

Title: Knowledge, Work and Human Development: What Technology Can and Cannot Do

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Abstract

The nineties had brought about a fundamental rethinking in development. This rethinking, emanating in part from the international development institutions such as the World Bank and the UNDP, placed knowledge at the center of development and called for strategic efforts to bridge “knowledge gaps.” The understanding of knowledge underlying this reconceptualisation, however, has remained somewhat unsatisfactory. This paper attempts to theorise more adequately the relationship between knowledge and development - understood explicitly as human development. Human development concerns the development of human capacity which can eventually lead to ‘empowerment’. By drawing upon Castells and Habermas, this paper theorises empowerment as involving, inter alia, a simultaneous transformation of the realm of work and the realm of communication, since it is in these realms that oppressive power relations primarily reside. These transformations, require in turn, the mutual interaction between technical and practical knowledge. Technical knowledge concerns “the skilful production of artifacts and the expert mastery of objectified tasks”; in the most immediate sense it is the knowledge that seeks to enhance the exchange value of human capacity. By contrast, practical knowledge concerns collective reflections about - and interventions in - two types of social relationships: (1) relationships of power which are hierarchical, and (2) relationships of shared meaning, which are non-hierarchical.

Through an examination of empirical evidence, the paper argues that there may exist great potential for the new technologies to foster advancements in practical knowledge. However, in most parts of the developing world, technology policies emphasize technical knowledge - in isolation from practical knowledge. Arguably, it is the faith on technical knowledge (and its capacity to enhance exchange value of human capacity) that is somewhat misplaced, especially when attempted in isolation from the development of practical knowledge. It is critical to recognize that empowerment/development need not be sought exclusively in the exchange value of human capacity.