



## Power and the construction of independence in ICTD organizations

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| Title            | Power and the construction of independence in ICTD organizations |
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| Publication Date | 2013-07-04   |
| Publisher        | Taylor & Francis   |

# POWER AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF INDEPENDENCE IN ICTD ORGANIZATIONS

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*Please reference as:*

Kenny, K. (2014) Power and the construction of independence in ICT4D Organizations. Information Technology for Development, 20(1): 6-22.

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Accepted version, final publication:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02681102.2013.809684?journalCode=titd20>

## Abstract

How do powerful vested interests continue to influence ICTD projects? In this paper, instead of adopting a macro-level analysis, I take an in-depth, ethnographic approach to focus on work practices at one NGO involved in producing information and communication technologies for use in developing countries. Staff decisions at this NGO were influenced by particular powerful organizations, and I draw on theoretical insights from organization studies in order to understand this. The approach yields surprising results. Staff members appeared able to 'stand back' from the pressures coming from donors and other influential parties, and to critically reflect upon these. Paradoxically, rather than fuelling resistance, this sense of independence appeared to reinforce dependency on these powerful organizations. Moreover, the fact that this NGO was engaged in ICTD work further heightened these effects. This study extends existing understandings of how power operates within ICTD organizations, by highlighting the ways in which a sense of independence can paradoxically exacerbate donor influence over work activities.

Keywords: ICTD, power, independence, participant observation, organizations.

## 1. Introducing ICT for Development

In recent years, those involved in international aid and development have increasingly emphasized the importance of ICT for bringing about positive changes in peoples' lives (Zheng, 2009). The idea is that the growing digital divide (Castells, 2001) disadvantages those without access to ICT, and so this gap must be reduced through the work of development agencies and international donors. In particular, access to the Internet is seen as vital to reducing poverty in the developing world. Since the late 1990s, much effort has been channelled into reducing this divide. For example, international development organizations began to emphasize ICT access as a measure of peoples' standard of living (Avgerou, 2003), and donors started to encourage developing country governments to promote ICT through education and better access policies. Funding followed such moves; the United Kingdom donated £40 million to ICT for development (ICTD) projects between 2001 and 2006 (POST, 2006), during which period research for this paper was carried out.

These changes did not provide straightforward improvements however; many ICTD projects appeared to fall short of their aims (Walsham, 2001). Commentators pointed to a variety of reasons for this. First, questions emerged about whether ICT access should be prioritised ahead of other needs including access to basic health services. In addition, many ICTD initiatives were introduced by Western organizations after insufficient planning, and were not sustainable in the long term (POST, 2006). A lack of understanding of the local nuances pertaining to specific situations by those in charge of designing and developing ICTD initiatives from afar, also appeared to hamper

their success (Zheng, 2009). Further obstacles included slow Internet speeds, monopolies over Internet access leading to exorbitant charges, lack of technical knowhow to fix broken equipment, and language difficulties (Avgerou, 2010; Madon et al., 2007).

In short, the deployment of ICT in developing country contexts has been beset with problems, and researchers continue to explore why this is. This paper represents a contribution to one such strand of exploration: the role of power in ICTD. In what follows, I begin by outlining the extant literature in this area. I show how a gap has emerged in relation to our ability to understand the reproduction of power, as part of micro-level work practices within the NGOs that are often tasked with producing ICTs for use in developing country contexts. While existing approaches to power have been useful, these have frequently remained at the macro level of analysis. Next, I introduce the research context, providing an overview of EWH<sup>1</sup>, the NGO being studied, along with the methodology used. In presenting the subsequent findings, I show how an ability to stand back and critically reflect upon the pressures emanating from donors and other influential organizations, was a key feature at EWH. I highlight how, nonetheless, the organization appeared to repeatedly acquiesce to such demands, and alter its work accordingly. In addition, I describe how the nature of ICTD work exacerbated this. I then present insights from the neighbouring discipline of organization studies, and show how these helped to shed light upon the case under examination. Discussing how the findings relate to existing literature on the role of power in ICTD, I conclude by drawing out implications for theory, along with practical recommendations for the management of NGOs in the ICTD area.

Before outlining the theoretical framing of this paper, it is important to note that ICTD is not a clearly-defined sector of activity, separate from other spheres of development. Many aspects of ICTD work share features with other forms of international development including for example: a dependence on funding, engagement with ‘end users’ of the product of work, and a reliance on volunteers. As such, observations made in this paper relate to other forms of international development and perhaps even to other activities in which there exists dependence upon funding from external bodies (including academic research). However, it is also the case that certain features mark ICTD activities. In what follows, I outline these differences and similarities, and discuss how they influence the conclusions presented here.

## 2. Theoretical approach: From ICTD to organization studies

### 2.1 ICTD and power

For many authors, a critical theory perspective is helpful in understanding the problems inherent to ICTD (Zheng, 2009). The aim here is to make structures of power and domination explicit, where

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<sup>1</sup> Individuals’ and organizations’ names have been changed to protect anonymity.

they may not have been previously (Silva, 2007a). Avgerou terms this a 'disruptive' perspective (2010: 6); it involves standing apart from dominant assumptions underscoring ICTD initiatives, including the notion that technology necessarily leads to the positive transformation of peoples' lives if only the obstacles to successful implementation can be removed. In place of these assumptions, ICTD is understood as embedded within global flows of power. These ideas are explained next.

Critical development theorists have long argued that forms of power that include the strategic interests of donors and managerial and technocratic logics, influence development work more generally (Cooke and Dar, 2008). As an example relevant to this paper, research has shown that political and strategic considerations are significant determinants of donor behaviour, especially where the donor agency is funded by a national government (Alesina and Dollar, 2000). This is exacerbated in countries in which ties with former colonies remain strong, including the United Kingdom and France (Riddle, 2007: 98). In such countries, non-development criteria including the promotion of trade between countries and their former colonies often supersede other goals in funding decisions (McGillivray, 2003). The result of such strategic allocation of donor funding has been that aid is often granted to countries with which strategic partnerships are desired, with those most in need being ignored. In 2004 for example, when the research presented here was being carried out, only 37% of the UK's official development aid was granted to the world's poorest nations (Riddle, 2007: 104).

Drawing on such observations from critical development theory, authors have noted that the particular concerns of governments, corporations and other powerful entities can colour the activities of organizations working in ICTD. This occurs through the distribution of development funding and the exercise of political influence, and such practices ultimately contribute to the frequent failures of development projects to achieve their aims (Avgerou 2003; Kanungo, 2003). For example, Avgerou (2003) discusses how Western donors insisted upon the introduction of computing technology and information systems, which were developed in the West, during the structural adjustment programmes of the late seventies and early eighties in several sub-Saharan African countries. She shows how such initiatives simply served to reproduce the hegemony of Western economic interests in these areas. Thompson (2004) demonstrates how representatives of the World Bank frame ICT in a way that reinforces the Bank's centrality within the development sector, partly by emphasizing particular, technocratic ways of understanding ICT. These ways of knowing effectively exclude any alternative perspectives of ICT, and development more generally, and ultimately act in the interest of the World Bank itself. Thompson illustrates these arguments with a detailed analysis of a speech by the Bank's president. What this perspective shows, in summary, is that organizations that have the power to withhold important resources can influence practices in ICT for development in ways that further their interests, creating an unfair situation in

which those most in need of assistance are ignored. While these studies and the critical development perspectives that they draw on are very valuable, a gap has emerged in this approach.

## 2.2 A need for micro-level perspectives on the reproduction of power in ICTD organizations

With some exceptions, critical perspectives on ICTD can tend to focus on the 'macro' landscape of development, examining how vested interests dominate the sector on a wider scale (Avgerou, 2003), or how particular discourses embed texts including policy documents and speeches (Thompson, 2004). This emphasis is shared by critical development studies more broadly (see for example Cooke and Dar, 2008) although notable exceptions included Ebrahim's (2003) research on how external funding relations affect work practices in NGOs, specifically, the production of reports (see also Dar, 2008). As Ebrahim shows, macro level approaches are valuable although they leave us with an incomplete picture. What appears to be missing is a focus on how power and domination come to be reproduced through day-to-day work practices in specific NGOs; the emphasis tends to be on the outcomes of particular power struggles, rather than on the nuances of how these struggles are enacted. By overlooking the lived experiences of people that work in ICTD organizations, researchers cannot usefully comment on how patterns of power and domination might be resisted and potentially altered.

In addition to its practical relevance to ICTD work, this focus is theoretically important. Many critical studies of ICTD draw on Michel Foucault's work to understand power either directly, or indirectly through for example Escobar's Foucauldian-inspired analysis of power (Silva, 2007; Thompson, 2004). For Foucault, large-scale 'systems' of power have their roots in the mundane activities of people as they go about their daily lives; these systems are sustained by their continuous re-enactment. Networks of power are difficult to observe at a macro level of analysis, given their complex nature. However, they are 'often quite explicit at the restricted level where they are inscribed', and so it is useful to examine this level (Foucault, 1990: 94-95). These explicit practices can be studied in order to understand how they link up and, 'becoming connected to one another, attracting and propagating one another, but finding their base of support and their condition elsewhere, end by forming comprehensive systems' (ibid). It appears therefore, that if we wish to examine how power is reproduced within the organizations that carry out development work, we need to examine the mundane practices of people who work in this sector. It is important to note that the intention is not to deny the usefulness of other analytic perspectives on this problem. Both critical development theory and postcolonial theory, for example, have been drawn upon by the author to provide valuable insights on the case of EWH (author, 2008). Rather, the approach proposed here is intended to complement these perspectives and draws upon organization studies to do so. Within this body of work, the question of how people in organizations reproduce power on a day-to-day basis, has long been a central focus of analysis.

### 3. Introducing EWH: an ICTD organization

I chose EWH, a UK-based NGO working exclusively on ICTD projects, as the focus of study. While some researchers have examined work practices in development sector NGOs from a micro-level perspective (e.g. Eyben, 2004), what appears to be missing are studies of specific, local settings pertaining to the Western organizations involved in carrying out ICTD work. Such a focus is valuable not least because Western NGOs are centrally involved in many ICTD projects.

EWH was formed because of an idea that its founder John had had while working with an aid agency in poorly developed regions. He had become frustrated with the absence of appropriate ICT, and the resulting lack of communications available in places where access to the Internet, telephone lines and mobile phone receptivity were poor. As John himself described in an interview:

“I was sat up a mountain in Nepal, I was with UNHCR. We were finding that communications were really hampering our ability to operate in terms of offering aid support. Yet it was at a moment, this was 1997 I think, when it was becoming obvious how email and the Internet were revolutionizing the way in which we used our personal computers, but also the way in which you were able to communicate” (John, Interview, 22nd April 2005).

An idea emerged from these experiences. John wondered whether software could be developed, which would enable communications despite poor access to the necessary networks. He shared his idea with Derek, Mark and Roger, and EWH was formed in 2001 with the goal of developing this software. Mark and Roger resigned from well-paid positions in London's I.T. sector in order to work towards helping less well-off people.

Specifically, the team worked on an Internet browser that would reduce the amount of bandwidth required in order to access websites. This was done by stripping away unnecessary parts of each website accessed, including colours, pictures and other embedded files. The result was that almost any website could be rendered on-screen quickly, in a simple black and white format. Access to the Internet would therefore be improved for those in areas of poor connectivity. The team specifically targeted developing countries and aimed to help bridge the 'digital divide', as outlined in EWH's Mission Statement, and sought funding from international development donors. By the time I joined in April 2004, EWH had achieved charitable status and had successfully applied for funding from a large UK government donor, UKD. Part of this funding was intended for a pilot study in Kenya, during which the software would be tested. Given its aim of enabling ICT access in developing country contexts, and its reliance on international development donors, EWH can be seen as an organization focused on ICTD.

The organization was based in a mid-sized city in the United Kingdom, and its staff came from the

UK and overseas. Five members were paid small salaries with the remaining seven volunteering their time. I was happy to join as a participant observer for the nine-month period of the UKD project. Every morning, on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, I would cycle to the office. I would remain from nine until approximately six in the evening. I spent much of the working day at my laptop, sitting among EWH staff and volunteers. The period of research included a two-month visit to Kenya for the purpose of researching and testing the software being developed.

#### 4. Methods

For Walsham (2001), researchers concerned with the social implications of ICTD initiatives that relate to developing countries are advised to draw on interpretive or critical studies. The research carried out for this paper was interpretive in nature, in that it aimed to take the perspectives of the people being studied as central, and to provide a rich description of the research context (Silva, 2007; Walsham, 2001). It was also informed by a critical perspective (Avgerou, 2010; Zheng, 2009), as described above. A key tenet of interpretive work is the idea that researchers unavoidably carry assumptions and responsibilities (Jones, 2000). This is particularly the case where ethnographic methods, such as the participant observation approach adopted here, are used. To address this, researchers are encouraged to reflect on their assumptions and to provide rich detail on their engagement with the research context (Geertz, 1973; Kondo, 1990; Van Maanen, 1979). I have attempted this in the present paper.

##### 4.1 Data Collection

In order to study peoples' perceptions of the development sector at EWH, the organization chosen for study, I follow Eisenhardt (1989) in adopting a multi-method approach. My main source of data came from participant observation (Maitlis and Ozelik, 2004), which has proved useful in similar studies of organizations (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Clegg, 1994; Kondo, 1990). Participant observation enables a focus upon the less overt aspects of organizational life including the jokes, the complaints and the arguments, all of which can prove valuable in ethnographic research (Alvesson and Willmott, 2004). I recorded fieldnotes in notebooks during the day, and typed them up at night upon returning home from the office (Schultze, 2000). Computer work is relatively quiet and so most of my notes pertain to the times when the team members were doing other things together: eating lunch, holding meetings and travelling (Schultze, 2000). I augmented this participant observation with a series of semi-structured interviews with each member of EWH. These were carried out at the start and at the end of the nine-month study and lasted about an hour each. Interviews were recorded for later transcription. I also gathered meeting minutes, emails, photographs and intranet pages. All data was converted into electronic form where possible.

##### 4.2 Data Analysis



I was interested in how people at EWH spoke about their engagements with other organizations (Halford and Leonard, 2005; Pratt, 2000), particularly those upon which they depended for material resources. Analysis began by reading my data transcriptions closely, isolating relevant references by members of the team (Hardy et al., 2000). Following a process of open coding, I identified common themes including critical reflection, and independence (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Once identified, I traced these themes chronologically through the data, to see how they were enacted over time (Kondo, 1990; Maitlis and Ozelik, 2004). Naturally, multiple discourses prevail in any given workplace, and in the context of staff members' relations to other organizations, these were complex (Alvesson and Willmott, 2004; Hardy et al, 2000; Kondo, 1990). I chose to focus on the themes that appeared most significant. The account of life at EWH presented here is a specifically local one, developed in the context of EWH (Symon, 2005). This 'close-range' approach to discourse enables rich insights into day-to-day life (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000: 1134, see also Geertz, 1973; Van Maanen, 1979). In writing this account, I aim to weave the theoretical discussion throughout the results in order to capture the complexity of the perceptions that I observed at EWH (Kondo, 1990).

## 5. Donor Influence at EWH: Shifting Position

EWH's goals were clearly outlined in its Mission Statement; it aimed to help bridge the 'digital divide' and to benefit the poorest countries, through its work. This perspective appeared to be shared by members of the organization. However, observing EWH's activities, these goals appeared to have been ignored. Over the year I spent with EWH, I noticed how the team made fundamental changes to their work, structure and strategy, in direct response to what they believed various influential organizations wanted.

### 5.1. Choice of Country

EWH received a large donation from UKD, part of which was intended for testing its latest software product in a developing country of the team's choosing. Given that the organization's mission statement declared that EWH planned to target the 'poorest of the poor', the team consulted international poverty statistics and chose a set of countries on this basis. Before making their final decision, they travelled to London to seek their donor's feedback on the selection of the target country. At this meeting it became clear that from the donor's perspective, particular countries were deemed more important than others. The donor's representative listed the 'key countries for UKD', which included Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya (Field notes, UKD's offices, London, 3<sup>rd</sup> September). Kenya was eventually chosen by EWH, and a pilot study team that included myself, departed in late October 2004.

Even as this trip was still in the planning stages, it had been decided to apply for further funding from the Fitzgerald Charitable trust. This source of funding was seen as essential and so 'courting' Fitzgerald took priority in EWH's activities. A lot of research was carried out, prior to

applying, into the kinds of projects that this organization tended to give money to. Happily, it was discovered that Kenya was also a priority country for Fitzgerald. It also transpired that this was a key country for the International Federation of the Red Cross. It is clear that the content of the funding proposals written around this time tended to reflect the interests of the people supplying the money. A variety of reasons may be offered for this<sup>2</sup> but in the context of the present account, the fact remains that EWH acted upon these donor preferences by choosing to spend the money on researching Kenyan communities. Kenya had not been on the team's original list given its relatively higher rankings in the poverty statistics. This is not an unusual occurrence in development; donors' particular political, commercial and strategic interests often lead them to prioritise projects that might not necessarily be helping the poorest people, as noted above.

### 5.2 From non-profit to commercial organization

Within EWH, it was hoped that their largest donor UKD might continue to fund the organization's projects into the future. By Christmas 2004, however, members found themselves at the mercy of a reorganization within UKD itself. The donor planned to change the way it gave donations, such that money would only be granted to networks of organizations collaborating on a larger project. This would, according to EWH's donor representative, reduce the administrative burden associated with the management of many smaller grants. The change left the small EWH at a disadvantage; staff members realized that they would need to look elsewhere for funding. Two options were available and both would involve a further repositioning of EWH. The first meant applying to a new UK government source of funding, which focused on promoting business innovation in the UK. This would necessitate emphasizing the novel quality of EWH's product development approach in terms of how it addressed contemporary technical and business challenges. In addition, to succeed in this funding proposal, EWH would have to convince the UK government that their software could be saleable to commercial organizations, as well as nonprofit ones, and thus potentially generate a profit. This would involve a fundamental redesign of the software to suit potential paying customers. Again, in writing the proposal, EWH staff attempted to reposition the organization and present its work as compatible with donors' interests.

### 5.3 Aligning with large organizations

The second option for overcoming the feared lack of funds involved reapplying to UKD in partnership with other NGOs, as part of a larger consortium. Again, positioning was key. An existing consortium organization was identified, which had already received a large amount of funding from UK.

EWH began contacting member organizations, including the Red Cross, to discuss the possibility of joining. At the time of the research, a huge number of ICTD organizations had

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in the years since Kenyan independence, the United Kingdom remains by far the largest foreign investor in Kenya. Over 60 British companies are represented in Kenya, with British investments estimated to be worth around £1.5 billion. The UK remains one of the biggest exporters to Kenya, with a 10% share of the market.

emerged within international development. For John, the chairman, it was very important for EWH, as young ICTD organization, to be seen to be helping larger and more well-established groups in their sphere. He argued that the sector had many small, stand-alone NGOs that were finding it difficult to raise funds and to build a profile, because they were not seen to be affiliated with more reputable organizations.

“There are thousands of organizations that do ICT for development and to be honest, there is a bit of a dot-com bubble-bursting thing going on at the moment. Fundings are cut: ‘where is ICT going?, What is the value in it?’ These are the kinds of questions that are being asked.” (John, Fieldnotes, 16th February 2005)

As John notes, funding had begun to dwindle in this already overcrowded space and so EWH had to struggle to make a name for itself:

“There are 1001 different organizations who may have charitable status. How do you separate the wheat from the chaff? The organization that really will do something from those which have set up on a fly by night? It is all based upon your name and what you bring to it, and what you build your name into.” (John, Interview, 22nd April 2005)

Once again, the work of the organization would fundamentally change as they aimed to fit in with the needs of their larger and established partners. A contact with IFRC (International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) was made and John, EWH’s chairman, suggested that the organization should offer to develop software for IFRC, for free, in order to improve EWH’s profile.

In summary, during the period of research, EWH’s position shifted three times: from helping the poorest people to supporting development projects in Kenya, then to designing commercial software and finally to being part of a large consortium of NGOs proposing to work for free. The organization periodically realigned its strategy in order to fit with what it hoped various powerful interest groups wanted and expected. It is important to note that each of these decisions had the potential to, and frequently did, fundamentally affect the direction and nature of the work that the organization carried out. This relates to findings from other studies of international development (Flint et al., 2002). NGO recipients of funding are often willing to agree with donor wishes for example, and work on projects that are not aligned with their own goals and values, because of their dependence on this resource (Schwabenland and Tomlinson, 2008).

Having shown how EWH staff members acted to change the organization’s position three times over the months that I spent with them, I next describe peoples’ perceptions of this as it was occurring.

## 6. Perceptions of ICTD

Over the course of the study, it became apparent that members of the team found particular practices within ICTD to be upsetting, including those mentioned above. Founders Derek, Mark, John and Roger, and volunteers Sally and Dan began to express concern that the sector was dominated by particular political and economic interests. Donor organizations, governments and international NGOs often seemed to be prioritizing things like international trade links, or their own reputations, over more basic goals of helping the poorest people. Team members expressed awareness that this was occurring, and conversations often focused on how EWH was going to manage its engagement. This involvement was somewhat difficult to avoid; many of the questionable 'vested interests' were either funding the organization or promoting its work to the wider ICTD community. Both were essential for EWH's survival as a small, new NGO.

When asked why they joined EWH in the first place, all staff members had cited a need to try and do good with their work; each person had opted out of a better paid career path in another sector, for this reason (Author, 2010). Much of the conversation at work revolved around a dilemma however: a clear discrepancy existed between these personal values and perceived upsetting practices in the ICTD sector. In what follows, I highlight the resulting struggles. I show how EWH members constructed stories of independence and separation, in relation to particular aspects of the wider ICTD sector.

### 6.2 Critical Reflection on ICTD

The first discrepancy between my experiences of being part of the team at EWH, and the picture painted of NGO workers in much academic literature focusing on ICTD, was the level of critical reflection exhibited by my new colleagues in relation to their sector. After some time at the organization, I noticed the very open ways in which these problems were discussed. For example, some people frequently espoused scepticism about whether international NGOs were in fact capable of helping poorer people in developing countries. Chief technology officer, Roger, found that the research trip to Kenya changed his attitude towards development somewhat. On this journey, he visited a variety of ICTD initiatives being run by organizations such as UNDP and various local NGOs.

“The more time we spend here, I am beginning to realize that this whole ‘ICT for development’ thing (trails off)... Any development that’s happening is coming from local entrepreneurs that are taking advantage of the latest technologies in their own ways. The NGO thing is starting to seem, well, almost irrelevant.” (Field notes, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2004)

Roger openly spoke about how he disapproved of the typical development sector funding model in which Western donors grant money to Western NGOs, that then travel to ‘the field’ to deploy their

assistance to the poor. For Roger, a more useful model would be to donate money directly to local NGOs or better, to assist indigenous businesses in the developing country itself. He was frequently and openly critical about funding practices in the ICTD sector, funding that EWH itself availed of. For Roger, the persistence of these practices was particularly upsetting because they were clearly not working very well. The problems of development, he felt, were evident in its failure to improve conditions in the countries it claimed to help:

“You consider Kenya as the recipient of aid in the last forty years: have they moved? Where would you have expected them to have moved, and have they moved anywhere near there? And it doesn’t look so good. So you’ve got some big question marks.” (Roger, Interview, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2005)

Again, Roger felt free to wax lyrical about his cynicism regarding the ability for the ICTD sector to bring about positive change.

In this way, Roger’s views on ICTD matched those of critical development scholars. For example, commentators are concerned about the general lack of information at donor level, about what is happening in the particular regions that they are ostensibly helping (Conyers and Mellors, 2005). This results in donors making decisions on how to fund and monitor projects based on assumptions that are somewhat disconnected from what is actually occurring at their sites (Riddle, 2007), highlighted in a recent study of the funding of telecentres (Madon et al., 2007). Reporting at the end of projects is known to be poor, and where it occurs, findings are frequently overstated in order to attract further funding (Dar, 2008; Flint et al., 2002).

### 6.3 Awareness of donor interests

The inefficiencies inherent to the donor- NGO model were not the only source of upset at EWH. People often talked about the idea that the donations they received might be tied to particular vested interests, such as those in charge of a country’s economic policy:

“These (donor) organizations must be under pressure from governments to give more money to certain countries to certain types of projects. If you create good links, good relationships and stability in a country then you are likely to have good trade there, and maybe you’re going to get the contract to mine something or whatever it might be. And if the country is stable you are going to do better out of it than if it’s in a constant state of civil war.” (Derek, Interview, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2004)

As noted above, EWH received a large donation from a UK government donor (UKD), early on in the research period. Derek and his colleagues espoused a clear awareness that this donation might be connected to particular political interests:

“Obviously the aim of UKD is to help Britain. It doesn't say that but it must be. Looking at it in a very cold way, I mean it must be. What else is it there for? Is it purely there so that everyone (in the United Kingdom) could feel better about themselves? I doubt it.”

(Derek, Interview, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2004)

In this case, ‘helping Britain’ took the form of UKD making a strong recommendation to EWH that they carry out their field research in Kenya. EWH hoped to receive funding in the future from this donor, and agreed that their pilot study should be carried out in this country. For CEO Derek, we can see that he reports to be aware of the flows of power in ICTD, in which governments influence donors in their choice of countries and projects to fund.

This perception that funding frequently comes from particular vested interests was shared by project manager Sally:

“There are a lot of negative and very sinister aspects of development, because, well, development is largely funded by massive government organizations. I am just saying that that is one aspect of it. It's a cynical point of view but it is still true.” (Sally, Interview, July 2004)

Software developer Dan worried about the fact that EWH might have to accept donations from interested governments or businesses, and recognized the potential paradox within this cycle of funding:

“The way I see it, is the reason that development is necessary, (is) the existence of huge power structures which are very self interested by definition, that wreck the place for other people.” (Dan, Interview, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2005)

He frequently expressed his concern at the diverse sources of funding to which EWH was applying. For Dan, this was an unfortunate fact of the way that development sector funding operates:

“Of course it's unsustainable and of course we are only going to be given as much as that interest group thinks it can afford to give away to peace and human conscience, to appear to be a good organization or government.” (Dan, Interview, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2005)

As in Derek's discussion of Kenya, we can see that his colleague Dan recognized that many development sector donations were made for cosmetic purposes: to make the donor organization “look good”, or worse, to alleviate a problem that was in part created by the donor itself. Dan's concern reflects how other EWH members were upset by their dependence on ‘self-interested

power structures'. As was shown, EWH members spoke openly about this, critically reflecting on their involvement in these problems. Again, these views on the role of donors reflect those of critical development scholars outlined above (Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Avgerou, 2003; McGillivray, 2004).

#### 6.4 Constructing independence from powerful organizations

The construction of an independent stance appeared important to staff members. This is reflected in the description of EWH which appeared on its website, and in its business plan. Both used words like 'impartial', 'neutral' and 'independent' to describe the organization's practices to the outside world: ideas that were seen as both important and achievable by team members themselves. Over time, it appeared that the critical reflection described above fed into a general sense of independence among EWH members. Roger described how he felt that a shared scepticism with regards to the vested interests that pervaded the sector, would act to shield the organization. It would prevent outside influences from affecting the work of EWH:

“We've come from other backgrounds, but we have come into this development sector. We now have a kind of scepticism about how development works” (Roger, Interview, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2005)

In this way, critical reflection supported the construction of a sense of independence. Any attempts by external forces to deter EWH members from the path that they had set for themselves could effectively be refused by the ‘power’ of enlightened awareness that staff at EWH enjoyed. An example of this power involved EWH being in a position to ‘do its own thing’ in terms of, for example, designing an organizational model:

“We don’t feel constrained by what we think are maybe the traditional models of how NGOs and how other institutions work.” (Roger, Interview, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2005)

EWH would not be constrained to adopting the same kinds of practices as other organizations within international development, practices which were seen to be flawed as described above.

Importantly, for Roger, it is his and his colleagues’ background in commercial I.T. that enables them to think differently about development, and to remain independent:

“I have come from a technology background and I have big scepticism, which I hope we can use as a sort of power to keep us going down the straight and narrow in trying to do something that is truly useful.” (Roger, Interview, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2005)

It was, for Roger, this very ability to be both within and without ‘development’, derived from his technology background, that enabled his successful negotiation around the contradictions he perceived within international development.

Even as volunteer Dan declared his awareness of the questionable motives of certain donors, as described above, he maintained that these motives would not affect EWH’s actions in any way:

“As long as we are not seen to be supporting in some way the bad things that those businesses and organizations are undoubtedly doing. All we can do is make the best use of those (donor) resources as we can, without compromising core principles.” (Dan, Interview, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2005)

Dan felt that EWH would be able to take these resources and use them in an independent, unbiased manner. The core principles of the organization would remain untainted by the questionable aims of other parties. Having expounded on the wide gulf between the moral imperative at EWH and that of some of its donors, he explained how, if EWH managed to d



good things as a result of taking this money, then the acceptance of donations from people with problematic motives will have been justified:

“If we can radically change the accessibility of communication, then all the money that’s been invested in that will have been a fantastic thing: it will be great that we have got that money from these strange, strange sources.” (Dan, Interview, 26th April 2005)

For Dan, therefore, the end will have justified the means, and this end will not have been coloured by the ‘strange, strange sources’ that finance the effort. In its actions, EWH would be able to remain independent. It would resist the dictates of problematic, vested interests with which it was forced to engage.

In summary, bolstered by critical reflection, a sense of independence prevailed within the organization. In this, it was perceived by EWH members that they would remain free to choose their own practices. Even as the organization engaged on a daily basis with donor organizations, these engagements need not be controlled, nor even influenced, by particular dubious interests. In reflecting upon these observations, it appeared that some theoretical ideas from the neighbouring field of organization studies helped to understand this issue.

Organization researchers, particularly those in the critical tradition, explore how it is that people, when they come to work, engage with and reproduce particular patterns of domination. Scholars have noted how workers often construct a sense of ‘separateness’ between themselves and forms of power that appear problematic. In-depth studies of various workplaces show that whether it appears in the form of telling jokes, playing games or being cynical, maintaining a sense of space in which workers feel able to think and act freely, is important in getting by amid particular forms of domination (Dale, 2005; Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Newton, 1999; Willmott, 1993). Such a ‘breathing space’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 167) helps us to enjoy a sense of independence from that which oppresses us, as Ezzamel et al. found among shop floor automotive workers at Northern Plant (2001: 1054). This idea, that we can feel independent, in a neutral space separate from the influence of others, has long been seen as an important feature of workers’ engagement with systems of domination. Related to this, a sense of individual independence is growing within Western, late capitalist societies. Contemporary conceptions of self are increasingly inscribed by a sense of individualism (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992), personal freedom (Butler, 2004) and ability to control the world around us (Foucault, 1982; Sampson, 1989; Willmott, 1993). For example, ideas of freedom and autonomy increasingly pervade the ways in which we consume, as Du Gay and Salaman note (1992). They argue that through exercising what we presume to be our ‘sovereign choice’ over goods and services, we feel that we are somehow maximizing ‘the worth of (our) existence to (ourselves)’ and remaining in control of our lives (ibid: 623). Similarly, in

contemporary Western workplaces, a sense of individual autonomy is growing at all levels of organizational hierarchy (Czander, 1993). Today's employee increasingly feels that they are independent in decision-making and in control over their destiny. They feel sovereign and free in their capacity to 'understand, and manage their lives' (Knights and Willmott, 2002: 60). Roberts (2005) discusses this in relation to managers, and Grey (1994) describes how the top accountants he studied are encouraged to adopt and internalize a sense of independence and responsibility in relation to their career paths. In the accounting profession, one's career is conceived of as the outcome of various choices and decisions, part of one's 'life project'. Individuals are therefore encouraged to view this project as something that can, and should, be independently designed and managed by each professional accountant.

These ideas help us to understand how people at EWH engaged with the aspects of the ICTD sector that appeared problematic; a sense of independence predominated. In addition to the data presented above, a further illustration of this process involves the organization's engagement with IFRC. As described above, EWH's chairman had proposed to approach this organization and offer to develop software that it required, free of charge, in return for being associated with IFRC. However, chief technology officer Roger perceived that this would distract EWH from pursuing its goals:

“(Roger): I don't think we should be beholden to anybody... not to UKD. We aren't. And we shouldn't be. Like if Red Cross tell us to, what was it? Help them with their Internet Speedometer?

(Researcher) Well, that could be a useful tool for EWH.

(Roger) Yes, but if that's the case, we will decide to develop it, and we will develop it our way.” (Field notes, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2004)

Roger felt that its dependency upon larger NGOs for recognition ought not to compromise the core principles of EWH: the organization should, and could, remain independent in what it chose to do. A further example shows how, for Roger, this independent action extended to EWH's very positioning within the ICTD sector. When asked in an interview whether he considered EWH to be a development sector organization, he answered:

“Hmm. That’s a tricky one. We are going through a period of reassessment, of looking at that question.” (Roger, Interview, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2005)

Despite being funded by development donors, Roger felt that the organization remained in a position to assess the situation and to make its own choices about where it was located.

Interestingly, this view was not shared by all. As the above example illustrates, Chairman John felt that EWH would be better off acknowledging its dependence on donors and larger NGOs, and acting accordingly by offering its services. Here we can see the tensions inherent to this ongoing construction of independence. While this was upheld by the practices of most members of EWH, most of the time, this was not always the case. These tensions were a continual part of EWH life, however in this paper, I have omitted details of these for reasons of space.

As noted earlier, critical studies of organizations working in the ICTD sector have to date focused largely at the macro level of analysis. In order to understand how such organizations engage, day-to-day, with influences from donors and other large entities, in this paper I aimed to examine these practices in more depth. The ideas outlined above: that workers engage with problematic forms of power by constructing a sense of separateness, and that notions of personal freedom are on the increase in Western society, proved helpful in understanding the specific case of EWH, an NGO working in the ICTD sphere.

## 7. Discussion

This account placed in-depth insights into the day-to-day experiences of members of EWH alongside a ‘macro’ account of the organization’s year-long engagement with other parties in the development sector. As such, the approach here complements other perspectives that tend to highlight the broader context of ICT for development work, including critical development and postcolonial theories. This juxtaposition was useful in showing how people engage with powerful and influential organizations as part of their mundane work practices. The paper highlights the nuances of such interactions. Rather than unproblematic compliance with particular vested interests, we saw staff members espouse the kinds of critical insights that might be expected from the most strident critics of contemporary development processes. It was only through such an in-depth focus that we can see the complexity of the ways in which staff members at EWH engaged with their sector: at once finding themselves embedded in particular forms of power, reflectively aware and cynical about this, and yet able to feel separate and apart from the problems of development. A number of insights emerge, outlined next.

### 7.1 The illusion of independence in ICTD work

A first observation relates to the apparent independence from power espoused by EWH staff. In this account, it appears that people at EWH coped with the upsetting practices they perceived in the wider ICTD sector, by constructing a sense of independence. A strong sense of separation between EWH and powerful organizations such as its donor UKD, and the Red Cross, pervaded the organization. Engaging with the 'strange, strange' world of development funding was an unfortunate necessity as noted by Dan, but through their critical reflections and sense of being keenly aware of the problems, EWH members felt that they would be able to control their involvement with the sector. Day-to-day activities, such as accepting donations from problematic sources, would not necessarily implicate EWH in the problems they perceived. Rather, these were seen as somewhat sovereign 'acts of choice' by members of the independent EWH (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992: 623). EWH would remain separate and in control of these one-off acts: the goals of the organization would remain untainted.

Related to this, authors discuss how a sense of independence enables a person to feel separate and in control of one's engagement with the world (Knights and Willmott, 2002: 60), and this appeared to be the case here. For example, even as his colleagues planned to reposition the organization to suit particular interests, Roger's sense of scepticism enabled him to position himself as an 'enlightened cynic' (Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 171), enjoying a breathing space from the powerful interests inherent to ICTD. We saw above how Dan, Derek, Roger, Sally and other members of the team would loudly assert criticisms of the upsetting practices perceived to be part of this sector, and in doing so, refute their embeddedness within it. Despite their presence within the sector, and dependency on it, they felt free to think and act as they pleased. This freedom engendered a special kind of 'power' in EWH, which would enable it to remain 'unconstrained' in the choices it made while carrying out its work.

A problem emerges here, however. It appears from the actions of EWH staff that they were by no means separate or independent from influential organizations in their field. Rather, the initial findings highlight how EWH frequently responded to the whims of their donors, for example, and were prepared to alter their practices, and indeed the founding goals of the organization, in response. Why was this so? Turning to the literature, authors note that a concept of self that over-emphasises one's independence and autonomy can be problematic (Harre, 1989; Rose, 1999; Shotter, 1989). Such an assumption leads people to ignore their inescapable involvement with those around them (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Newton, 1995). Exaggerated notions of independence can merely act to reinforce particular structures of dominance (Willmott, 1993), masking the power relations in which people find themselves embedded (Butler, 2004). It appears that in the case of EWH, the prevalence of this sense of independence acted to reinforce the influence of other organizations, by masking what was a clearly asymmetrical relation of power. However, it must be noted that a

certain amount of independence, separateness and capability to exert power must be assumed if any type of action is to be attempted (Knights and Willmott, 2002). Positive political change is impossible without an assumption that one may act independently, even where that assumption is understood to be contingent and, perhaps, somewhat constructed (Butler et al., 2000).

## 7.2 ICTD work and power

As a further point of discussion, this reinforcement was exacerbated by the fact that EWH worked in the area of ICTD. The sectoral context was a key factor in the specific power-independence dynamics described in this paper. First, within the organization, some employees identified strongly as 'IT people', rather than development staff, and this identity was drawn upon in order to construct a notion of independence. As Roger notes, being an IT person would enable him to keep on the 'straight and narrow', and not be swayed by vested interests. Second, in the conduct of its work, it is likely that the fact that EWH were working in ICTD contributed to its vulnerability to the wishes of influential organizations. As noted above by John, 'thousands' of ICTD organizations had emerged by the time of the research; international development had experienced something of a 'dot com bubble' and this had led to something of a crisis in relation to funding. While this kind of insecurity is a feature of development NGOs more generally (see Riddle, 2007: 367), this was heightened for small ICTD organizations, situated at a time in which the 'ICTD boom' and related funding sources, were on the brink of collapse. It is likely that this increased the pressure to join in with large organizations such as the Red Cross, and acquiesce to donor wishes. Finally, EWH's interactions with donor agencies were coloured by the fact that its core work was in the ICTD area. For example, it is unlikely that the pressures to produce a 'saleable', commercially-viable product and thus become essentially a private-sector ICTD vendor, would occur in other sectors in development. What this study suggests, therefore, is that a sense of independence can be important in day to day life at ICTD NGOs and can blind workers from their location in wider forms of power. It appears that these features are enhanced by aspects of ICTD work.

## 7.3 Implications for research and practice

This paper provides support for ethnographic and participant observation methods in the study of ICTD. It is likely that the kinds of critical reflections that emerged during my time at EWH were

partly a result of having developed a relationship with people working there, as a closeness is required before people are willing to open up to a researcher about the problems inherent to their own sphere of working. It must also be noted that my presence as participant observer affected the site that I was studying. For example, perhaps Roger and his colleagues wished to display a tendency for critical reflection, in the presence of an academic. However, as others have shown, an advantage of participant observation is that it is difficult for people to maintain such an affectation, over the long periods of time necessary for such a study.

This paper has implications for practice; people involved in ICTD work, particularly the managers of NGOs in this space, should consider whether problematic aspects of their work including donor influence, are being ignored in ways described here. A critical reflection, even upon espoused 'critical reflections', would likely be useful in assessing whether and how originating Mission Statements and founding goals have been compromised. Further research into the management of development sector organizations is badly needed (Cooke and Dar, 2008; Eyben, 2004), and this paper represents one such contribution.

## 8. Concluding Remarks

The empirical analysis presented here shows that we cannot hope to understand ICTD by macro-level analyses of the operation of power alone. Rather, in-depth and situated studies of daily work at non-profit organizations are vital for helping to understand problems within the sector. This paper highlights the value of drawing on particular ideas from organization studies and is unusual in this respect: while ICTD studies have tended to draw on a wide range of disciplines, including critical pedagogy, postcolonial theory and environmental feminism, insights from organization studies have not generally been utilized. However, given the importance of organizations such as EWH within the ICTD sphere, it appears that this area of scholarship cannot be ignored.

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