A Just Information Society
Cognitive justice and the WSIS

By Maja van der Velden

It will take another 130 years before hunger is eradicated. With all our money, might and knowledge, we are unable to provide solutions for the marginalised and the hungry in their dramatically shortened lifetimes. Yet, rather than to challenge the assumptions underlying our thinking about the solutions for hunger, the development sector is formulating and implementing new ways of sharing even more of this knowledge. Not wanting to miss out on the promises of the Information Society and the knowledge economy, local and international development organisations are blaming past failures on their limited capacities to exploit information and knowledge. But what knowledge are we talking about?

Vikuruti, Tanzania – 1988

Christine was smart and fun to be with. She was one of the few women in Vikuruti, a village for the rehabilitation of psychiatric patients. I worked together with her in the fields. One day Christine told me her story.

Christine was working as a secretary in a company and business was bad. The IMF’s structural adjustment programme had failed and Tanzania was in transition from that to an economic reconstruction programme. The economy was in tatters. The company boss had to blame someone for not paying salaries to his workers. Christine became the scapegoat: Was her harelip not a sign? Could she be a witch? Certainly, she had given the company bad luck!

Christine was so ashamed about losing her job that she didn’t dare to go back to her family. She was found strolling along the road, in the wrong place at the wrong time. When she resisted her arrest she was sent to the psychiatric ward in the hospital. After the usual treatment of electroshock

1 Maja van der Velden is an activist and researcher from the Netherlands, now based in Oslo, Norway. She can be reached by email at <maja@xs4all.nl> This essay has a Creative Commons License 2003. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd-nc/1.0/ References to this essay should be made as follows: A Just Information Society | Cognitive justice and the WSIS, by Maja van der Velden (2003) URL http://www.globalagenda.org/cognitivejusticewsis

2 See UNDP(2002).

3 I arrived in Vikuruti in January 1988 and stayed there for six weeks as an independent volunteer. Vikuruti was established and maintained with Dutch (Dgis) and Danish (Danida) governmental development aid.
and weeks of idly walking around in the barren hospital ward, she was sent to Vikuruti⁴.

As we worked together in the fields, Christine told me that instead of being rehabilitated, learning skills they could use upon return to their villages and growing their own food, the patients were more or less forced to grow pineapples and other crops. Once harvested, these crops were transported back to the city. Everyone assumed that the hospital doctors were selling the village produce to supplement their hospital incomes, made almost worthless by the effects of the adjustment program and then frozen by government decree. Meanwhile, the patients survived on rations of maize, rice, tea and sugar shipped in by the hospital. Christina didn’t receive any payment for her work. Now she wanted to go home, but she had no money to pay for the bus.

More than a decade later, memories of Vikuruti flooded back to me after watching a television documentary about Ghana. Two thirds of Ghana’s land is now controlled by mining concessions and people have been displaced by new mining projects. Forced from their villages and fields, they are now paying for water and for going to the toilet. The World Bank calls this full cost recovery.⁵

"In the village of Kpembe, I came across Azara Issah. She was filling her bucket with water from a dam she knew was infested with guinea worm. She didn’t have the money to pay for clean water at the local pump.

The village chief invited us for lunch. We ate chicken feet, soup and rice - American rice. A mile away is the Katanga valley, once Ghana’s rice bowl. It now lies fallow. Ghana now imports rice. Ghana used to be self-sufficient in rice. But then the World Bank and IMF decreed that markets had to open and subsidies had to stop.

Wherever I looked, I saw double standards. People here have to pay for the essentials of life, like water. In America, the government pours millions of dollars each year into propping up its water system. And why is American rice the staple now for Ghanaians? Yes, you’ve guessed it. American rice is subsidised.⁶

---

⁴ With a few exceptions, all patients in Vikuruti had undergone the standard treatment of electroshock and stay in the hospital before being transferred to the rehabilitation village.
⁵ “Profits of Doom” by John Kampfner; video footage of Azara Issah’s story can be found at URL http://news.bbc.co.uk/olmedia/1630000/video/_1634502_wateredit_vi.ram
⁶ The transcript of the documentary can be found at URL http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/audio_video/programmes/correspondent/transcripts/1634502.txt
Whose Knowledge Counts?

The stories of Christine and Azara show how easy it is to hide the destructive effects of global economic adjustment behind ‘traditional’ knowledge, such as the cultural understandings of a harelip or how to filter water. Knowledge for Development, as understood by the World Bank, transposes theories about the information society and the knowledge economy into development, and asserts that development will occur if people have the right information. Thus, people in Ghana suffer from diarrhoea because of their use of traditional water filtering methods or other examples of ‘incomplete’ knowledge. Yet, Azara knows very well why people get diarrhoea. In the documentary, she explains to us that you get sick from drinking water infested with guinea worm. Her problem is not the lack of knowledge. Her problem is that she doesn’t earn enough money to pay for both food and water.

Knowledge for Development assumes that knowledge can be detached from the knower. Anything that is situated in the knower simply doesn’t count. The result is that the effects of a cost recovery policy that makes clean water an unaffordable luxury for most people remains hidden behind a gloss about people’s ignorance of the right development methods. Christine’s misery was a result of society’s ignorance and the resulting stigmatisation of a woman with a harelip. But she, too, knew that she had been fired, exploited and denied help because of an economic crisis, one prompted by structural adjustment.

The Development Gateway\(^7\) has as slogan “Where the worlds of knowledge meet”. Do these local knowledges really meet, on an equal basis, with the knowledge of development? In the documentary, journalist John Kampfner asks Peter Harrold, the World Bank representative in Ghana, if he has visited a village where people have to pay for their water and for going to the toilet. Harrold responds angrily, accusing Kampfner of provocation, adding to the suspicion that a meeting of knowledges was not the idea. In Vikuruti, Christine and other patients told me that doctors and mzungus (foreigners), the representatives of the Dutch and Danish governmental development agencies, rarely visited and they never asked questions about issues that mattered to the patients. In both cases, it seems that the aid agencies view traditions as something that hinders development, not as a standpoint from which a community understands its world and solves problems.

\(^7\) www.developmentgateway.org
These different ways of understanding are contradictory even conflicting. The rationale of development is about replacing or infusing local knowledge with dominant scientific and economic knowledge. This is reinforced by the new ‘knowledge sharing for development’ paradigm, which has failed to recognise that development stumbles when these knowledges don’t meet as equals.

For example, a recent study of a drinking water installation in a village in Ghana has shown that village women don’t give up their own water filtering technique even though they are provided with expert knowledge about the Guinea worm and water filtering. In this case there is a fundamental difference in understanding about water and Guinea worms. That difference isn’t going to disappear with providing more scientific knowledge. Only the integration of women’s understanding of water and water filters, in all levels of the project, thus minimising the cultural disruption, could lead to a satisfying outcome for all.

In the same way it is arguable that Christine’s boss would not change his mind about firing her just because he reads in the newspaper about the real reasons for his economic woes. The hospital’s electroshocks practices and forced labour in Vikuruti were not going to disappear with the provision of more up-to-date knowledge about psychiatric care. They already had that. Only a change in this economic policy that would increase doctor salaries and hospital budgets to buy drugs could make a change of behaviour possible.

If development is to succeed in solving problems for the poor, marginalised and hungry, we have to do justice to the diversity of knowledges they possess. A mere tolerance of the diversity of knowledge, as we now see in many well-intentioned projects and networks, is not enough. We have to actively cultivate diversity and protect the communities and environments in which these knowledges are located. The value in terms of efficacy (problem solving) of what Christine or Azara know is even greater than that of the foreigners who draft the policies that affect their lives. But the poor and marginalised are, by definition, vastly outgunned by powers that be,

---

8 See Jensen (2000).
9 I checked: In 1988 hospital personnel were using fairly recent British psychiatric manuals.
10 Tanzanian doctors, like other local elites, are expected to provide for their extended families and to fulfil other societal expectations. Many used a variety of coping strategies; one of them was the use of publicly funded drugs in their private clinics.
11 After Vikuruti I moved to Dar es Salaam and worked as a volunteer for the Tanzania Media Women Association (TAMWA). TAMWA played a crucial role in revealing the cause for the increasing number of women dying during or just after delivery. The drugs provided by the public hospital to stop bleedings were appropriated by doctors for use in their private clinics, often to stop bleedings as a result of abortion.
12 See Agrawal (1995)
such as the World Bank. Their knowledge is valuable, but it does not count. To move beyond this fundamental obstacle to human development, our activities need to build forth on the principle of cognitive justice,13 the right of knowledges to exist without being marginalised by the dominant cultures of government, development or science. Cognitive justice is based on moral inclusiveness and on principles, such as the validity of different understandings and the right to communicate.

Cognitive Justice in an Information Society

A critical reading of the Draft Declaration of Principles14 for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in December 2003 indicates that we are still far from enshrining principles that promote cognitive justice. With its focus on information technologies such as the Internet, the WSIS reaffirms people’s right to express, access, and share information. These are important principles to affirm. It does not affirm or clarify the rights of people as knowers, or address ethical questions of inclusion, power and motivation. To do so, our work and activism must be based on the recognition that all knowledges are equally valid. We must begin to create dialogues of knowledges in which interactive and participatory information and knowledge sharing can take place. Without those kinds of dialogues, the stories of Christine and Azara will be unable to illuminate solutions in the real lifetimes of real people, let alone in the imagined future 130 years from now.

Web sites

BBC/John Kampfner/Profits of Doom
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/correspondent/1634502.stm

Communications Rights in the Information Society (CRIS)
http://www.crisinfo.org

Media Carta
http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/mediacarta

Multiworld
http://www.multiworld.org

Tanzania Media Women Association (TAMWA)
http://www.tamwa.or.tz

Wassa Association of Communities Affected by Mining (WACAM)
http://www.wacam.org

13 I first encountered the term cognitive justice in a presentation by Shiv Visvanathan of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi, India. See Kraak (1999).
World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)
http://www.itu.int/wsis/

Further reading

Agrawal, Arun: 1995, Indigenous and scientific knowledge: some critical comments,


van der Velden, Maja: 2004, From Communities of Practice to Communities of Resistance, in *Development* (47)1 (forthcoming).