

Introduction

Nowadays, Internet relevance for our life is undeniable; the world is completely different since its introduction in the early seventies. It is widely recognised, although arguable, that inclusion in the digital society is necessary to avoid being left behind (McKinsey 2014). Following its increasing importance, the UN has declared access to the Internet a human right (HRC 2011), like it recognises the right to development.

The discipline of development evolved in the last decades, from its assimilation to exogenous growth and links to Westernisation of Modernization theory in the 50s, to the more recent recognition that effective development has to comprehend other aspects of life. It is fundamental to consider endogenous growth, local cultures and participation. In the following paper I will consider development defined as the “process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy” (Sen 1999: 1) by economist Amartya Sen. I chose this definition because I will be using the capability approach developed by him to assess the success of Internet projects in developing countries. The economic aspect, meaning economic growth achieved with ICTs, is still part of this analysis, but the main focus is on the extension of people’s capabilities.

The importance of technologies for development was officially recognized in the 90s, when the discipline of Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) was born. Many ICT4D initiatives were implemented following the early enthusiasm connected to the belief that ICT could positively impact growth in developing countries. The earliest implementations of ICT4D projects had their weaknesses, as I will explain later, and for this reason I will focus on projects that are assessed and implemented following the capability approach. In particular, I will consider the impact of the introduction of Internet.org by Facebook, a partnership aimed at bringing connectivity to everyone. As a case study to help narrow the research I chose Zambia, the first country where Internet.org was introduced in 2014.

There is still no study published about Internet.org and its competitors, this is why my contribution to the literature would be to evaluate this projects regarding its impact on development considering the main debates on ICT4D and capability approach. It is important to specify that Internet.org will develop infrastructures (to augment connectivity) and services partnering with governments, Internet service providers and Facebook, while the actual connection with grassroots level will be in the hands of NGOs. Such an enormous investment in infrastructures cannot be achieved by small entities.

There are almost 4.4 billion people offline, but only between 1.1 and 2.8 individuals are so because they do not have access to mobile network coverage (McKinsey 2014). Even if Internet is going to be more accessible, its use is dependent on the digital literacy and mobile penetration rate of the country. I chose the Internet out of all the new technologies because as research shows it is an important tool for social capital development (Thapa et al. 2012), participation, and equality if it considered as a level playing field. Amongst other things it can contribute to the strengthening of national identities (Eriksen 2007) when, for example, helps keeping in touch with family or friends who emigrated. Achieving these results is also one of the reasons why the implementation of projects that will use Internet.org need to be done focusing on capabilities and bearing the interests of rural communities in mind.

The limitations of my research are connected to the novelty of the Internet.org project. This means that there are not enough data available about its impact on subscribers and on the country's economy. The only information related to its impact on the ground comes from interviews of Zuckerberg, Facebook CEO. The "too-young to understand its impact" critique is moved to the Internet in general (Eriksen 2007), and I will address this issue in the following chapters.

I will consider the impact that connectivity might have once achieved all over the world, and I will use the term connectivity as a synonym for Internet usage diffusion. Global connectivity through

Internet.org is expected to be realised from 5 to 10 years from now. For this reason, my discussion is not based on field experience and Internet.org impact assessment, but on other case studies centred on the Internet and mobile phones. Field experience is fundamental for a better understanding of the changes created in lives and achievements by these kinds of projects. I chose the capability approach even if I do not have access to field data because I believe it is the best framework to understand how a project like this can impact a community.

While it is commonly understood that ICTs and digital inclusion are fundamental for future participation in the global society, this change might bring the negative consequences on livelihoods that I will explore in the following work. My intention is not to describe a model that can lift Zambian population out of poverty, because such a paper might be seen as the perpetuation of the ideology of development as imposition, but rather to understand the dimensions that should be taken into account when implementing projects related to the Internet.

The ICT4D literature is characterized by the different theoretical perspectives on technology that influence the interpretation of project outcomes. Most of the times technology is perceived as a neutral commodity, quality that can be detrimental to a critical analysis of its impacts (Zheng and Stahl 2011). This little engagement with development theories is one of the reasons why ICT4D projects might be abandoned or fail, as I will discuss later in more details (Loh 2013).

In the following paper I will answer the question: can the Internet be considered a fundamental tool to accelerate development? And will Internet.org be a fundamental contribution?