



Title	Book review: E-governance for Development: a Focus on Rural India, by Madon, S.
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Publication date	2011
Publication information	Miscione, Gianluca. "Book Review: E-Governance for Development: A Focus on Rural India, by Madon, S." 11, no. 1 (2011).
Publisher	Sage Publications
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/6036
Publisher's version (DOI)	10.1177/146499341001100108

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Madon, S. 2009: E-governance for Development: a Focus on Rural India. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. £55 cloth. ISBN 9780230201576

I find it as relevant as unusual that a book in a series on “technology, work and globalization” focuses on rural India. While IT are increasingly designed and implemented within and across a variety of organizations and settings around the world, information system research tends to remain focused on “Western” environments, and on private companies. We cannot take for granted that findings which originated in those contexts are relevant for other settings.

The argument is well organized as it brings the reader smoothly from articulated literature reviews on development, governance and e-governance, to the approach adopted for the research of three cases. The result is a crisp critique to the usual assumption that development is automatically produced by e-governance initiatives.

A social science perspective is embraced to show the shortcomings of narrow project management, which look at and analyze IT based projects only on the basis of preset, quantified targets. The author argues convincingly for a more holistic understanding of the complex relation between IT and context.

Two potential audiences can find this work relevant: those engaged in information systems and organizational issues, and those active in development.

For the former, the most evident originality is in the empirical domain chosen. Nevertheless, empirical extension of research is not the only contribution of this book. Rather than the usual prescriptive approach in management and information system studies, the author opts explicitly for an explanatory stance. For this, the longitudinal view is as appropriate as it is rare. Several authors have argued for the importance of context sensitivity, not only in developing countries. This work shows the huge effort it takes to practice it. The outcome in terms of understanding is worth this effort. Through Madon's accounts we see how stand-alone, project-oriented IT endeavors are part of a much bigger picture, and they transform and are transformed overtime. The deep knowledge of the contexts developed by Madon resonates with Rottenburg's (2000) conceptualization of accountability vs. predictability: development projects, in order to avoid to be held accountable for failures, define a-priori the formal process to which they commit.

Longitudinal, explanatory and qualitative research presents many methodological challenges, not only in terms of space and time. I appreciate the reference to critical reflexivity to shed new light on what is taken for granted, not just on what is "out there". Making the implicit explicit is a crucial challenge to bring more organizational learning into IT for development.

The other readership which can learn from this publication is composed of people involved in development as activity and for study. By reading it, they can find how

general concepts borrowed by sociology (like modernization, neo-liberalism) are actually ‘made of’ IT, also in remote areas, and not only rhetorically. The author opens the blackbox of IT to show how it is entangled with market, civil society, and capacity building in different ways depending on local conditions and historical development trends.

The first lesson is descriptive: IT-related social changes do not happen as emulation of the West. The second, less explicit, is more prescriptive: they do not need to emulate. The state is argued to have an important role, because projects tend to drift towards economical development (of the few) rather than social development (of the many). But what kind of state should carry out regulatory action? A universalist one? One aimed at creating equal opportunities for all? Or a religious state, as is increasingly happening in several parts of the world?

The effort to propose convincing sociological interpretations on e-governance for development could be criticized for leaving the “e-” in the background. I can foresee possible criticisms from those who conceive technology as the driver of social change, and those who are treading the difficult paths of proposing arguments which can be palatable both for social engineers and social scientists. Although IT is not researched as such, I appreciate that it is the red line allowing the researcher to consider the variety of issues and theories that orbit around IT for development. In this way, the social analysis of e-governance, including policy shifts for contextual constraints and opportunities,

show the limits of e-readiness, requirements analysis, impacts measurements, and similar reductionist approaches.

A note is about the increasing difficulty of using a label like “developing countries” when it refers to a country that sent a satellite to the moon, and sees 70% of its population depending on agriculture. Such unevenness is not an internal political problem only. Global forces, like IT, are omni-pervasive also in rural areas, but rarely studied from the periphery. What I would have expected is a discussion about specific social characteristics (like castes, just to name a widely acknowledged one) that social scientists have found affecting social change.

Theoretically, Avgerou (2008) -in her critical review of the contemporary literature about information systems in developing contexts- addresses three discourses: transfer and diffusion, social embeddedness and “transformational”. The latter, rooted into the second, is different from the first as it is conscious of its latent ethnocentrism. This research is situated between the last two.

In conclusion, this book can be read as a step toward the “indigenization” of IT for development research. It recalls an interesting paradox: some time ago in a conference I attended, Indian social scientists sharing similar research interests were labeled social anthropologists if affiliated to Western institutions, and sociologists if affiliated to Indian ones. In her conclusions, Madon identifies relevant lines for further research: cultural studies, organizational learning and the methodological problems of integration of policies and research. So, as rural India and other ‘peripheral’ viewpoints can help in

explaining broad phenomena like development, modernization, and IT-related social change, I welcome research from both social anthropologists and sociologists.

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