

“Children, ICT and Development: Capturing the potential, meeting the challenges”

*A report for the UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti,
by the ICT4D Centre, Royal Holloway, University of London and Jigsaw Consult*

Key messages

ICTs and development

- Information and communication technologies (ICTs) can play a critical role in achieving human development goals and targets. They can facilitate access to information, which in turn can have a positive impact including on health, education and governance outcomes.
- However, equity of access and use are key in achieving results for the most vulnerable children, mothers, and families.
- ICTs on their own cannot offer quick wins for child-focused development objectives. Technological innovation, however, can be crucial for strengthening social networks, disseminating information and linking disadvantaged communities with vital knowledge.
- Unintended consequences of fast technological change and disconnect between technology and the underlying social and cultural context can often contribute to less effective uses of ICTs for development.
- ICTs can support and amplify the impact of a variety of child-focused development efforts when the focus is first and foremost on the needs of the child, not on the technology, nor indeed on innovation for its own sake.
- Change at the systemic level in many cases requires a combination of technological as well as societal change. Achieving this synergy requires buy-in, and ideally participation in design, from intended users. Understanding the social context and rooting ICT for development efforts in existing incentive systems is vital if systemic changes are to be supported.

Equity

- ICT for development (ICT4D) projects must be consciously designed to engage with more disadvantaged groups if they are to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities. Some ICT4D projects do not adequately target the most vulnerable groups and as a result are less effective.
- Many projects are either equity-blind or end up working with relatively more privileged children in order to reduce the risk of project failure. In order to change this, funders have a role to play: they must demand equity-sensitive approaches and also recognise/reward risk-taking with harder-to-reach children.

- Good practice in the use of ICT strategies to address inequity: 1. Consider equity issues from the outset; 2. Consider gender issues throughout; 3. Consider designing for technology realities of the most remote areas first; 4. Consider disability issues.

Access

- Access consists of multiple dimensions, such as availability, affordability, technical skills, as well as social norms that define who has time to use them and which access spaces are open to which social group.
- The study findings underline the need to create spaces, online and offline, where it is safe for less powerful groups such as, in many contexts, women and children – particularly girls – to access ICTs.

Gender issues

- Gender is a key dimension of inequality. Girls are more often prevented by their parents from using mobile phones or the internet than boys.
- Besides often not receiving the same educational opportunities, many girls are expected to take on household and care responsibilities and may have less time to use ICTs than their male siblings.
- Girls who are disadvantaged by their household workload and therefore time-constrained are *'the most demanding end user you can probably design for in the world'* (designer interviewed in the report)

ICTs and children

- Research into the context of children and IT use in the global South, particularly for more disadvantaged children, is very limited. More fine-grained research that adequately incorporates the equity perspectives outlined above are urgently needed (rural/urban, rich/poor, male/female).
- The child's experience with ICT often combines both potential vulnerability to risk as well as innate ability to connect with and understand ICTs.
- ICT4D projects frequently do not engage sufficiently with children as users. Children are often intended beneficiaries but are rarely involved in the design of interventions concerning their lives.
- Failing to consider integration from the outset and just giving technology to children, assuming they will know how to use it in a constructive manner runs the risk of privileging those with greater confidence, higher cognitive ability, better literacy and access to peer or adult advice, thus potentially reinforcing existing inequalities .
- It is important to assess the role of intermediaries such as parents, teachers, community health workers, street or social workers in ICTs and children issues. It is necessary to integrate technology with the participation of users to provide a good foundation for the effective use of ICTs in child-focused development efforts.

- Child use of ICT cannot be seen as homogenous experience. Multiple factors need to be taken into account to assess the potential impact of ICTs in their lives: age, gender, rural/urban, disability, and prior educational opportunities.

Pilots

- To increase the chances of project success, key steps include assessing what other development initiatives are ongoing, what the existing usage patterns of ICTs are and indeed what the landscape of stakeholders looks like.
- More iterative project and programme design which integrates monitoring and evaluation as a continuing activity, not simply an end-of-project work package can pave the way to success.
- Implementing pilot projects in child-focused ICT for development, while paying insufficient attention to social and cultural context and not involving people actually located within the anticipated beneficiary community are leading reasons to the failure of a project.

Private sector

- Private sector companies are vital partners in ICT4D work. However their tendency to prioritize projects which focus on a particular device, or promise to become commercially self-sustained or even profitable at some stage, often stands in some tension with equity-focused work.
- While there are bottom-of-the-pyramid commercial opportunities, there is a risk that the most vulnerable have limited or no ability to pay for ICT services, or that such payment negatively affect other household expenses which are vital for children.
- Only relying on market forces risks reinforcing existing inequalities.

Failure

- Institutionalising a culture of openness and learning is essential to the success of ICT4D, as it is for development work in general.
- It is increasingly recognised that, alongside their impact and accountability functions, monitoring and evaluation should be understood as processes of embedding learning throughout a programme.
- The study highlights the importance of making sure failure is a recognised part of innovation within ICT for development – and not only recognised but also proactively discussed.
- If project success is understood to often include elements of failure, then development planning can move away from binaries of successful or unsuccessful projects and instead move to an approach which is open to ongoing learning.
- The study advocates a context-aware, participatory, child-focused and equity-sensitive approach to using ICTs for child-related development goals.

- One of the most common reasons for failure is building a clever technical solution and then trying to find people who will benefit from it, rather than first identifying the challenge and then considering how technology might be helpful in addressing it.

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