

IMPLEMENTING NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THE SOUTH: A CHANCE FOR PEOPLE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES TO REALISE THEIR OWN PROJECTS

A CONVERSATION WITH CAROLINE FIGUÈRES

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Caroline Figuères (Msc, National School for Water and Environmental Engineering (ENGEES), Strasbourg, France, 1985), from 1985 to 2002 has been working for a number of French and Dutch consulting companies, eventually moving to The Netherlands in 1989. Thanks to her involvement in short missions and projects in developing countries and in Europe, Ms Figuères gained an invaluable insight into international water and environmental problems. She has a broad experience in projects as advisor, including policy making, feasibility studies, project outlining and preparation, master planning, monitoring and evaluation, project development and financing, up to the strengthening of institutional capacity.

In 1996 Ms Figuères founded IWACO-France, the French branch of the Dutch IWACO consulting company, and till 1999 she developed its corporate strategy. From 1999 to 2002, she has been working at Netherlands Engineering Consultants (NEDECO) as marketing manager and water expert. In 1999 she was chosen to participate in the next round of a water leadership programme. From 2002 to 2007 Ms Figuères has been Head of the Urban Water and Sanitation Department at the UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education (Delft, The Netherlands) and member of the management team. She has been involved in various education and capacity building programmes in water and environmental sectors. She has implemented workshops and trainings in several countries mostly in Africa and Asia. Currently, Ms Figuères is Managing Director of the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) based in The Hague, The Netherlands.

THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNICATION and Development (IICD) is a non-profit foundation specialised in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a tool for development. IICD creates practical and sustainable solutions using both modern media (such as computers, internet, email and multimedia) and traditional media (such as

radio and television) to connect people and enable them to benefit from ICT, thereby contributing to the Millennium Development Goals. Together with partners from the public, private and non-profit sector, IICD puts knowledge, innovation and finance to work. Currently, IICD is active in Bolivia,

Burkina Faso, Ecuador, Ghana, Jamaica, Mali, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia in the sectors education, environment, governance, health and livelihoods (agriculture). We asked Ms Figuerès to give us an overview of the institution she manages, to illustrate its achievements in using ICT to enhance education through the several ICT projects and policy processes it supports, and to explain its overall role in the education sector.

How and when was IICD established?

IICD was created from scratch in 1996. Jan Pronk, at that time minister of Development and Cooperation for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stressed the importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for development, thus this NGO was set up. Although IICD is often seen as an international organisation, it is a Dutch based NGO.

What is the role of the IICD?

When setting a project in a country, we first establish a 'round table' with different stakeholders. We discuss with them their problems and objectives, and we suggest how ICT can facilitate the creation or the implementation of the relevant solutions. The next stage involves developing a pilot projects, after which the projects are put into practice. We help local people with these projects and support the technology needed for them, either with high technology like internet and cell-phones or more conventional communications tools, including radio and television.

Can you give us an example of the activities IICD in the educational sector?

A relevant example is the Lusaka Vocational Training project. In a rough township of Lusaka, in Zambia, we are supporting the Chawama Youth skill training centre, which carries out activities in the fields of tailoring, auto mechanics,

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“ The century
is advanced,
but every
individual
begins
afresh. ”

J. W. GOETHE

carpentry etc. The centre also runs a music recording studio for young music writers, who often play a combination of African music, rap and other styles. It is interesting that they frequently convey in the music their life stories, their problems and their experiences.

Have these activities an anthropological or sociological content?

Yes, but in reality the content itself is not the main purpose of the training centre. In the case of the music studio, it was the local youth who came up with the idea, and we said «why not». Our projects are focused on the people or the local organisations that are responsible for a certain activity. If these people inspire those around them, who in turn communicate the message to others, then the project will succeed, independently from its specific content. These people are 'agents of change' or entrepreneurs or carriers: individuals who see opportunities and are able to transform the ideas into action. With our projects we help the local people to do what *they* want. Instead of setting up our predetermined solutions, we assist them to formulate their own solutions, because they are the best agents who can apply them into

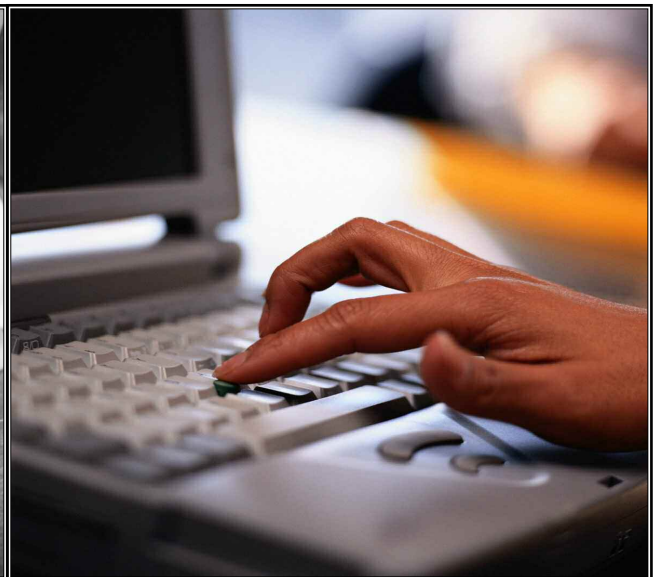
to embed it. Currently, over 50% of the pilot projects have already been embedded in the day-by-day activities of the organisation. We prefer to be involved only at advisory or coaching level. The local people have to take the concrete decisions relating to the projects, and we allow them to make their own mistakes – for the parties involved this is really the best way to learn. Nevertheless, where a large amount of money is involved or the repercussions of a mistake could be significant, we support them with more than just advice. To date, we decided to terminate about 10% of the projects because they were not effective.

How does the relationship between your institution and the local partners work? Could you give us an example?

An example showing the importance of the dialogue between IICD and the local partners is the blood transfusion project in Zambia, which coordinates and manages the national blood transfusion programme. At the beginning, the local people proposed to develop their own software to create a database management system for blood donor tracking and data retention. Since the development



Paul Almsy, *Lessons in the Paline primary school in Togo, 1957.* © Akg-images.



their own, local context. The last thing we want is to transplant a foreign solution created in a different context.

Do you provide then the content of the ICT?

Yes, we provide the ICT support. We consider that the local communities know how to address a specific topic related challenge. We are not experts in health, education or agriculture, but we have sufficient knowledge to understand their challenges and to help them introduce the ICT to the solution or to the project that the local community has selected.

Are these projects established with the help of local partners?

Yes, nothing can be done without the help of local partners. We find a local organisation is owning the project, being able to take care of and to manage it, and then we help them carry it out, by financing the activities, giving advice, know-how and training. Once the project is established, we help them through mentoring via the organisation, which will continue even when IICD is no longer directly involved. If the project is working, we really seek

of software is expensive, we first recommended looking for a suitable program already available on the market. They found a company which was implementing a similar project, but unfortunately the licensing system was too expensive, since the fees were based on the number of persons added to the databank. Consequently, we agreed to the option of developing the software in cooperation with the Open Source Zambia Developers Community. To date, our local partners are now concretely implementing the project, such as preparing the terms of reference for the databank etc. Again, we help them to consider and evaluate different possibilities for such implementation. In particular, they received from the USAID and the EU a great deal of equipment for blood testing. This ensures that the process of taking blood donations is in accordance with World Health Organisation (WHO) standards. The main problem still remains in recording the blood donation by hand, because one of the major difficulties in Zambia is finding donors who are not contaminated by HIV/Aids

– trustee donors – and making their data easily accessible for future donations. It took around three months to see this aspect of the project going through, which although lengthy, is long enough for the involved parties to make up their minds and to stand behind their decisions.

Are the local partners trained by IICD?

Yes, when the people from this organisation and the stakeholders need training on a particular aspect, that training is provided either by another partner (training centre) or by IICD staff member if the competence is not yet available. In Zambia there is now a good training centre, almost grown up from nothing. We started by supporting an existing organisation which wanted to expand its activities in the field of ICT training. Additionally, we organize assistance from important companies in the Netherlands (such as Altran, Ordina, InterAccess, Atos Origin, Cap-Gemini) that can donate time to provide training in the country where the project is based.

It seems that the local partners play an intermediate role between you and the end-users. How sensitive is this aspect?

The relationship with our local partner is actually quite sensitive. We are aware that the information we have about the needs of local people often reflects the view of our *partners* and not always that of the end-users. There is therefore a risk that the balance between ‘supply and demand’ of services might fail if the demand comes only from the partners, or if the cooperation between the partner and end-users is not properly working. In some ICT projects where we train the partners, we require them also to train the end-users, and encourage the end-users to train in turn other people. Understandably, the partners are often reluctant to such divulgence of skills, because it limits their advantageous position in the business. However, since we have no option but to work with local partners, this problem needs to be addressed. We also thought of getting directly in contact with the end-users, and to bypass the intermediate level, by having our local representatives and our local offices. This would certainly bridge that gap, but may destroy the power of the network. These networks are indeed the best way to make information flow and reach the end-users. I believe that power lies in the ability of sharing knowledge, not in owning such knowledge exclusively, like many people still think, and the best way to discourage this hoarding of information is to reinforce the networks, through linking them with other actors, who are linked and interacting at a broader scale, such that they can share and generate knowledge openly.

In which ways is it possible to link these networks?

We try to be proactive and attuned to local events, to create links with other actors in the region and other organisations working on the specific topic and to integrate the knowledge held by IICD into the network. For instance, some of the information IICD has gained through a project in a country could be very useful in other countries. Moreover, into a network working on a specific topic, for instance health, we bring information relevant to that topic. At the moment, this process is still done in an unstructured manner, with people meeting each other on an *ad hoc* basis, and the link is structured only afterwards. In January 2008 we

started a Thematic Learning Circle within the IICD related to specific topics; we have one circle on education, one on livelihoods, another on gender and so on. The people actively involved under each topic have the opportunity to gather and exchange information concerning their experiences, to learn from each other and to share information with other groups. The Learning Circle involves an open discussion about an action in a country, followed by analysing, evaluating and finally planning the new activities, therefore creating a type of ‘think-tank’. We had noted, in fact, that the analysis was often shortcut by bilateral actors who intervened with their own suggestions. Through the Learning Circles project, instead, we can strengthen this process and have the analysis being done effectively, both on questions arisen within the project and the external questions, till the publication of the end results.

May these networks be compared to a living organism? And what would be the main dangers or ‘diseases’ which can occur?

In organisms, the different elements or parts work normally in symbiosis, since none of them has a separate interest independent from the interest of the whole organism. In networks, instead, there is at the beginning often a lack of mutual understanding between the members, and a lack of trust that everyone is working for the best of the network. The most important – and difficult – issue is to engage with those individuals who are working in isolation, and let them understand that they will be better off when working in collaboration with others or with a community. This change of approach requires a prior change of the individual(s).

Does the integration of ICT involve the entire community or only specific sectors?

Although in the past ICT was seen as a stand-alone sector, mainly independent from its application, we now follow a more integrated approach. If you want to have ICT work, it must be rooted in the sectors where it is applied, such as education, health, agriculture, governance etc. ICT need not to be implemented in every activity, but only in those where it provides an added value. In the health sector, for instance, Health (facility management) Information system or telemedicine can make a great difference. The main advantage of ICT is in making information and knowledge accessible to those who need it. This is in itself a major added value for the whole community, but the real impact is difficult to measure because of many variables occurring during the development of a project. The introduction of ICT helps the local people look at the processes in a different way and redefine the way in which they work. It is a power of ICT that goes beyond the mere technology, and involves the community at a deeper level. For instance, when applying ICT to transform a paper form into electronic form, the worker shall re-consider the way in which they phrase and structure the language to make it more effective.

Do you mean that applying ICT is a process of learning as well as an implementation of technology?

Yes. I find it fascinating how ICT facilitates this learning, even where general knowledge may not be present, and I have seen this learning occur in a number of circumstances. For example, we have a few of projects on health information systems. By applying ICT, the users recognized that there was an unnecessary chain of information travelling to and from

an excessive number of different people, rendering the whole communication process inefficient. In worst cases, it would take a year for some information to reach the Ministry. By adding a function of direct feedback to the centre, it was possible for local people to speed up the flow of information to the Ministry, and allowed a more effective preparation of the centre itself, with consequent financial improvements. This new ICT system has created a win-win situation, where information and feedback can easily flow, and changes are made available more quickly.

What are the main obstacles for the local communities in developing ICT projects?

Besides the technical issues (connectivity) and the financial issues, a big obstacle is the *lack of self-belief*: only a limited number of people are acquainted with the idea that they can carry out a project by themselves. Fortunately, the exposure to both local and global issues and developments plays an important role in fostering the mentality of self-reliance. In the five years I have been working at UNESCO-IHE I noted a considerable improvement: since the participants enrolled in 2006 had had a broader exposure to global events (e.g. surfing on internet) than those enrolled in 2000, they were much more critical of and inquisitive about global events and showed already a sense of self-reliance. This has a double benefit, because once there is a sense of self-reliance amongst some individuals (the agents of change, as mentioned before), they can in turn encourage others, and the mentality of self-belief can develop exponentially.

Are there differences in participation between males and females?

Some project had a significantly lower impact on the female group of end-users. This may depend on several factors, such as the community and the country in which the project is based, as well as the type of project at hand. One example is the agriculture project we had in Ghana, where we set up an internet connection with a farm cooperative in order to allow the on-line pricing of the market crops. After some time we noticed that the women lost interest in the project, since only the prices of the crops farmed by men were indicated on the board! Only when the cooperative began indicating also the price of crops farmed by women, the project regained a better balanced participation from the two groups.

Do you find similar problems with female participation in other sectors such as education?

In relation to education and schooling, participation amongst girls is low because the parents often prefer to send their male son(s) to school, if they have to make a choice. Even in primary education, the boys attending school often outnumber the girls. Moreover, girls are often expected to stay at home and help with domestic matters. The lack of female participation is even worse at the level of secondary education, because this is the age when, in

certain communities, girls are expected to get married. And if the daughter is going to get married outside her family the investment on her is normally smaller than that on daughters who are going to marry inside the family, thereby supporting very strong 'tribal' relations. Because of this bias against female participation in education, one of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals is to get all children, male and female alike, complete primary level education. Hopefully, the opportunities for girls in these situations will improve with a growing socio-educational level. In other areas, like in some Sub-Saharan African countries with high unemployment rates, the lack of schooling relate mainly to boys, who are expected to work and to earn income for the family.

In some countries, despite the education programmes, there is still little progress because of failures in implementation. What are the reasons for that?

In education the peculiar issue is convincing the parents to send their children to school, that poses them the choice between a short-term value of keeping the children at home and the long-term added value of education. The 2008 Education-for-All Global Monitoring Report, and the intermediate results for education and health, indicates that there is still an alarming amount of progress to be made in that direction.

What is the impact of ICT in education? Which benefits can be expected by implementing ICT?

Speaking from my own experience, I have witnessed changes on a case by case basis, especially in

the social behaviour of students. In Zambia, a teacher introduced multimedia in a secondary school for girls during biology lessons focused on mosquitoes and malaria. The behaviour of the class was impressively quite and disciplined, with students asking questions only upon permission; that reminded me the vision of a European class in 1950's. By having ICT and multimedia, and consequently being exposed to global events, both the teachers' and students' behaviour evolve. They both become more critical and more proactive; this change is something we wish to see globally, in all people, in order to move in the direction of a better democracy. Another example is the Chawama Youth project in Zambia mentioned before, where participants make their own music. We partnered with Atos Origin who provided a one-week training and helped the project leaders to develop the training material. In the evenings, their young participants were taught to make videos reflecting their interests, and now these youth have created real video clips. This demonstrates that ICT can be implemented in short time and that participants can pick up new ICT skills quite easily and quickly. In addition to that, students educated with the assistance of ICT have a better chance of finding employment because they have ICT skills – at the moment ICT makes a significant difference.



How are your projects monitored?

The monitoring is based on surveys. We prepare a questionnaire survey for our partners, and in some cases NGO's, to answer. This could be done online. Then we look back and reflect on the project and develop lessons learned. For instance, with the ICT for Education we collected in a booklet the lessons learnt from the project itself. We have done the same for livelihood. Based on numerous projects we are able to extract from our experiences more general knowledge and, as a consequence, we can improve the assistance we provide.

What are your institution's future aims and objectives?

This year the major goal is to detail the strategy for the coming years since our agreement with the Dutch government is to be renewed in 2010. After nearly twelve years of activities, IICD has become mature and is entering a new development phase. This offers the chance to reflect on how we want to continue doing and funding development cooperation. I see two different approaches in this sector: a progressive 'bottom-up' approach that really involves the people at a grassroots level and the old-fashioned 'top-down' approach, with the patriarchal attitude of the 'rescuers' of the poor, local people. While for a big 'old' organisation it is difficult to move from a top-down attitude to a bottom-up approach, for a small and rather young organisation like IICD that always worked this way, it is much easier. It allows also to stay at the forefront of change. I wish to see more organisations adopting this progressive approach, which is not yet very visible, and I would like to demonstrate that IICD is working for a change in this direction. To that scope, IICD needs to enhance the structural linkage between the North and the South and between the South and the experience. We now have a lot of networks working successfully in the different countries, as mentioned before, and the overall objective is to link these networks to each other, and then to develop a more structured linkage to the North. Strengthening IICD's networks is the direction we are moving in for the future.

What are the other main points in the IICD strategy?

The second element of the strategy is to really focus on innovation, not only in technological sense but also on the process. A major point is the ability of IICD, with the help of its local partners, to put adequate technology into a local context. In some areas of Africa, for example, the connectivity is so low that certain forms of technology cannot be used, and we have to find solutions to make a particular system work at acceptable level of quality and that people can pay for it. Integrating ICT to local needs is an essential skill of IICD and its partners. I would like us to continue being cutting edge at a level that makes us unique. The third and final element of our strategy is to find a good balance between the funds coming in, with their qualified allocations, and the expectations of the people we are assisting. Because of our involvement on the field, we note that the needs of local people do not always match with the conditions specified for the funds.

What is the expected time frame for implementing the new strategy?

The new strategy has to be ready by 2010, when we will have to apply for new funding from the Ministry. By the end of 2008 we shall have defined our strategy so that we can check during 2009 how the strategy fits the Ministry's

expectations and requests, and submit the final proposals in 2010. Despite the long time frame, there is still pressure on this process, because we need feedback from the local people. Note that the four-year strategy, only indicates the proposed activities, the country and sector of intervention. It is a general framework which leaves us the freedom to work in a demand driven manner. The particular details of the activities are not finalised in the beginning, but are defined, and reviewed and agreed annually depending on the particularities of each project. At the end of each year we evaluate the success of the projects according to the annual plan, and we adopt the necessary changes or corrections. Since we mainly work with what our local partners are willing to do, our plans contain our *expectations* qualified by what our partners are able and willing to do.

What is the relationship you have with your donors, in particular regarding the conditions they pose on the grants?

Most of the funding comes from the Dutch government, and of course IICD has to report that the money has been correctly and efficiently spent. A big question remains on how the government's approach to development cooperation may change in the coming future, because of some critics raised to a few organisations about the correct expenditure of the funds. In fact, when money is just given to people, thrown at a problem, they will spend it uncontrollably, with even the risk of corruption, and there is little confidence that the money is being applied properly. Nonetheless, it would be regrettable to cut all funding because of few critical situations. Instead the solution is to give help in a more interactive, selective manner. Instead of giving money along with conditions for the grant, nowadays some donors are willing to give the money directly to third local NGO's parties who then tell the international NGO how this money should be spent. The idea in behind is that it is more demand driven. The question is if the local NGO is really representative of the target group or its own interest!; this process has been adopted by a number of large NGO's. What local NGO's still need along with the grants is also support – this is mainly a problem of a lack of local capacity. IICD has put the transparency as a fundamental issue of all its actions. If we have the feeling that for any reason something is not going well, then we ask for an external audit to ensure that our projects are not subject to any misuse of funds.

Do you also operate in Western or developed countries?

We are not involved in developed countries in terms of operating projects. However, we are part of a structured network of contacts among numerous organisations. With some of them we have a partnership, from which our local partners in the developing countries can benefit. For instance, we partner with private companies that can be involved in the local projects. Such mutual benefit works also on the other way: we partner with other organisations which established projects in developing countries, e.g. Cordaid and Hivos, and then they can act as a vehicle for promoting the work of IICD is bringing, for instance, the ICT knowledge and/or the way of working. ■