A New Donor Code of Conduct

Donors are in an ideal position to stem the flow of poorly thought-out or inadequately planned technology-for-development projects.

By Ken Banks | September 25th, 2014 | Link

It was Albert Einstein who once said that insanity was "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." He could well have been talking about today's technology-for-development (ICT4D) community, which has a habit of trying the same things over and over again in the hope that someone might eventually get it right.

How we define success is, like most things in the development world, open to debate and interpretation. When called upon, most of us could likely name a few projects we'd define as successful, but donors often chase scale not success. The irony is that, when asked to name ICT4D projects that achieved scale, most people draw a blank. In "Innovation: The Missing Middle"—a recent paper by Dan McClure and Ian Gray—the majority of interviewees struggled to name a single ICT4D project that had gone to scale. The only two that got a mention were FrontlineSMS and Ushahidi, and there were questions even around those.

In two decades of ICT4D initiatives, why have so few gone to scale? What number would represent a reasonable return for the vast amounts of money spent and vast number of pilots that have taken place?

Attempts to understand this and then put things right are as old as the discipline itself. The academic community unpicks, analyzes, and critiques wider development efforts—often for it's own purposes, it has to be said—and occasionally its findings even feed back to the practitioners who do the actual work. Literature also regularly emerges on the topic of ICT4D best practice—a voluntary code of conduct (of sorts) for people looking to deploy technology in their work. The problem is that most people ignore best practice because, well, you don't really have to follow advice if you don't want to, and few academic papers make sense to people outside of academia.

So where does that leave us?

Given that the vast majority of projects would never get off the ground without some source of funding, donors are in an ideal position to stem the flow of those that are poorly thought-out or inadequately planned. So, what if all major philanthropic foundations signed a Donors Charter that encourages much greater scrutiny of any technology-based projects they might be considering funding?

The charter would be available online, offering considerably more guidance and transparency for anyone looking for money for their project. Critically, the charter would require that project owners answer a number of set questions before funders consider their grant application. These might include the following:

Preliminary questions

1. Do you understand the problem? Have you seen, experienced, or witnessed the problem? Why are you the one fixing it?

2. Does anything else exist that might solve the problem? Have you searched for existing solutions?

3. Could anything that you found be adapted to solve the problem?

4. Have you spoken to anyone working on the same problem? Is collaboration possible? If not, why not?

5. Is your solution economically, technically, and culturally appropriate?

Implementation questions

6. Have you carried out base research to understand the scale of the problem before you start?

7. Will you be working with locally based people and organizations to carry out your implementation? If not, why not?

8. Are you making full use of the skills and experience of these local partners? How?

Evaluation and post-implementation questions

9. How do you plan to measure your impact? How will you know if your project was a success or not?

10. Do you plan to scale up or scale out that impact? If not, why not? If yes, how?

11. What is your business/sustainability model?

Transparency question

12. Are you willing to have your summary project proposal and any future summary progress reports posted online for the benefit of transparency and more open sharing?

Not being able to answer these questions fully and reasonably needn't be the difference between funding or no funding—donors would still be allowed wildcards—but taking potential grantees through a process like this would serve three purposes:

- It would force implementers to consider important issues before reaching out for support, resulting in a reinforcement of best practice.
- It would help the donors themselves focus resources and dollars on better thought-out projects that are therefore less likely to fail.
- It would help stop the vast amounts of replication, failed pilots, secrecy, and near-zero levels of collaboration with project owners in the field.

My belief is that the adoption of a charter would do more to put an end to the frustrations, problems, and inefficiencies people in our sector regularly write, talk, and complain about. We should make better use of all that negative energy, and we owe it to the people we seek to help to do everything we can to avoid not only making mistakes, but making the same ones over and over again. Not doing so would, in Einstein's words, be simply insane.