

Global JAM on Collaborative Technology Requirements for Social Change

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JAM 'FINDINGS' and 'NEXT STEPS' -> ACTION AGENDA -> Re: ACTION AGENDA

by Lars Soeftestad - Saturday, 21 July 2007, 07:19 AM

In lieu of a better place to present this suggestion —

I believe several among us would like to be able to consult parts of the discussion during this Jam, after the site is removed. This certainly applies to me, as I did not have the time to read everything in detail, and certainly not follow up on various links, etc. that were listed

Accordingly, I would like to suggest that all discussion threads be saved for posterity. The easiest way of doing this is probably to convert all relevant (HTML) pages into PDFs, and post them somewhere, e.g., on the kpublic site, and/or alternatively on the websites of the organizations behind the Jam.

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GLOBAL JAM FORUM -> WORKING -> Re: WORKING

by Lars Soeftestad - Saturday, 21 July 2007, 06:29 AM

Dear Conan,

Thanks for these valuable comments. You begin by addressing technology, and end by focusing on social considerations, needs, requirements, and mores. As may be obvious to you all by now, this is also my own assessment and preference! But before I leave technology behind, I would like to point out that Michael's concern is valid and valuable in the context of the geographic and societal focus that predominantly has marked this excellent exchange, namely the West.

My focus on participation as a means and as a goal (or aim) is, however, universal. Perhaps I may be allowed to expand a little on this logic and rationale, that intuitively may seem more tautological than anything else. In everyday thought, it is true, we think of means as something that, down the road, result in a certain outcome or goal. The inherent logic of this argument, I agree, does not really fit with my argument of means and goals as mutually causing and supporting each other. The reason it may be hard to grasp this argument is because we in the developed countries largely have achieved this position in a natural way, that is, in the course of a political evolution over the last few hundred years. Other countries, specifically those we often refer to as developing and transition countries – or certainly sections in many of these countries – are trying to achieve this at the present time through leapfrogging. (I admit to hesitating to refer to the outcome of this process as "democratic", and certainly not a "democracy," as many are want to do, including in developing and transition countries.)

To understand this, we have to think in terms of two levels at one and the same time: the individual citizen level and the nation-state level. On the level of the citizens, participation will have to be used as a means in order to change the mindset of people, to build societal capacity, to achieve involvement and transparency, to address and change traditional power structures and authority, to empower, and to achieve needed change and equity in the areas of economics, ethnicity, gender relations, and politics. If, and over time, this meets with success, a result will be (increased) participation also as a goal. At the same time, and in order for this achievement to be sustainable (to use a much-misused term), it is necessary that the above advances in participation become part of the whole nation-state mindset, become part and parcel of the nation-state's way of conducting itself and doing business, so to speak. Thus, participation as a goal must be reflected also at the nation-state level. As it happened in countries in the West, the logic of this process is that it often begins at the local level (often violently, which is one important reason why developing countries today should address the challenge of participation and inclusion), but more generally in a dialectic between the micro- and macro-level (e.g., that more and more categories of the citizens receive the rights to vote, which, in turn, paves the way for increased participation). The above term "process" is a key one, in the North as in the South. The road is made as we traverse it. Democratic (there I used the

term again) modes of governance are never finished – the goal, in a manner of speaking, always seems to be a few steps ahead of us, around the bend. As we all know, this is why such forms of governance are inherently difficult and complex both to achieve (participation as a means) and to maintain (participation as a goal). There are always decisions to be taken and choices to be made, and it is in the nature of this that we will never have complete knowledge available to guide us, that intuition often will be an important factor, and, furthermore, that we often do not have the full understanding of the implications of these decisions and choices. Yet, we have no choice but making them and move along – to further choices to be made down the road. In the words of the poet:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
...*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

–Robert Frost, from *The Road Not Taken*

The choices we have to make are often easy on the short-term and correspondingly more difficult as we opt for a longer-term view. As an aside: Our discussion seems to have taken on an interesting literary quality. The power of literary allusion can be powerful indeed!

Now, on the Maasai (which is the correct spelling for this ethnic group) reality. It follows from the emphasis on participation that it is for the Maasai to decide how to assess the current and emerging ICTs (including online communication and social networking) technologies and tools, how to make them applicable to their cultural and political reality, and whether and how to involve others in this work. We (meaning non-Maasai) are outsiders and can provide advice. The rest is up to them. For a participatory stance to make sense, the process will have to be prepared and managed by them. This follows, in more general terms, from a fundamental tenet of developing cooperation (often referred to as "ownership"), whereby the outcome of investment operations and development activities more generally are owned by the recipients (the "beneficiaries"), so to ensure an optimal long-term sustainability and lasting effect. How Maasai assess the

importance and use of ICTs is anybody's guess.

Some informed guesswork by an outsider may nonetheless be allowed: For a number of reasons I somehow cannot see the archetypal Maasai shepherd (traditional migratory Maasai have cattle) sit under the proverbial Baobab tree, hacking away at his laptop or other device (shepherds are boys and young men), sending missives off to his buddies in other factions of the Maasai tribe, gathering them for a meeting, or ask them to assemble the troops because some big men are out to exploit them. At this level cell phones and the old-fashioned radio (the latter presumably in a digital incarnation) will be – in fact, are – more than sufficient. This is intermediate technology in practice. Rather, this will likely be the domain of a new generation of Maasai that have left the traditional subsistence practices behind and have moved away to get education (in some cases later to move back). I have met and worked with such Maasai at UN conferences in NY and Geneva. In fact, for cultural, historical and other reasons, Maasai have been frontrunners in organizing and being proactive – locally, nationally, and internationally. Thus, the more likely scenario of how ICTs currently – as well as in the future – are used among the Maasai will, I believe, more resemble the office-variant, in the form of Maasai NGOs and support organizations. Where this technology is used is, however, of less interest. The important issue is *which* technologies and tools are used, as well as *how* they are being used. It is here that we outsiders, experts in various areas, can be useful as advisors. Such advisory roles have to be based upon knowledge that makes us "inside strangers" (to use a term in an earlier posting of mine). However, in performing this role I advise caution. Our role should not be to advocate and promote technological solutions; it is to help Maasai achieve whatever goal(s) they have, based upon their own needs assessments. Thus, in this work Schumacher's slogan "small is beautiful" should guide our actions. I believe that many of the advanced social networking tools that have been discussed in this Jam have little or no relevance and use for most Maasai, certainly today and in the near future. However, for Maasai NGOs such tools may be of use, in order to communicate with others at this level, that is, other support organizations and civil society more generally, nationally and internationally.

Several are already asking when the next Jam will take place. My plea for a future Jam is that we make sure that the participants will include not only experts and activists in the West, but also those whom we want to help and support. Given that the recruitment basis for the participation in this Jam were a number of existing networks, it would be crucial that these networks proactively seek out such relevant participants. Locating such people is not enough, however. Accordingly, as a further advise, I suggest we make an effort to determine why so few of the registered participants from the South logged on at all during the Jam, and why even fewer took an active part (see the stats on participation and geographic location that I included in my posting under the rubric of "As a result of this Jam ...").

[Show parent](#)[See this post in context](#)**GLOBAL JAM FORUM -> WORKING -> Re: Modernity raises its head ...**

by Lars Soeftestad - Friday, 20 July 2007, 10:39 AM

Dear Roy,

How sad to hear about this Masai experience. Without more details it is not possible to arrive at a conclusion of how and why it went wrong. My hunch, though, is that the researchers/activists in question were not well versed in the local / regional / national *realpolitik* and powerplay-implications and contexts of what they started out on (if so, researchers are often political naive, while activists should not be).

The antidote to any type of exploitation is as simple as it is complex and long-term to achieve: namely to change the mindset of marginalized people towards understanding their own worth, and towards realizing that ones they join forces they can stand up to outside exploiters. The way to achieve this is what we in the development business refers to as "participation" or "participatory approaches". As I wrote in an earlier post, this amounts to understanding participation as both a means and an aim.

To tie this argument in with our overall topic, the key question to be addressed is how ICTs in general, and online communication and social networking in particular, can play a role in achieving this shift in mentality and outlook on oneself and the position in society, in redefining the role of citizenship and ethnicity in nation states. It's all about achieving transparency, empowerment and equity.

Back to you, or anybody else working overtime (we're by now well into Day 3 of the Jam). Maybe it should become permanent – 😊.

[Show parent](#)[See this post in context](#)**GLOBAL JAM FORUM -> AS A RESULT OF THIS JAM I WILL... -> Re: AS A RESULT OF THIS JAM I WILL...**

by Lars Soeftestad - Thursday, 19 July 2007, 09:48 PM

.... Try harder to understand the complexity of the interaction between technology and culture, keeping in mind that while technology is a constant, the variability of cultures, with their concomitant values and preferences, is endless. The fundamental rationale for this work is that technology has to adapt to culture, and not the other way around.

.... Keep reminding myself that, in spite of the facts of the overwhelming enthusiasm and great contributions that have characterized this JAM, it is somewhat troubling that the character of the group is so skewed geographically. Some relevant figures:

(1) The total number of registered persons is 294, of which around 220 (ca. 75 percent) come from the North,

(2) Around 130 (ca. 44 percent of the total) were logged on at least once during the Jam (including lurkers and posters). Of this, around 110 persons (ca. 85 percent of the sub-total) came from the North, and

(3) Around 70 persons (ca. 24 percent of the total) contributed at least one posting. The overwhelming majority are from the North.

Furthermore, I will consider the reasons for these stats, their implications, as well as how to address this.

.... Inform my constituency about the proceedings over these couple of days, as well as any follow-up, and remind them that their voices were not represented at this JAM, and collectively discuss why this is so, and what to do about it.

.... Give renewed attention to how ICTs in general, and social networking tools in particular, can be adapted to the realities in developing and transition countries, in terms of culture, and, by implication, in terms of technology. In this, locally defined needs will provide the impetus as well as guide the work towards identifying tools that address these needs.

Finally, thanks to all for two intense days! Now I can finally enjoy the midnight sun and all that comes with it!

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GLOBAL JAM FORUM -> LEARNING -> Re: LEARNING - learning from a case in Botswana

by Lars Soeftestad - Thursday, 19 July 2007, 09:08 PM

Dear Susan and Conor,

Thanks for insightful and incisive comments. We're definitely talking about both marginalization - if not destruction - of "indigenous technologies and cultural practices," as you point out Susan. And, as you comment, Conor, it's a case of "tacit knowledge and often language of concepts" that are disappearing. It is important to understand that this concern with past lost is NOT a question of romanticizing the past, on the part of Western urbanized persons that dream back to the golden past. You point to the essential and crucial issues at stake here, Conor: what is at stake here is that as languages disappear (and they do at an alarming rate - on the average 4 unique languages disappear every year, for good, never to return again), the cultures' potentials and abilities to change and adapt are also disappearing.

I quote myself: "Globalization results in the exclusion and marginalization of diverse categories of stakeholders at the local level in developing countries, while decentralization leads to integration and participation of some of these stakeholders. In this evolving process, increasingly facilitated by ICTs, the role of language and literacy, and their relationship with culture, have been given scant attention. ICTs facilitate language marginalization and homogenization, while it is an open question whether they contribute to language growth and survival. ... The Community-Based Natural Resource Management Network (CBNRM Net - www.cbnrm.net) ... is concerned with how globalization and decentralization is influencing traditional and modern CBNRM practices. This includes how the present massive use of ICTs to facilitate communication, relying largely on English, is affecting literacy and language in the area of traditional knowledge on CBNRM."

The above is quoted from the abstract of a recent paper that I co-authored with members of CBNRM Net, titled "Language, culture and communication in development cooperation." In this paper we explore how former and present colonial languages are gradually entering indigenous, small and marginal languages across the world, replacing existing words, but also coining completely new words for new thoughts, activities and values. While this might seem unproblematic enough, the long-term effect of this is it changes the culture's - and thereby its' speakers, views about itself, themselves, and their environment. In the process, crucial part of the tacit traditional knowledge about how to husband with natural resources, how to make a living, and how to adapt to changing circumstances are lost. The problem is not just that traditional words are replaced by foreign ones, and that new ideas are being representing by introduced terms. The perhaps more troublesome process is that it is virtually impossible to find a foreign word that has the exact same meaning as the indigenous one. This will feed back into other traditional words, and thus, over time, the meaning of other words will change. Again, change is universal and has always been. At issue here is the fact that language change takes place so fast

that other parts of the culture cannot keep pace. In the worst case scenario, the end result of this is that the social system will break apart. The people will live on, but the culture is mostly gone. This is where we most clearly see the truth of Conan's argument about the diminished potential for change and adaptation.

In the paper, we have selected a few languages in Africa, colonial as well as marginal languages, including Akposo, Arabic, French, Hassanya, Portuguese and Setswana. Furthermore, we discuss the possibilities for translating and locating good words that correspond to a list of pre-selected English terms. Needless to say, the result of the analysis is not very convincing. As an anthropologist, one of my favorite predecessors is Gregory Bateson. In his book "Steps to an ecology of mind" he stated that flexibility (as operating on any societal level) is to be understood as "the unused potential for change."

I have attached this paper.

The IUCN journal "Policy Matters" (no. 13, November 2004), contains a brief paper that expands upon this topic, but targeted specifically at biodiversity conservation, where ICTs and online communication involving NGOs and civil society across the world are very active. This paper is available online at <http://www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/> (click on "publications" in the left margin and scroll down).

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