkibera.org), and other ICT4D (information and communications technology for development) projects have captured the imagination of donors and policymakers alike. Understandably, there has been a great deal of excitement, in academic and practitioner circles, as to the potential of harnessing ICTs with respect to other aspects of aid delivery. In particular, we, in this study, focus on the potential impact of harnessing preferences garnered by way of 'crowdsourcing'[3]. In so doing, we consider the potential (and related implications) of a development model predicated on practical and meaningful forms of aid that are beneficiary-led. The benefits of a *genuine* BLA paradigm, we will argue, are clear and compelling: it would represent a bottom-up approach to delivery, it would speed up the decision-making process, it would have clear efficiency gains, and, furthermore, it would improve immeasurably the actual value of aid budgets 'on the ground'. BLA would also overcome questions of paternalism, neoimperialism and agenda-setting; in short, it would democratise and go some way towards de-politicising aid.

Ever since the acceptance, during the 1990s, that aid to regions like sub-Saharan Africa had failed to generate much in the way of development or poverty alleviation, the discourse of the donor community has shifted increasingly from the language of structural adjustment towards one based on 'people-focused' solutions. The 'new aid agenda', a popular buzz-phrase generated in the early 2000s, in the wake of the Millennium Development Goals and the post-Washington Consensus World Bank/IMF Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), was, and remains, all about beneficiary 'ownership', 'participation', and 'engagement'. In itself, this was a significant departure from the technocratic days of the 1980s – development's 'lost decade'. This new approach, in the discourse at least, was to be one that signalled a shift away from the top-down, expert-led directives that had emanated from the centres of Europe and North America. Contemporaneous to the changing language of the new aid agenda discourse was a sudden boom in the size and scope of the aid 'industry'. The 2001 attacks on the World Trade

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[2] We acknowledge the fact that the term 'beneficiary' is potentially problematic and, for some, comes with certain negative connotations but suitable alternatives are difficult to find - see, for example, the discussion in the *Guardian* Development Professionals Network panel (2013). The use of the term here is to denote those who are in need of humanitarian aid and assistance, including development assistance.

[3] While difficult to define precisely, in basic terms 'crowdsourcing' involves, usually by way of the internet, the outsourcing of certain tasks/problems to a loosely defined, generally large and heterogeneous group of people, working anonymously and independently of each other (Howe 2008, Estelles-Arolas and Gonzalez-Ladron-de-Guevara 2012).

Centre saw the emergence of a development and security nexus that conceptualised development in terms of human security[4]. As donor governments poured money into aid programmes targeting 'fragile states' like Afghanistan, NGOs were increasingly called upon to act as agents of development, resulting in the rapid expansion and professionalization of the sector. However, despite the change in focus and the ways in which aid was disbursed, the tangible effects of development programmes have remained limited.

Critics have long argued that, with respect to the design and implementation of aid programmes, there needs to be 'real' engagement with communities. A workable model has, until now, remained largely elusive. Theoretical debates pertaining to aid delivery have – like many debates in international political economy and development – long been viewed through 'problem-solving' versus 'critical' lenses (Cox 1981). The former broadly argues in favour of improving efficacy while the latter points to seemingly fundamental structural impediments to the efficacy of aid delivery. Accordingly, 'problem solvers' within the development community have demanded more efficient and accountable institutions. Critical theorists, on the other hand, have pointed to what they perceive to be far more deep-seated concerns. For example, Mark Duffield (2007; 2012) has argued that the linkage of development and security, post-9/11, has had the effect of locating the practice of development within the vanguard of an increasingly hegemonic neoliberal security agenda. He argues, too, that concerns over insecurity and any exposure to risk have led to the retreat of NGO personnel into the new equivalent of 'green zones'; the fortified aid 'bunker'. This 'architecture of aid' has served to alienate NGO personnel from the communities they are supposed to 'serve'. This, in turn, has resulted in an increased distancing of donors from beneficiaries on the ground, despite the rhetoric of closer engagement.

Despite dramatically differing perceptions of what development should be/is for, both sides of the spectrum argue, on paper, in favour of increased engagement with representatives of 'the community'. Groups like Oxfam (2011:7) argue that in order for aid programmes to be effective they need to be 'owned and accountable to [their] beneficiaries, driven by and responsive to those whose needs and rights are being addressed'. Similarly, critical theorists have stressed the need for NGOs to engage with local communities in a more meaningful way through an abandonment of the paternalism of the expert-led models of development (Ebrahim 2005, Srinivas 2009). Ironically, while the majority of NGOs and other development and aid actors broadly agree with this critique, the result is frequently yet more expert-led assessments, evaluations and reviews. This constitutes something of a paradox that BLA is well placed to addressed; real and meaningful BLA is something that, on this point at least, is seemingly capable of bringing both sides of the argument together. However, it represents more of a paradigm shift than

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[4] The UNDP (1994) defines human security as a paradigm that puts the security of the individual ahead of that of the state: job security, income security, health security, environmental security, and security from crime are all listed as key components.

many donors would currently be willing to admit (or, from a critical perspective, be willing to tolerate).

In this paper, we interrogate the meaningfulness of the current participation agenda, linked as it is to a top-down, expert-led model of development. We offer BLA as an alternative framework for transforming the way in which aid programmes are designed and implemented. We focus on the potential of crowdsourcing as a tool with which to engage with the realities of such a model, taking into account the normative, ethical and practical considerations thereof.

Crowdsourcing and BLA: a model for development and aid?

The prevailing success of crowdsourced initiatives in popular culture point to the potential of an aid-delivery approach that is predominantly beneficiary-led. The effective delivery of aid is determined largely by intelligence concerning the situation on the ground, including the anticipation of needs and problems. Due to technological limitations, the provision of aid has been, almost unavoidably up until this point, a largely expert-led enterprise. Despite continuous talk of the merits of 'bottom-up' consultation amongst aid donors this has often proved to be difficult and, in emergency situations, almost impossible. As a result, donor agencies and NGOs, staffed by experts often well schooled and trained in various aspects of aid delivery, have traditionally determined the direction and allocation of funding streams in a 'top-down' manner, albeit with some degree of participation from local stakeholders. However, developments in the last decade mean that the paradigm governing the way in which aid is provided might be ripe for reconsideration.

Approximately ten years ago, analysts covering the business community, including James Surowiecki and Jeff Howe, became very focused on the benefits of harnessing 'group intelligence'. Focusing on the group as a vehicle for advancing economic development initially seemed counter-intuitive as it went against all perceived wisdom with respect to well-established perceptions of crowd mentality. Surowiecki's bestselling *The Wisdom of Crowds* helped to turn much of this perceived wisdom on its head. Surowiecki's title played on the nineteenth-century *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* by Charles MacKay (1852) which extolled – with a fair degree of humour – the dangers of a herd mentality. In establishing the groundwork for his argument, Surowiecki cited a number of critics of 'the crowd', including the late-nineteenth-century French commentator Gustave Le Bon, who posited that crowds are 'always intellectually inferior to the isolated individual' (cited in Surowiecki 2011: xvi). However, as Surowiecki demonstrated, this is not necessarily the case. What the evidence actually showed was that the combined knowledge of the group often far exceeded the knowledge of individual experts:

under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them. Groups do not need to be dominated by exceptionally intelligent people in order to be smart. Even if most of the people

within a group are not especially well-informed or rational, it can still reach a collectively wise decision (Surowiecki 2011: xiii-xiv).

The fact that popular sayings like 'two heads are better than one' and 'the truth lies in the middle' suggest there has long been something of a unconscious cultural engagement with the 'wisdom of crowds' (Larrick and Soll 2006:19). However, despite this, the generally-held perception that the group-view was one that tended to 'average out' viewpoints (resulting in mediocrity), has a long history of dominance. This has meant that for decades there has been a focus on prioritising the expert-view so as not to dilute its 'potency' (Larrick and Soll 2006:19). Basically, when faced with a problem, most people (and institutions) tend to 'chase the expert'.

By harnessing group knowledge (by way of 'crowdsourcing'), whole new approaches to a host of different problems have become evident. The growing ubiquity of the internet has enabled the development of vast transboundary communities and networks, all operating in a largely anarchic and non-hierarchical manner. These communities have shown themselves to be capable of incredible feats of self-organisation and creativity, despite having little-to-no managerial input or organisational structure.

The most compelling argument for the effectiveness of 'the crowd' in producing sophisticated outcomes with very little organisation or input from above is the evolution of the Linux operating system. Unlike commercially-produced software like Microsoft, which is developed by employees beholden to the company, Linux is produced by hundreds of volunteers working only when, and if, they feel inspired to. Linux volunteers are not directed or managed, and the source-code created is often generated by people who are not professional code-writers. Yet the result is a product that can compete on an equal footing with anything produced by companies like Microsoft.[5] Wikipedia is another example. Originally envisaged as a free online encyclopaedia designed to compete with *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, it has far outstripped its original target in terms of its sheer scale and ubiquity (Howe 2009). On the internet, no one necessarily knows whether a contributor holds a PhD or a high school diploma – the value of the contribution lies simply in the quality of the product. Even when expertise is required, the crowd often remains more effective than a dedicated 'brains trust'. For example, websites like InnoCentive (https://www.innocentive.com) have become gateways for companies like Proctor & Gamble – traditionally reliant on in-house research and development – to outsource problem issues to the website's 270,000 registered 'solvers'. Solutions devised by solvers are submitted anonymously, with no record of the solver's qualification (if any) for attempting the task; only the outcome matters. The results have changed the way in which many companies think about expertise. These examples are simply the tip of an ever-growing iceberg.

What has facilitated the development of crowdsourcing is the fact that the costs associated with the relevant technology have declined dramatically. The media and music

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[5] The Linux versus Windows debate is one that has raged for nearly two decades now and continues to generate a great deal of excitement amongst the IT fraternity (see for example Nistor 2010).

industries are just two examples in which ever more widely accessible tools have led to a boom in amateur input and a steady decline in the traditional way in which these products are produced and consumed. The advent of cheap video cameras and platforms like You Tube have allowed millions to make and show (although the quality varies) short films. Likewise, recording software has enabled musicians without recording contracts to record music in their bedrooms, while the blogosphere and Twitter have re-invented the way in which news is discussed and disseminated.

The availability of such technology is not only restricted to developed countries. The ubiquity of mobile phones across many African countries reflects the global (albeit unevenly distributed) nature of this phenomenon. According to the International Telecommunications Union (2012), there are approximately 6 billion mobile-cellular subscriptions in the world today. Much of the growth in subscriptions is located in developing countries. By the end of 2011, nearly one third of the world's population (2.3 billion people) had access to the internet (International Telecommunications Union 2012). 62 percent of these users were from developing countries. While regions like sub-Saharan Africa remain some way behind other regions in terms of the number of available handsets, network coverage, and user-costs, even here the ICT market is expanding rapidly. This makes the crowdsourcing of information in an aid context, and hence BLA, a real possibility in the near future, even in some of the poorest regions of world.[6]

The Participation Agenda in Theory and in Practice

In many respects, BLA, based largely on crowdsourcing, would seem to be a logical extension of the participation agenda that has developed over the course of the last quarter of a century. However, participation as it is currently understood is far more limited in practice than the discourse might suggest. In 1987, the publication by UNICEF of *Adjustment with a Human Face* revealed much of the extent to which structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) had failed in regions like sub-Saharan Africa. Critically, the report highlighted the human cost of these failures, emphasising the need for development to be people-centred. The report emphasised, amongst other factors, the importance of the community, arguing that community action 'should form an essential part of the strategy to protect vulnerable groups, and may assist in identifying needs, organising a response, and part financing priority projects' (Cornia *et al* 1987: 121). The World Bank, by the end of the 1980s, was coming to a similar conclusion. Reflecting on previous projects, the authors of the World Bank's 1990 *World Development Report* noted that projects often failed because 'project beneficiaries were often not involved in decisions, and they felt that they had little stake in sustaining projects. Projects that encouraged participation worked better' (World Bank 1990: 131). Likewise, the authors of the 1991 Report argued that 'participation enhances project efficiency and benefits the poor' (World Bank 1991: 85). This, together

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[6] While global access to ICTs is improving on an almost daily basis, certain regions remain poorly served. For instance, in Myanmar only 2% of the population have mobile phone subscriptions, while less than 1% have access to the internet (Open Technology Fund 2013).

with the self-reflection that followed its 50th birthday in 1994, led the World Bank, under its new president, James Wolfensohn, to look to shift the focus of the institution towards poverty alleviation. Part of Wolfensohn's reconceptualization of the World Bank was to attempt to connect with beneficiaries in a more meaningful manner than in the past. In a speech to the World Bank Board of Governors in 1997, he argued that 'the challenge of inclusion is the key development challenge of our time'. He further argued that development 'can *not* [emphasis in the original] be donor-driven … development projects and programs must be fully owned by *local* [emphasis in the original] stakeholders if they are to succeed. We must listen to those stakeholders'. This new participation agenda brought with it a seemingly built-in moral authority, while the Millennium Development Goals offered a 'score sheet' for those engaged in development. Beneficiary participation, sanctioned even by the World Bank, was now, seemingly, the guiding principle behind development.

In academic circles, moreover, calls for greater beneficiary participation in shaping development strategies and outcomes comfortably pre-dated the Wolfensohn 'revolution' and did much to shape it (see for example Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, originally published in 1968). In 1981, Robert Chambers, then of the Institute of Development studies at the University of Sussex, published a paper entitled 'Rapid Rural Appraisal: Rationale and Repertoire' that demanded a rethink of how information pertinent to rural development projects was gathered. He argued that decision-makers required input that was 'relevant, timely, accurate and usable' (Chambers 1981: 95) and called for increased cost-effectiveness in the field. Chambers divided what had hitherto been viewed as fieldwork best practice into two strands – the 'quick and dirty' approach (with 'dirty' meaning not cost effective) wherein an expert made a (sometimes literally) flying visit to a specified area, and the 'long and dirty' approach wherein observers like social anthropologists embedded themselves within target communities for extended periods of time. 'Quick and dirty', was, in his view, too limited, whereas 'long and dirty' frequently produced work that was 'academically brilliant but useless' (Chambers 1981: 97). What was needed, in Chambers' view, was a system capable of producing 'proportionate accuracy', of delivering information in a timely fashion that successfully flagged needs and trends. This, he argued, could be accomplished, in part, with a high degree of input from local stakeholders.

By the 1990s, then, the participation agenda was increasingly dominant in the literature at least, and Chambers' rather radical approach had become, to a significant extent, orthodoxy. Tools like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), largely based on Chambers' thesis, have come to form the bedrock of development in practice.

However, as early as the mid-1990s, some of those who campaigned for increased participation from beneficiaries were left somewhat disillusioned by the processes in practice. A 1995 special edition of the International Institute for Environment and Development's (IIED) Participatory Learning and Action Notes titled 'Critical Reflections from

Practice' reflected growing concerns over the co-option of participation instruments by donor professionals. In the same publication, Paul Richards (1995) questioned the preoccupation with the speed of consultation and articulated his fear that the new participation approach relegated rigorous social scientific study to the margins of the decision-making process, focusing instead on narrow surveys, box-ticking exercises and quick fixes.

In the provocatively-titled volume *Participation: The New Tyranny*, editors Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (2001) offered a forum for interrogating the value of participation, as it was (and remains) framed. An undoubtedly critical take on donor attempts to solicit greater input from local communities, it confronted a number of sacred cows, arguing that, for some, the whole notion of participation had become ritualistic, and an end, rather than a means to an end. Contributor Francis Cleaver (2001) described practitioners' largely uncritical acceptance of the benefits of participation as an 'act of faith' [echoing Richards' (1995:16) piece above, in which the latter argued that claims for effectiveness were 'based on faith, not science']. The contributors to the volume (see for example Cooke and Kothari 2001, Mosse 2001, Cleaver 2001, Mohan 2001, and Kothari 2001) all questioned the somewhat unthinking/uncritical acceptance of current forms of participation. David Mosse (2001) argued that, far from subverting top-down decision-making, 'participation' could (and continues to) be used to re-enforce existing structures. Inadvertently or not (and there have been very sincere efforts on the part of NGOs to mitigate such imbalances), practitioners have a tendency to shape the results of participatory processes to suit (and legitimise) outcomes (Mosse 2001). Similarly, 'participation' can serve to legitimise local top-down structures. For example, in interaction with donors, local elites claiming to speak for the whole community can effectively silence dissent and competing views (Pottier and Orone 1995). It can be tempting for donors to interpret 'the community' as being somehow organic and homogenous, ignoring competing/dissenting voices of, for instance, women (Cleaver 2001). Those who claim to speak for the community are frequently male and, thus, through the legitimisation of patriarchal perspectives as those of the community as a whole, gender hierarchies may be further entrenched. Given that local elites can often stand to benefit the most from aid projects, they may have an interest in legitimising donor visions, particularly since their recognition by outsiders as community leaders tends to entrench existing power bases. The relationship between local elites and donors is therefore frequently symbiotic. Hence, the makeup of user committees, long-established tools for facilitating participation, has been a source of concern for critical theorists for some time (Manor, 2004). While NGOs and aid agencies recognise this as a problem, through the unintended development of client-patron relationships, participation, instead of shaping programmes, can actually serve to buttress established viewpoints.

BLA, as a form of aid predicated specifically on input from the community as a whole, would address many of the failings highlighted here. It would be needs-based (as perceived by beneficiaries) rather than donor-driven, it would be bottom-up and inclusive in terms of decision-making, it would serve to break down entrenched local hierarchies, it

would remove the perception of donor agenda-setting, it would build on local infrastructures, it would be more cost effective, and importantly, decision-making would be in the hands of the beneficiaries themselves, rather than those of experts.

The Expert-led Paradigm and BLA

Crowdsourcing has, arguably, reintroduced the age of the amateur. The intellectual life of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was dominated by incredibly skilled and talented amateurs. The legions of 'gentlemen scholars' like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, Charles Darwin and John Stuart Mill were all 'amateurs' in the twentieth century sense in that they lacked formal qualifications and were not trained specialists. Furthermore, for polymaths like Franklin – author, publisher, scientist, inventor, politician and diplomat – their curiosity was unbounded by specialisms. However, as education spread, and became more formalised and more closely linked to specific professions, the age of the respected and skilled amateur came to an end. Indeed, the term 'amateur' has increasingly come to be employed as an insult (Howe 2009).

As universities and other institutions of education sought to expand, specialities became Balkanised, with a gradually more narrow focus and little overlap. Over the course of the twentieth century, 'knowledge' became ever more codified and vetted by experts. Furthermore, 'cognitive standardisation' allowed for the creation of a production line of similarly trained experts (Larson 1977: 41). This was accompanied by a focus on methodology and modelling, leading to an increasing disconnect between 'theoretical' and 'practical' knowledge, with precedence being afforded to those at the apex of the professional hierarchy, whose knowledge was frequently more theoretical than practical (Larson 1977). As Harold Perkins (1989:2) remarked in *The Rise of the Professional Society*, '[t]he twentieth [was] not … the century of the common man but of the uncommon and increasingly professional expert'. A host of occupations gradually became the preserve of experts, including politics, policymaking and administration. John F Kennedy, in 1962, remarked that 'most of the problems that we…face are technical problems, are administrative problems. They are very sophisticated judgments which do not lend themselves to the great sort of "passionate movements" which have stirred this country so often in the past. [They] deal with questions which are beyond the comprehension of most men' (Kennedy cited in Carson 2010). By the late twentieth century, the value of amateur input had been marginalized.

With reference to the medical profession in the 1970s, Eliot Freidson's seminal sociological analysis laid bare the creation of a discipline almost immune to input from 'outsiders'. Focusing on the propensity of the medical profession to define and control what constitutes medical practice, Freidson (1970a, 1970b) argued that the profession had effectively turned the sector into a closed shop. Decisions made by the medical profession were, he argued, almost solely based on 'insider' knowledge, with little discussion with the patient. Furthermore, the doctor-patient relationship was found to be perceived by medical personnel as a 'clash of perspectives' rather than a relationship geared towards creating

consensus by way of considering alternatives. That this attitude persists is clear from debates on how to reconcile Western biomedicine with traditional medical practices in regions like sub-Saharan Africa, representing just one instance of the gulf separating 'expert knowledge' from people's day-to-day experiences (for a more detailed discussion see, for example, Flint and Payne 2012).

While the professionalization of the development sector remains somewhat removed from that of the medical profession, it has developed steadily in this direction from the early days of Save the Children (established 1919), Oxfam (established 1942), and CARE (established 1946) when these groups were dominated by a largely amateur volunteer ethos (in some respects, the fundraising aspect of NGOs remains so). As NGOs have become central actors within development politics, so they have evolved into professionalized careerist organisations, in many respects closer in their ethos to that of their donors than their target communities (Ebrahim 2005, Lewis and Kanji 2009). Alongside such developments have come, in many cases, a strong sense of corporate identity and an established bureaucratic elite. Linked to the changing makeup of NGOs has come criticism from critical theorists that the role played by NGOs is increasingly that of donor agent (Cooke and Kothari 2001).

The value of a BLA approach lies in its ability to force donors to confront a somewhat paternalistic view of development based on experts deciding on behalf of beneficiaries what is 'good for them' and 'what really works'. At the heart of many development initiatives is the expert determination of what constitutes the 'needs' of beneficiaries (as opposed to 'wants'). BLA dispenses with this bifurcation. Beneficiaries' perceptions of 'need' are frequently very different to those expressed by donors. For donors the distinction is important; 'needs' are worthy, 'wants' are often frivolous. Yet, the evidence shows that, when offered a choice, beneficiaries often tend to make wants/needs decisions that run counter to expert expectations. Surprisingly for many in developed countries, the poor in developing countries are not simply focused on survival. As Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo point out in *Poor Economics* (2011), the very poor often spend a seemingly disproportionate percentage of their incomes on what most donors would perceive to be 'wants' rather than 'needs'. For example, festival attendance, television, radio and mobile phone ownership, and means of transport all frequently rank alongside food as spending priorities. Accordingly, there is an argument to be made, based on Amartya Sen's notion of 'development as freedom', for viewing 'wants' as part of any developmental framework (Sen cited in Heeks 2009).

BLA differs from participation in that it seeks to refine not only how aid should be delivered but what aid is for. BLA also redefines the role of the development agency as being that of facilitator rather than designer of projects. However, while many in the donor community are happy to embrace the problem-solving aspects of, for example, ICT4D projects that offer value for money and improved efficiency, it is by no means clear that there is enthusiasm for any radical (in the true sense of the word) change to the system.

BLA as a Paradigm Shift: beyond innovation in ICT

The technology necessary to facilitate BLA is increasingly available. However, a move towards the further integration of ICT within development projects should not be mistaken for a paradigm shift. As David Edgerton (2008: ix) contends in *The Shock of the Old*, 'too often the agenda for discussing the … future of technology is set by the promoters of new technologies', not the supposed beneficiaries of those technologies. That Vodafone[7] sponsored a high-profile conference on the use of mobile phone technology in development in December 2012 certainly chimes with this critique. Edgerton (2008: xvii) goes on to argue that as a society we are far too fixated with 'innovation-centric futurism' in which technology-as-innovation is prized above almost all else. It is often the tools, rather than the outcomes that form the focus for many ICT4D developers – a fixation that Richard Heeks (2009) describes as 'technovelty'.

Too many strongly-hyped technological advances are not nearly as 'game changing' as we would like to think, often only reflecting marginal gains. Arguably, ICT4D does little to alter the current participation paradigm. ICT4D may facilitate efficiency gains where aid delivery is concerned, but it does little to affect either the degree of participation or the level of ownership within aid delivery. In effect, while different (and innovative) tools may be employed, the development model per se remains unchanged, and, arguably, unchallenged. For instance, in terms of healthcare, mobile phone communication has been shown to significantly bolster clinic attendance, allowing donors to remind patients about appointments, prescriptions, dosages, and how to monitor symptoms (see, for example, West 2012). However, such projects do little to convey to donors either what beneficiaries actually want from their healthcare providers or how they want to prioritise their healthcare needs.

Ken Banks (2013), an early innovator with respect to mobile technology and development and one of the founders of the FrontlineSMS platform that has been employed across Africa, has highlighted concerns regarding the excitement being generated in some quarters by developments in ICT4D. In particular, he emphasises how, in many respects, the 'new' model of participation significantly resembles the 'old' model, in that it is imported and imposed from above. For critics like Bill Cooke (2004), the power afforded to increased participation is 'delusional' due to the way in which the 'message' from such interactions is manipulated. As it stands, there is a real concern that participation, even via new formats will be, to draw from Paulo Friere's (2006: 69) seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 'pseudo-participation'. Friere (2006: 65) argued that 'attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation … is to … transform them into masses that can be manipulated'. Simply put, 'we shouldn't take ownership of a problem that isn't ours, and we certainly shouldn't build "solutions" from thousands of miles away and then jump on a plane in search of a home for them' (Banks 2013). If ICT is really to provide the means

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[7] In December 2012, Vodafone and the London Business School hosted a high-profile 'Mobile for Good' summit that engaged personnel from development agencies, charities, businesses, government, academia and the media.

for meaningful community participation, then the relevant tools must be developed locally: regions like sub-Saharan Africa require skilled insiders rather than increased engagement with outsiders who, for all their skills, nonetheless lack local knowledge.

As much as ICT has come to be viewed as an innovative solution to the question of participation, significant issues remain where both critical theorists and problem-solvers are concerned. Despite the rhetoric – and the introduction of new technology notwithstanding – it appears that the top-down, expert-led approach to development remains entrenched; rather than a new paradigm, ICT4D is simply 'old wine in new bottles'. The question then, inevitably, is the degree to which the concept of BLA represents a resolution in this regard.

Crowdsourcing developed as a means to finding alternative methods for gathering and collating information, and solving problems. As noted, starting with initiatives like Linux and Wikipedia, it has begun to influence any number of fields traditionally governed by expert practitioners: it has been employed by NASA to help map Mars, by the SETI project in monitoring electromagnetic radiation, and ornithologists mapping the ranges of different species. It has likewise been employed in a number of ways pertinent to the potential delivery of aid. The most dramatic example of this was in the wake of the devastating Haiti earthquake in 2010, which caused the deaths of over 200,000 people. Using the Ushahidi ('testimony' in Swahili) platform, an open-source crisis-mapping tool originally developed in Kenya in 2008, and based mainly on information collated from mobile phone communications and other forms of social media, a group of mostly Tufts University students operating out of Boston were able to create a real-time map of the crisis. This open-source intelligence gathering was quickly shown to be far more effective than approaches to information gathering traditionally used in such circumstances. The fact that a group of students, thousands of miles from the actual crisis itself, and untrained in crisis management, were able to create what came to be one of the defining symbols of the aid effort suggested something of a paradigm shift.

The Ushahidi platform that made the Haiti mapping project possible is symbolic of changes in how non-experts can shape major aid operations. Created in part by Ory Okolloh, a Harvard-educated Kenyan political activist, the platform is open-source and can be downloaded free of charge. Furthermore, in terms of its development, Ushahidi is much like Linux in that it is driven by volunteers. As Okolloh (2008a) outlined in her blog, Ushahidi is a labour of love: 'one of the best/most amazing things about Ushahidi has been the spirit of community that has surrounded it since its inception. We certainly wouldn't be where we are today without the individuals who have stepped up to give generous amounts of their time and skill for no other reason other than the fact that they believe in what we are trying to build and accomplish'. Designed to map political violence in Kenya following the 2008 elections, the platform was specifically created with poorer countries in mind. Drawing mainly from mobile phone data and using Google maps, it allowed for real-time mapping of the Kenyan crisis based on 45,000 contributions from the public (Van Deusen Philips 2011). Since then, there have been over 20,000 Ushahidi maps launched in approximately 140 countries (Meier 2011).

Okolloh (2008b) complained, after the launch of the platform, that donors do not always 'get' developments like Ushahidi and are thus reluctant to fund such projects: 'the donor funding world … sometimes … struggles to figure out how to support us and our non-traditional approach. Nevertheless, we soldier on, driven by the great support we've gotten from the community that has evolved around Ushahidi'. Similarly, the Haiti experience also showed that major aid agencies like the UN were often 'structurally' unable to innovate and make the most of crowd-sourced intelligence, relying instead on tried and tested (that is, expert-led) procedures when approaching the delivery of emergency relief. The result was that crucial emergency inputs like food drops to earthquake-affected towns like Léogâne were delayed while UN staff attempted to evaluate independently, for example, security risks in different areas. Despite the increased availability of feedback and beneficiary participation, the model for most aid agencies remains the 'Land Rover-powered expert assessment', in which aid experts are parachuted into regions that they might well not be overly familiar with in order to provide 'boots on the ground' intelligence.

BLA: Ethical and Practical Considerations

Any paradigm shift towards BLA would create certain issues with respect to the protection of beneficiary rights. For example, while the academic literature covering the use of ICT in development remains somewhat limited, within what coverage there is, the majority of analysts have raised concerns with respect to access, intellectual property rights, data protection, privacy, and personal safety (see for example Chapman 2012, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative 2011, OCHA 2013, Red Cross 2010, Meier 2011).

There are significant issues regarding access to ICTs in lower and middle-income countries, particularly where gender is concerned. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, a woman is 24 percent less likely to own a mobile phone than her male counterpart; in South Asia, this rises to 37 percent (GSMA 2013). In rural areas, this difference can be marked. For instance, in rural Ghana, 42 percent of men own mobile phones compared to just 15 percent of women (Doss *et al* 2012). Overall, in lower to middle-income countries, this equates to a gender gap of approximately 300 million people. Ignored, this gap can only serve to limit real participation and entrench existing gender hierarchies and power structures. As outlined by Bott and Young (2012: 61), 'imperfect participation reduces legitimacy and, therefore, threatens project effectiveness and empowerment'. Clearly, this represents an issue if crowdsourced data for BLA is to be presented as being representative of 'the community' as a whole (GSMA 2013).

Given that 'ownership' is very much a theme in any discussion of development best practice, the question of who owns the intellectual property on any particular platform or dataset is one that merits discussion. This is particularly the case where indigenous knowledge forms the basis of the data being collected (Rambaldi *et al* 2006). To what degree should the information gathered be 'owned' by the gatherer? Should specific agencies be allowed to restrict access to 'their' data? Bill Cooke (2004: 47), referencing the World Bank, argues strongly that the 'data belong to those from whom they were taken'

and that 'appropriated information' is (often unthinkingly) abused. He goes on to assert that the 'appropriation of information is extraction, as sure as the taking of natural resources or the attempts to patent the genes of a commonly held plant stock' (Cooke 2004: 48). A new ethical framework governing BLA will need to be agreed.

Open datasets and open-source software can be viewed as democratising forces. At the same time, a lack of data protection can, literally, put lives at stake. While BLA is focused on mainly long-term development projects, questions raised by those engaged in emergency responses or operating out of conflict zones can be informative. A Red Cross (2010: 25) White Paper entitled 'the Case for Integrating Crisis Response with Social Media' asks whether it is 'okay to compromise someone's privacy during a disaster? And, whose job is it to guard privacy during a crisis?' With respect to BLA, if privacy is not assured, it is possible that individual beneficiaries might find themselves vulnerable to intimidation and violence from vested interests.

The relative anonymity of the 'crowd' can create a false sense of security. Governments in both developed and developing countries have shown themselves to be increasingly determined to monitor internet and mobile phone traffic (and will simply shut down networks if 'needs must'). In Egypt, during the Arab Spring, the government disrupted communications and actively intervened to spread misinformation on social networking sites (OCHA 2013). The ability on the part of interested actors to manipulate 'the crowd' is problematic because, since members of the group are often only concerned with their own particular task, misinformation might not be immediately apparent and, in any case, the pseudo-anonymity of the crowd may make the independent verification of information difficult. The future success of BLA over the expert-led approach will be dependent on the development of some form of rapid verification system compatible with the model.

BLA projects will need to ensure that beneficiaries are free to make contributions without fear of reprisal. Safety concerns were raised concerning the development of crisis maps during the Libyan conflict; it was feared that the Gaddafi regime would be able to identify and punish those it saw to be opposing it. Similarly, the Syrian regime has, during the ongoing conflict, made active attempts to track journalists, activists and rebels (OCHA 2013). If beneficiaries are scared that their inputs might be being monitored – as was the case with some individuals in Haiti concerned about government surveillance in the aftermath of the earthquake – there might be a reluctance to engage with the idea of BLA as a whole (Heinzelman and Waters 2010). BLA might, for instance, serve to alert governments (or other elites) to people living in restricted areas, or areas set aside for conservation.

Conclusion: Beyond ICT4D

Developments in ICT have made the potential for BLA a distinct possibility. Examples of crowdsourcing ranging from emergency situations such as that of Haiti following the earthquake, to more basic development projects like the Map Kibera Project in Kenya, have demonstrated Surowiecki's 'wisdom of crowds' in a very real way. Furthermore, as ICT becomes ever more readily available amongst even the poorest of communities, so the

opportunities for accessing this 'wisdom' become more practicable. However, despite the increasing ubiquity of ICT4D projects, in the rush for the 'new', the radical aspect of many such projects has been dramatically overemphasised. In many respects, ICT4D 'innovations' are simply a case of 'old wine in new bottles': the same model of development sporting improved technology. This is not, however, to disparage ICT4D projects per se. Rather, it is an effort to emphasise that few of these initiatives are genuinely radical in intent - rather, they are refinements on what has gone before. However, the deployment of BLA to its fullest extent will involve not just a technical revolution in data gathering but a complete re-evaluation of how development aid is dispensed and, from a critical perspective, what it is for. BLA would involve not just the dissemination of information or the collection of data but the outsourcing of project design to beneficiaries themselves, with the associated caveat that, having outsourced the 'problem of aid', donors respect the 'solution' irrespective of their concerns regarding needs/wants and political sensitivities. In short, BLA is a model that will empower beneficiaries to decide the 'when' and 'what', while agencies and NGOs concentrate on facilitation.

The rewards are potentially telling, not least in terms of genuine engagement with beneficiary communities. Furthermore, the concept of BLA squares the circle with respect to critical and problem-solving debates pertaining to development. For the former, BLA goes some way towards addressing structuralist concerns regarding aid and the perception of an 'aid industry' in thrall to donor interests. For the latter, BLA offers greater efficiency, cost effectiveness, and value for money. In short, it offers a conceptually-unified response to the question of what development aid and assistance is for.

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