

### **Book Review**

Madon, S. (2009) *E-governance for Development: A Focus on Rural India*, 2009, Palgrave Macmillan, London ISBN 978-0-230-20157-6

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Shirin Madon's book is a welcome addition to a select corpus of monographs addressing issues in ICTs and development. It is fitting that Madon has written this book as it gives her space to articulate her position and findings on e-governance based on twenty years of fieldwork in India. This experience makes her well placed to address a key theme in the book understanding e-governance for development in relation to 'historical processes of development and governance' (p.166). The book sets out to question commonly understood assumptions about e-governance. First, that good governance is a key feature to achieve human development and second, that e-governance is supportive of good governance in a variety of ways including improving government's efficiency and effectiveness; improving the relationships between government administration and citizens; improving transparency and accountability; and enabling access to information and participation in the processes of public policy. These are, as Madon notes, ambitious claims. Her approach is to critically review the relationship between governance and development which is then exemplified through description and analysis of three case studies of e-governance projects in the rural parts of the states of Gujarat, Karnataka and Kerala in India.

The book begins by questioning what is meant by development. Drawing on a wide range of literature and particularly on the sociology of development literature Madon deftly describes changing understandings of development which she wryly notes in passing tend to be western domestic policies applied to international development 'regardless of their relevance.' (p.22) Development, she concludes, is a balance between competing social and economic motivations which sometimes overlap, but which equally require each other. Economic development needs sociality and social development proceeds more rapidly when economic development occurs. A new managerialism has become prevalent in development policy which tends to marginalise the state and its role in social reform on the one hand and affirm the peripheral position of social analysis as a means of understanding development on the other.

Having cleared this ground Madon proceeds first to consider governance and its relationship to development and then assess e-governance for development. Good governance is a combination of bureaucratic and political elements. A focus on bureaucracy leads to agendas of administrative simplification which have been co-opted by a wave of managerialism. The political element emphasises the provision of information, transparency and accountability. A point of contention is the role of the state: is state provision part of the problem or is the state critical in providing an institutional framework and a focal point for democratic values? Madon prefers the latter explanation and argues that the good governance is an interplay of state, local government, civil society and local entrepreneurs. This view is developed into a model that conceptualises e-government for development and shows a cascade of translation of global, national and state policies on development and governance acts as one of a number of forces (others include local administration, NGOs, local political bodies, local entrepreneurs etc.) to shape community and e-governance projects.

The second part of the book charts India's substantive and varied experience with e-governance which began with a decentralised focus on social development and has moved towards an emphasis on economic growth. A key feature of the book is the description and analysis of the three case studies. The first is a twenty year study in Gujarat focusing on programmes to develop and implement management information systems which support rural

self employment schemes. It is the social aspects of governance rather than technologies or management that Madon shows are central to the understanding the mixed outcomes in this case. The second case in Kerala is a seven year study of the inception and development of a telecentre. Given the history of Kerala as a well known left of centre administration it is interesting to find that the telecentre of Akshaya is organised by a local entrepreneur. On closer reading we find that this entrepreneurship is very much integrated in a socially inclusive political system. This project shows how technologies can be used to provide social spaces accommodating political, social and administrative forces but which depend on a history of social engagement by government. The final case is a health information system in rural Karnataka. Madon follows health workers around and shows how a bureaucratic imperative to collect specific statistics is inflected by changing health priorities; by concerns about surveillance; and a lack of capability to interrogate the collected statistics. The case shows the importance of health workers in providing health care and collecting health statistics in a complex social environment which is important to public health but which remains unexamined in collected health statistics.

The book concludes by arguing that the role of state, national, and global views and prescriptions are important in understanding how e-governance is enacted in the three sites. Contrasting fortunes can be explained, at least in part, by differing conceptions of governance in particular in Kerala in which a more inclusive experience of governance provides a supportive environment for technologically enabled development. Madon is particularly attentive to the importance of front line workers who literally make the multifaceted systems work and provide adaptive mediation between changeable local circumstances and changeable governance and their associated technologies.

What can we make of Madon's argument? It is clear that the book provides a welcome corrective to policies based on a technological determinism, that e-governance will lead to certain outcomes. It is also a corrective to, what we might call, an institutional determinism that proposes that technologies and appropriate institutional structures will lead to specific outcomes. However, the book does not lapse into a contingent muddle and shows how mediation is central to any use of technologies and any aspirations to e-governance. How systems are enacted on the ground, as it were, are key to understanding successful outcomes. Moreover this mediation is a complex interplay of local political, economic, social and cultural histories that defy deterministic outcomes. If Madon does an excellent job in this area of how global/national/state 'solutions' are made local, it is not surprising that she plays less attention to how these programmes are constructed and sustained. This aspect of e-governance returns us to questions of how the benefits of e-governance development are distributed. Others have argued, Robert Wade and Bill Cooke for example, that many of the benefits flow to providers of technologies, governments who host donor aided programmes, and to a development managerialism. Perhaps the question of the opportunity cost of framing development as e-governance continually needs asking.

To conclude, this book is an excellent example of detailed and comprehensive scholarship directed at issues that matter and I recommend it to anyone interested in development, let alone the specific area of e-governance.