Facilitating genuine community participation: can development learn from design?

Adrian Flint\textsuperscript{a} and Simon Blyth\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}SPAIS, University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom; \textsuperscript{b}School of Management, University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom

\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Despite decades of debate with respect to facilitating ‘bottom up’ solutions and increased ‘beneficiary participation’ in development, there is little evidence to suggest genuine intellectual exchange between donors and ‘beneficiaries’. Nearly seven decades have witnessed only relatively minor shifts in established power hierarchies, and the sector remains one dominated largely by ‘top-down’ approaches to decision-making. This paper posits that development, as both a concept and a practice, could be enriched significantly if academics and practitioners paid closer attention to the participatory aspects of design methodologies. While design is associated largely with commercial activity, in the hands of more radical designers its methods can be used to generate more participatory ways of thinking and ‘doing’. With this in mind, we consider the extent to which, by employing aspects of design methodologies, there might be scope for alternative approaches to the ways in which development is conceived and practised.

\textbf{Introduction}

On the face of it, development as a practice has changed significantly from the ‘bad old days’ of structural adjustment. Donor programs, from the World Bank and IMF downwards are now far more focused, ostensibly, on people rather than just systems and governance. Furthermore, the ‘beneficiaries’ of aid have, since the 1990s, become increasingly prioritised as actors in the process, rather than being viewed as passive recipients. ‘Community participation’ is now a mandatory aspect of nearly all donor programs. However, as has been argued for some time, despite the language of inclusiveness, diversity, and ‘ownership’, much of the ‘old’ international development template remains in place, particularly with respect to top-down power structures. Development as a practice remains an expert-led affair, and much of what passes for consultation is ‘quick and dirty’ and often peripheral to the decision-making process. Even where this is not ostensibly the case, structural factors mean that ‘beneficiaries’ regularly face constraints where the degree to which they can influence the shape and content of programs is concerned. Succinctly put, there is often a gap between the rhetoric and the reality of ‘doing’ participation in development.

We propose that one possible solution to this ‘participation gap’ is the employment of particular design methodologies as a way of delivering ‘people-centred’ solutions. While design is generally associated with the production and communication of capitalist ‘objects’ and values (consumer goods and advertising), more critical designers have evolved methodologies that are imminently more suited to the problems of development. Starting with the progress of participatory design in the 1970s (as a response to the failure of Taylorism in developed countries) and the growth of ‘design activism’ (as a response to the 2008 global financial crisis), we argue that particular design methodologies offer a possible route to forms of participatory engagement that can subvert or disrupt entrenched development hierarchies and narratives.

This article provides an overview of ‘participation’ in development over the course of the past fifty years. It highlights how an orthodoxy as to what it means to engage in participation in development has evolved, and emphasizes the shortcomings and limitations of this orthodoxy. In discussion with designers working in a development context, we make a case for the integration of aspects of design methodologies within development sector ‘toolkits’ as a means of rectifying this ‘participation gap’. In short, we argue that development can learn to do participation better through engagement with some of design’s more inclusive methods.
This paper should not be read as an attack or refutation of the idea of development. We are not development cynics; we acknowledge development’s successes. At the same time, like many others, we believe that development, both in theory and in practice, retains significant shortcomings. This article is an attempt to observe development practices through a non-development lens with a view to potentially challenging established ways of thinking, particularly with respect to participation and decision-making.

The basis for this study

This paper evolved out of a discussion over coffee at Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok where we, the authors, thrown together as ambassadors for our university, were waiting for a plane to Kuala Lumpur. With several hours to spare, we discussed our respective academic and professional backgrounds (development and design/management), segueing eventually to our experiences of the development sector. Anecdotes of development projects that had failed, sometimes quite spectacularly – largely due to the fact that the people they were intended to help did not see their value – flowed. How, we asked ourselves, did we so regularly get things so badly wrong? In the ensuing conversation, we shifted to the need for ‘bottom up’ solutions and the need to involve communities in the decision-making process (hardly a novel position, given that ‘participation’ in project design is now a development sector standard). How best to achieve this, though? We have had nearly fifty years of ‘beneficiary participation’ in development programs. Why then is this input so often ineffectual when it comes to driving positive outcomes? Over multiple coffees, we discussed the potential value (and problems) of reconceptualising the ‘beneficiary’ experience as that of ‘customer’ or ‘end user’, as opposed to ‘recipient’ and what this might look like in practice. With this in mind, we began to talk about more ‘commercial’ approaches to doing development; how these were possibly better suited to giving people what they wanted (commercial approaches being something we were both ideologically somewhat uncomfortable with). It was at this point that we segued again, moving back into the work being undertaken by designers employed in the field of development and the degree to which their methods just might square some of these circles. In hastily typed notes on our phones, we outlined four key themes that we thought deserved closer investigation: (1) how development and design differ in terms of approach, (2) the ontological outlook at the heart of design, (3) the type of expertise prioritised by practitioners in the field of design, and, most importantly, (4) how designers engage with the ‘problem’ of participation.

On our return to the UK, on the basis of this initial discussion, we began to approach designers working in the development sector, asking them to share their experiences with us. We conducted nine in-depth semi-structured interviews with respondents drawn from a range of design backgrounds, all of whom have had experience working in developing regions on projects that were development orientated (although all have had commercial experience too, and move easily between the commercial and development sectors). Seven of these designers are based in the US and Europe; one is based in Indonesia; another is based in India. We focused less on specific projects, asking instead that respondents reflect on what motivated them to enter the field of development, what they saw as methodological shortcomings with respect to how development is ‘practiced’, and what they thought design methodologies could bring to the field. As part of the discussion, we asked the designers to consider the role of the ‘beneficiary’ in their design processes and how they worked to ensure that their designs reflected the beneficiary’s preferences and requirements. From these data we created a broad overview of respondents’ deliberations and used this structure as a guide to frame our discussion of ‘beneficiary’ participation in the development sector.

The ‘provocation’: designers reflecting on development

At the start of our interviews, we asked participants about the motivations behind their involvement in development-related projects. A common theme was the urge to contribute to ‘meaningful projects’ (Participant A and Participant H both used the same phrase), rather than focus on ‘selling more stuff’ – good design is about ‘changing someone’s life’ (Participant H), having a ‘social impact’ (Participant I). One respondent described what they do as ‘altruistic design’, in which personal satisfaction is derived from the impact of the project rather than its commercial value (Participant E). Another designer went further, stating that, in their view, design is a tool that can be used for ‘social justice’ and a possible means with which to break down ‘colonialist structures’ (Participant F).

Participants were asked their thoughts on ‘traditional’ development approaches, and what they felt their design methodologies brought to the field. An almost unanimous response was that a key difference is one of attitude; in contrast to ‘development’s five year plans and roadmaps’ (Participant D), the design
approach was described as ‘gung-ho’ (Participant A), ‘tactically fast’ (Participant B), about ‘accelerating the process’ (Participant C), ‘making things tangible quickly’ (Participant D), being prepared to ‘take a risk’ (Participant E), a ‘yeah, let’s do this!’ perspective (both Participant F and Participant I used this phrase), ‘fast solutions’ (Participant G), a philosophy of ‘fail fast, fail early’ (Participant H), with a determination to be ‘experimental and wild’ (Participant I). For most participants, design equates with optimism.

Another key area of departure is the process of ‘doing’ – ‘design is fundamentally about iteration’ (Participant C), which is a process of ‘build and learn, build and learn’ (Participant D), and getting ‘something out there’ that you can ‘un-fuck’ as you learn (Participant C). Similar sentiments are evident across the sample: design is about ‘prototyping’, ‘iterating’, ‘stress testing’, ‘reality testing’, ‘innovating’. Importantly, design is not about ideology (Participant D) or politics (Participant E) or generating ‘insight’. It is about ‘making something that works’ (Participant C). Design in this context is action focused, practical and pragmatic. Institutional ‘red tape’ and ‘by the book’ templates are all things to be cut through or circumvented because they slow things down (Participant A).

Participants saw fundamental differences between the types of experts and expertise prioritised within the two fields. Traditional development is understood as being ‘expert-led’; the need for a shift towards less hierarchical forms of leadership was stressed, with an emphasis on co-design (Participant B described this as shifting to a ‘special forces’ model of leadership, where hierarchies are flattened and individual agency is prized). Participants prioritised expertise in ‘process’, not ‘domain expertise’ (Participant I) – as designers, they are experts in ‘process not knowledge’ (Participant B). Accordingly, expert subject knowledge forms part of the process but as an aid to design rather than as an end in itself; using a design toolkit, any problem can be tackled (Participant F). Participant H described their design methodology as a type of intellectual ‘martial art’, it can be deployed effectively in any type of ‘fight’, regardless of context.

With respect to participation, respondents were, again, almost unanimous in their view that what separates design approaches to development from more orthodox methods is an emphasis on empathy and genuine engagement (‘co-design’). In our discussions, Participant F argued forcefully that it is difficult to ‘solve a problem that is not ours’ and, if we were to attempt to do so, those affected would need to be at the heart of any solution. Too much of development is, according to Participant F, geared towards ‘solving problems that communities don’t think that they actually have’. For Participant H, development projects tend to fail because there is ‘nothing worse than thrusting your ideas on people’ – problematically, for Participant H, many development experts interpret their key challenges as technical issues, whereas, in reality, they are ‘adoption’-issues (development experts need to ensure that there is a desire for the ‘products’ they are offering). For Participant G, too much time in development is devoted to doing things ‘for the sake of it’, rather than because the people concerned actually want it. Accordingly, the overwhelming consensus of respondents was that it is only by getting a sense of people’s lived experiences that we can hope to produce outcomes that are wanted and useful.

For all the participants, any design process, be it commercial or non-profit, has to be focused on the user, making the underlying idea of the ‘beneficiary’ inherently problematic. For Participant F, the main problem with development was that orthodox funding models are determined by people ‘who had never been into the field’ and which categorize people as ‘beneficiaries rather than customers’ (other participants referred to ‘beneficiaries’ as ‘clients’ or ‘partners’). At its heart, design is an ‘empathy-led approach’ (Participant A), with Participant H arguing that the ‘best design comes from real empathy’; you can only understand the ‘whole problem’ if you immerse yourself in users’ lives. Methodologically, the result is that design in development is often less about staging key informant interviews and focus groups, and more about simple observation – respondents used terms like ‘hanging out’ (Participant A), ‘hanging around’ (Participant E), ‘valorizing intimacy’ (Participant C), ‘cultural connections’ (Participant D), and ‘fieldwork’ (Participant F).

Participant A argued that, as a result of this informal, involved, and participatory approach, design ‘notices more’ and, consequently, is more effective than development in generating ideas, rather than just ‘pointing out problems’. Participant A was also at pains to stress the practical rather than ‘academic’ nature of design, articulating their aim as conducting ‘good enough’ research, rather than attempting to be ‘exhaustive’ or ‘completist’ – learning, for its own sake, is, according to Participant A, passive while design is active. To quote from Participant B, ‘everything we [as designers] do is a verb’.

Respondents highlighted how participation in a design context diverges from that within development approaches principally due to the fact that, within the parameters of the two toolkits, ‘beneficiaries’ are perceived differently. Participant E, with a significant degree of experience working with European development agencies, argued that, in many ways, the
commercial template usually associated with design is ‘liberating’ in terms of its facilitation of a shift of mindset from one focused on charity, to one focused on treating ‘beneficiaries’ as clients. For Participant E, their work is not about ‘helping people’ but giving people (understood as clients) what they want. In fact, they argued that helping people is ‘not core to what we do’, rather that their work is about improving processes and improving products. Similarly, Participant H stressed the need to see ‘beneficiaries’ as ‘clients’, not ‘charity cases’. This shift in mentality, from seeing people as ‘beneficiaries’ to viewing them as ‘clients’, also enables designers to move away from what Participant B described as the ‘drama triangle’ of ‘hero, villain, victim’ that, for them, currently defines (and limits) development.

All participants interviewed were conscious of problems linked to their design toolkits. Participant A worried about the impact of ‘white privilege’, Participant B raised the issue of ‘white knight syndrome’. For Participant B, concerns regarding ‘white knight syndrome’ were aggravated by the fact that in their view, ‘design doesn’t have a compass in it... it doesn’t tell what the right thing is’. Concerns were also raised about the Silicon Valley ethos (Participant F) that forms the basis for much of design’s ‘gung-ho’ approach. For Participant F, poverty alleviation cannot – and should not – be viewed in the same way as a ‘start-up’ opportunity. The lack of an overarching moral framework was also a concern for Participant E: in ‘depoliticizing’ development, larger – more structural – problems within the global economy might be overlooked. Participant I was concerned about the project-focused approach imposed on most designers by donors, meaning that projects are ‘always devoid of political context and history’. Echoing Participant B, Participant I argued that the lack of a wider context means that there is ‘very little room for ethics’ and that ‘the business of design doesn’t give you any space to be critical about the practice or even about the impact of your work’. That said, Participant A and Participant D were confident that the system could be self-policing, with participants ensuring that ‘we hold each other responsible for doing good’.

With respect to practical limitations, Participant G argued that design methodologies, as currently practiced in a development context, are good for focused projects but less effective where the design of more holistic solutions is concerned. Furthermore, the siloed nature of design projects means that relationships between designers and impacted communities tend to be short-term and transitory (as a result, the ‘building blocks’ never come together). For design methodologies to have a more significant impact, designers need, according to Participant G, ‘to be part of a bigger cycle of innovation’: it is important that communities be taught to do design themselves, thus negating the need for designers to be parachuted in to take charge.

Participants were, therefore, clear in their acknowledgment of the limitations of their methodologies. However, they were unanimous in their conviction that design ‘does participation’ more successfully than development does.

**The limitations of ‘participation’ in development**

The question of participation in development is not new, and the associated debates have now been consistent for decades. While there has long been some degree of agreement that participation is important where the improvement of project outcomes is concerned, the gap between rhetoric and reality persists.

It is remarkable, looking back on nearly five decades of work on the issue of participation, just how limited the progress in advancing genuinely bottom-up decision-making sometimes appears to have been. Writing in 1969, with respect to citizen participation in the US, Sherry Arnstein stressed the need for meaningful community engagement as opposed to box-ticking exercises. Arnstein (1969, 216) argued, in language familiar to anyone who has studied participation in development, that:

> [t]here is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the process... participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the powerholders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit.

In the context of the Citizen Advisory Committees of the era, Arnstein goes on to discuss community participation using terms like ‘manipulation’, ‘rubberstamping’ and being ‘educated’ by the ‘powerholders’. Much of the ‘participation’ she witnessed involved processes in which ‘it was the officials who educated, persuaded, and advised the citizens, not the reverse’ (Arnstein 1969, 216–217). In rather frank language, she described such forms of ‘participation’ as a ‘Mickey Mouse game’. Writing in the 1970s, in an African context, Robert Chambers, who was to become a key thinker in attempts to move towards a more participatory framework in development, made similar arguments (Chambers 1974).

As a result of such critiques, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the evolution of development toolkits such as those inherent in frameworks like Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and, later on, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA).
and its many offshoots and variants. However, as with Arnstein’s experiences in the US, for critics these toolkits became – intentionally or not – mainly ‘extractive’, arguably more focused on ‘data mining’ than co-learning (Younus 2014). By the late 1990s, even some of the pioneers of these participatory approaches feared that their methods had become a cover for those who professed a desire for change but who, in reality, favored ‘business as usual’ (Chambers 1997). In the provocatively titled Participation: The New Tyranny, the contributors collectively posited that by the early 2000s, the development sector had come to employ the language of participation as a fig-leaf for preserving existing hierarchies (Cooke and Kothari 2001 – see also Hickey and Mohan 2004 for additional debates).

The increasing use of standardized toolkits by development professionals in order to facilitate community participation in projects is held up, by critics, as illustrative of the methodological failings of current ‘best practice’. The benefits of a template approach are obvious – expert-designed models can be parachuted into a range of different locations and contexts, negating the need for individual expertise, and allowing for more rapid project implementation. However, the ‘tyranny of the toolkit’ represents the other side of the coin. The toolkit model, while clearly ‘efficient’, nonetheless entails the ceding of a significant degree of power to a small group of toolkit developers and trainers:

Manuals have to be written … [w]ith any innovation there is an urge to standardize and codify, often in the name of quality. Manuals are called for and composed. Paragraphs proliferate as intelligent authors seek to cater for every condition and contingency. As texts lengthen, so too does training. The more there is on paper, the more reading and lecturing becomes the norm, and the more inhibited and inflexible participants become in the field. Big manuals and bad training go together. (Chambers 1997, 212–213)

The problem with development toolkits is that, despite the participatory rhetoric, these approaches rarely succeed in challenging either the priorities of the relevant donor or the centrality of the development practitioner to the process. The flow of information between participants in the process also tends to be largely one way (‘data mining’). The result has been that while communities in developing countries are increasingly encouraged to contribute to projects that affect them, real ‘ownership’ remains in the hands of donors and their emissaries (Glennie 2020). The current donor-driven model, in reality, relegates ‘beneficiaries’ to the peripheries of the decision-making process, making them effectively ‘program takers’, not ‘program makers’ (Flint and Meyer zu Natrup 2019, 211). In essence, the problem is one of trust (or a lack thereof); in order for participation to be meaningful, ‘beneficiaries’ need to be trusted by donors to make the ‘right’ decisions.

The problems outlined above are hardly ‘news’. They are widely acknowledged by those working in development (see, for example, Glennie 2020). In a multi-country study by the CDA Collaborative Learning Projects think-tank, drawing on over 6,000 interviews with both recipients of aid and local aid workers, it was found that ‘beneficiaries’ were overwhelmingly in favor of development programs and the vast majority enthusiastically advocated for continued flows of aid (Anderson, Brown, and Jean 2012). However, the study also showed that ‘beneficiaries’ frequently felt that their views, despite being ostensibly solicited, were not actually ‘heard’ by donors. Furthermore, the interviews conducted demonstrated that the use of pre-planned and pre-determined approaches by donors alienated ‘beneficiaries’ and occasioned frustration when projects failed. The central, and basic, message which emerged from the 6,000 interviews was that ‘beneficiaries’ wanted donors to listen to them and to act on their input. Underpinning such calls is the crucial point that ‘beneficiaries’ felt the need to be treated with greater dignity and respect (Glennie 2020; Roy 2013).

The evolution of ‘participation’ in design

Design’s seeming focus on product development, consumerism, and market-led solutions make it, on the surface at least, the antithesis of development and what development encompasses. Adapting Aldridge’s (2003) typology, consumerist design helped facilitate the creation of a society of ‘dupes’ and ‘victims’, with individuals easily manipulated by market forces (mostly away from their true needs). However, while much of what we understand design to entail does indeed focus on consumerism, there has long been a strand of design theory devoted to addressing social and political issues (Boehnert 2018). Writing in the early 1970s, ground-breaking designer Victor Papanek railed against the frivolous aspects of design, bemoaning its almost exclusive focus on consumerism:

Advertising design, in persuading people to buy things they don’t need, with money they don’t have, in order to impress others who don’t care, is probably the phonyest field in existence today. Industrial design, by concocting the tawdry idiocies hawked by advertisers, comes a close second. (Papanek 1984, ix)

Given the power of consumerism and advertising in the (then) twentieth century to influence people’s lives,
Papanek (1984, ix) called for a change in the ethics of design, demanding ‘high social and moral responsibility from the designer’. He further argued that design ‘if it is to be … socially responsive, must be revolutionary and radical in the truest sense’ (Papanek 1984, 346).

Influenced by Papanek and the work of educator Paulo Freire, designers in Scandinavia in the late 1970s, led by Pelle Ehn, Gro Bjerknes, and Morten Kyng, looked to employ design, instead, as an emancipatory and democratizing tool (Bjerknes et al. 1987). Against a backdrop of a global economic recession and the crumbling of Taylorism, manufacturers looked to introduce new ways of working based more heavily on computer-generated automation. Trade unions in Scandinavian countries, fearful of the implications of this workplace revolution for their members, turned to Ehn and his colleagues to help them navigate this new environment. The result was the development of ‘participatory design’ which, over forty years later, remains the guiding principle for approaches to socially-beneficial design. In his seminal work, Work-Oriented Design of Computer Artefacts, Ehn (1988, ii) described his position:

The alternative design philosophy suggested is based on pragmatic interpretations of the philosophies of existential phenomenology, emancipatory practice, and ordinary language. Design is seen as a concerned social and creative activity founded in our traditions, but aiming at transcending them by anticipation and construction of alternative futures.

The starting point for Ehn and his colleagues was how to empower workers and, critically, how to harness their skills and knowledge in the design of new workplace systems. They felt that design ought to have an ‘emancipatory focus’, with the goal of overcoming ‘conditions that prevent humanization of the world – theoretically and in practice’ (Ehn 1988, 124).

Designers in general accept that the first principle of good design is empathy – understanding the needs of the person who will be using the final ‘product’. Ehn was aware that many factory workers were bemused by the computer systems that were being brought in to modernize production methods. Workers felt increasingly alienated from their jobs and the need for specialist knowledge of computing systems was placing increasing power in management hands. Against this backdrop, the Norwegian Iron and Metal Workers Union (NJMF) decided to commission research by Ehn and his colleagues into how changes in the workplace might be introduced without threatening the livelihoods of its members. Focusing on the need to help workers retain and employ their skills while simultaneously embracing the need for change in the workplace, Ehn and his colleagues looked to bridge the gap between the software developers responsible for designing the new systems and the workers who would have to employ them.

The most significant hurdle identified was ‘language’. As the philosopher Wittgenstein (1953) famously argued, ‘if a lion could speak, we could not understand him’. Even when people ostensibly speak the same language, meanings can differ significantly dependent as these are on culture, context and experience. Without a ‘shared world’ in which to interpret specific words, it can often be difficult to arrive at a common meaning, even with a common language – what is ‘obvious’ to one group can often be a mystery to another (Leigh Star 2010). Ehn’s strategy involved, to a significant degree, an attempt to get all parties speaking a ‘language’ that all could understand. For Ehn (1988), if designers were to create something effective for the workplace, they needed to understand the language of the workplace. Likewise, workers needed to understand the language of design if they were to help influence the process. With genuine communication possible, designers could then focus on harnessing users’ tacit knowledge alongside their own more analytical skills. The best way to facilitate this exchange of ideas was, for Ehn, ‘design by doing’, bringing designers and users together to create mock-ups, prototypes, simulations, and experimental situations. Participatory design was, therefore, more about establishing a context conducive to action than ‘data mining’.

The methodology that subsequently emerged from the work of Ehn and his colleagues was built to a significant degree on ethnography, enabling designers to explore properly the environment and context in which the ‘users’ operated (ie the use of ‘boundary objects’, observations, walkthroughs, and the consideration of artefacts). Central to the process was ‘discovery’, ascertaining what the users hoped to achieve as a result of the process, as opposed to simply asking for feedback on a design. Utilizing this method, designers could employ ‘what if’ scenarios to stress-test prototypes and models. Importantly, for proponents, this design approach worked best not as a ‘one-off’ linear progression but rather as a process of multiple iterations and reflexive practice (Spinuzzi 2005, 167).

The impact of participatory design on Scandinavian work practices has been long lasting and remains evident in current industrial practices across the region – and its impact has yielded positive results. A long-term emphasis on employee engagement and participation in industrial relations has resulted in a labor
force more comfortable with co-design and co-production than the monotony of Taylorist assembly lines. As a result of these Ehn-inspired processes, workers in Scandinavia are amongst the most satisfied in the world (Kristensen 2011). Moreover, the Scandinavian ‘model’ encourages novel approaches to problem-solving, based on teamwork and shared learning. This in turn has resulted in a workforce that is agile, trusted by management and, importantly, capable of continuous innovation (Moen 2011). In terms of levels of innovation, Sweden is ranked 2nd, Denmark is ranked 6th, Finland is ranked 7th and Norway is ranked 20th globally by the UN’s World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO 2020). It is the ability to facilitate this level of participation and ‘ownership’ that makes design potentially so valuable to development.

Development and design in practice

We argue that while some design methodologies have in some instances found their way into development processes, they have to date failed to have a transformative effect on how development is conceived and practiced. In part this can be explained by the fact that where design and development have intersected, it has largely been at the level of product development (ie wood burning stoves; compostable toilets; water pumps) and communication (ie literacy; gender equality; ways to better promote condom use), rather than at the level of ideas. Described by a colleague as ‘design-lite’, product development and communication approaches can be linked to the human-centred design (HCD) movement epitomized by organizations such as IDEO.org (IDEO.org is referenced directly here because it is, by some distance, the major forerunner and leader in the field of HCD, and the inspiration for a host of imitators).

IDEO.org is an offshoot of IDEO, the iconic design company formed by David Kelley, Tom Kelley, Mike Nuttall, and Bill Moggridge in 1991. The organization, which helped to pioneer ‘design-thinking’, has achieved semi-mythical status in the world of design (or at least to those who equate design with design-thinking) (Harvard Business Review 2020; Katz 2015). In many ways part of the Silicon Valley boom – its first offices were in Palo Alto, also home or incubator to, amongst others, Apple, Facebook, Google, Hewlett-Packard, PayPal, Skype, and Tesla – founder David Kelley was good friends with Apple’s Steve Jobs. As a consultancy firm, IDEO has worked to design products and systems for a host of ‘big names’; famously David Kelley and colleagues were responsible for designing (pre-IDEO) the first Apple mouse in 1983 and later the Palm V Palm Pilot in 1999.

Co-founder of IDEO, Tom Kelley (2016, 6), describing the organization’s ‘method’, states that the first priority for any designer is ‘understanding the market, the client, the technology, and the perceived constraints on the problem’. Important too, for Kelley (2016, 41), is the matter of empathy, and having a clear sense of ‘whom you’re actually trying to serve, what needs you’re trying to fulfil’. In terms of process, Kelley eschews the ‘lone genius’ designer stereotype, stressing instead the value of collaboration and teamwork.

The IDEO model, generally now referred to as design thinking, is somewhat removed from the participatory design model outlined earlier in this paper. Design thinking is unashamedly commercial in focus, and, while an example of a new way of working, it represents a still expert-led approach to problem solving. From a more critical perspective, IDEO forms part of the established global neoliberal order. In this sense, as Boehmert (2018, 1) has argued, IDEO and its imitators help to reproduce the ‘values and priorities of those who determine which design problems are to be addressed’.

As a spin-off of IDEO, IDEO.org, tagline: ‘we improve the lives of people in poor and vulnerable communities through design’, was launched as a non-profit organization in 2011. Its mission is defined as using ‘human-centered design to create products, services, and experiences that improve the lives of people living in poverty’. Building on the project consultancy model that made IDEO a global success story, IDEO.org has concentrated its efforts on projects relating to agriculture, health, water and sanitation, financial services, and gender equality. In the early days, the organization worked chiefly with philanthropic donors such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Bezos Family Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation, but has subsequently expanded its client base to include government agencies like the UK’s DfID (now FCDO).

What design organizations like IDEO.org did successfully was focus their energies on the ‘consumers’ of aid in developing countries. In many respects, this was a wholesale repositioning of the role of ‘beneficiaries’; traditionally in the development sector, while ‘beneficiaries’ were the ‘customers’, donors paid for the ‘product’. According to market logic, this, in turn, created a ‘market-failure’ in that the sector was being driven by those who ‘paid’ rather than those who ‘consumed’ (Cheng 2009, 15). By shifting the focus from the ‘buyer’ to the ‘consumer’, HCD offered an opportunity to more meaningfully involve ‘beneficiaries’ as ‘consumers of development’ in the project design process.

However, this repositioning of the ‘beneficiary’ as ‘consumer’ is not unproblematic. From this perspective, the idea that any ‘solution’ to poverty or
underdevelopment can be anchored in capitalist market practices should be understood as little more than an advocacy of the global status quo (Brohman 1995). As Lorde (2007) famously said, ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change’. Far from representing a challenge to the prevailing global order, critics argue that IDEO.org and similar design consultancies – through their understanding of the ‘beneficiary’ as ‘consumer’ – are simply offering communities in developing countries a repackaged version of the ‘American dream’. Given the similarities between HCD and more commercial deployments of design methodologies, the notion that any perceived ‘design turn’ in development represents anything more than the ‘Silicon Valley-isation’ of the sector, is difficult to refute.

The Silicon Valley ethos and mindset at the heart of HCD is evident when one looks at how IDEO.org and similar organizations operate. Organizations like IDEO.org place a significant degree of emphasis on a ‘can-do’ attitude and the power of ‘passion’ (there is an ‘optimism imperative’ built into the approach). On their website, IDEO.org states that ‘we’re eternal optimists’. In their Field Guide to Human-Centred Design (IDEO.org 2015, 19), the organization likewise places a heavy emphasis on creativity, passion and optimism (‘creative confidence’):

Creative confidence is the quality that human-centred designers rely on when it comes to making leaps, trusting their intuition, and chasing solutions that they haven’t totally figured out yet. It’s the belief that you can and will come up with creative solutions to big problems and the confidence that all it takes is rolling up your sleeves and diving in. Creative confidence will drive you to make things, to test them out, to get it wrong, and to keep on rolling, secure in the knowledge that you’ll get where you need to go and that you’re bound to innovate along the way.

In this, IDEO.org is echoing its parent organization – Kelley (2016, 74), writing about IDEO, puts significant store on the ‘passion factor’ and the need to ‘infect’ workers with optimism. The importance of the ‘optimism imperative’ as a guiding principle should not be underestimated and, looking at IDEO.org’s Field Guide, optimism is ranked second in its list of seven priorities. The mantra of ‘anything is possible if you try hard enough’ is, from a critical perspective, undeniably ‘ideological’, despite claims by proponents that HCD, practiced ‘properly’, is value free (the unspoken converse is that failure must be understood to be the result of insufficient hard work and commitment).

Critics argue that this devotion to the ‘passion factor’ means that questioning voices are often dismissed merely for being ‘negative’ (as one designer formerly employed by IDEO noted, to advance through the ranks, one had to ‘believe’, employees were required ‘to drink the Kool-Aid’). As part of the ‘belief’ there is an emphasis on ‘devotion’ to the company and its charismatic founders – Kelley (2016, 8) refers to employees as ‘IDEOers’. Far from dispelling this view, Kelley argues (2016, 189) strongly that ‘evangelism works’, citing Apple’s Steve Jobs as someone who worked with a team of evangelists’. Since IDEO, while not having the brand recognition of, say, Apple, is nevertheless part of the Silicon Valley pantheon, the organization and its offshoots are afforded a great deal of power and influence when it comes to shaping the field.

The ‘passion factor’ aside, a further limitation of IDEO-type approaches is that the model provides little room for critical self-reflection, especially where core assumptions are concerned (Ansari 2018). With respect to the HCD process, much goes unquestioned; there is a tacit acceptance of values, norms and assumptions. While feedback and consumer voices are central to the design process, interpretation remains a largely centralized enterprise that struggles to accommodate competing viewpoints (Lupton 2017). Our argument is that, even though HCD has supposedly ‘cracked’ the problem of participation, and democratized the design process, ultimately its claims remain overstated – effectively old wine in creatively branded new bottles. Despite the language of creativity, participation, inclusiveness, diversity and co-production, the HCD model mirrors much of the international development template, particularly in connection to the role of the ‘expert’. Under the development model, the authority-figure is usually a management consultant (or related); under the IDEO.org model, this figure is now a designer (or a group of designers).

As Lily Irani (2019, 4) has argued, ‘[d]ebates about power and values in design processes must reckon with the colonial, postcolonial, and capitalist processes that lend design and innovation their social promise in the first place’. For Irani, the concern is that the Silicon Valley approach to design is part of a system of postcolonial capitalism that is inimical to development; for design to be truly ‘disruptive’ requires a break from the still-dominant Western-centric model. Drawing instead on participatory design, more critical/radical designers are increasingly beginning to shift debates pertaining to the value of design methodologies towards an emphasis on working for social change: Joanna Boehnert (2018, 1), focussing on design and ecology, reconceptualises the purpose of design as having ‘a social and political function’. This shift towards the ‘political’ has given rise to a number of
interlinked approaches that, while differently labeled – ‘design activism’ (Fuad-Luke 2009; Julien 2013; Markusen 2013), ‘critical design’ (Dunne and Raby 2013), ‘alternative futures’ (Ehn, Nilsson, and Topgaard 2014), ‘transition design’ (Irwin 2015) – fall broadly under the same umbrella. Advocates of the shift view design as a tool with which to both disrupt accepted practices and power hierarchies, and, importantly, to help develop and refine counter-narratives that serve to challenge prevailing structures. Underpinning these critiques are calls for the decolonization of design, which focus on breaking from Western strictures and prescriptions, and opening up the resultant intellectual space to those affected by colonialism and neocolonialism, in the interests of fostering alternative, regionally appropriate ‘futures’:

We should aim to have many diverse forms of design practice in the world – each specific to its region and its biosphere, each rooted in the cosmologies and mythos of its culture, each concerned with defining its own aims and identifying and addressing its own problems and opportunities (Ansari 2018)

Through both employing more radical and critical design methodologies, and incorporating design’s specific approach to participation, we argue that development can be reconceptualised and rearticulated in the language of those affected by it. In so doing, the aspects of design that have made it so successful commercially can be retooled to deliver more meaningful development to communities in developing countries; through the decolonization of the design process, community-led counter-narratives to Western development can be made visible and viable.

**Conclusion**

Development can learn from design methodologies, particularly with respect to issues of empathy, empowerment, democratization, and ‘ownership’. Furthermore, design methodologies offer us in development a way of prioritizing and capturing community voices in a manner that current development toolkits rarely do.

The dynamism associated with design – its ‘can-do’ approach and its advancement ‘by doing’ – offers us in development scope for additional experimentation, evolution, and shared learning. That said, HCD, as espoused by IDEO.org and its imitators, and currently the model of design most visible to the development sector, evolved out of a Silicon Valley ethos that essentially attempts to reposition development within a ‘start-up’ culture approach. We argue that HCD offers little to challenge the development status quo, and may serve to entrench neoliberal values. Participatory design and its more radical offshoots offer something more in the way of a ‘roadmap’ with respect to the design and implementation of development projects and programs: it is possible to reorientate how development is practiced only through ensuring that ‘beneficiaries’ are listened to, through ensuring that ‘beneficiaries’ are agents in the process of development, through ensuring that ‘beneficiaries’ are treated with dignity and respect, and through ensuring that ‘beneficiaries’ are trusted to know what is in their best interests.

This ‘roadmap’ also offers much with respect to meta-debates surrounding the nature and purpose of development: it is only by using participatory methods that homegrown alternative narratives to current development orthodoxy can emerge. In this, the more radical design methodologies offer the prospect of a fresh approach to development thinking that has real bottom-up solutions as a basic starting point.

**Notes**

1. All respondents are currently still active in the field and their particulars have been anonymised so as to protect their privacy and their relationships with their employers and clients.
2. For example, Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) which evolved out of PRA in the mid-1990s but remains similar in terms of philosophy and practice.
3. See, for example, their collaboration on mobile money in Africa http://www.mobileagentsofchange.com/about.html#intro
4. See, for example, their collaboration on early parent-child engagement and brain-building https://www.ideo.org/project/vroom
5. See, for example, their collaboration focused on communities and digital government https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/grant/grant-ideo-org-2019-2/
6. See, for example, their collaboration on the UK Government’s Amplify Programme https://www.ideo.org/programs/amplify
7. Boehnert (2018, 24) cites Fredric Jameson’s description of the status quo, ‘it is now easier for us to imagine the end of the world than an alternative to capitalism’.

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