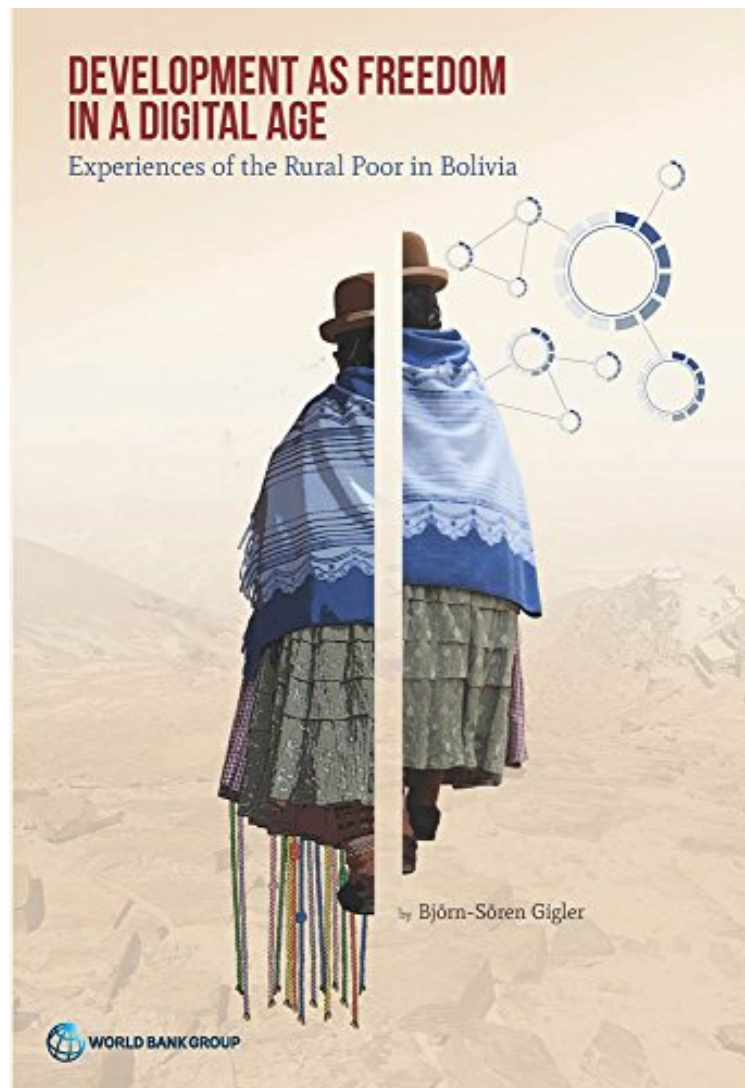


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Development as Freedom in a Digital Age: Experiences from the Rural Poor in Bolivia

Björn-Sören Gigler
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Björn-Sören Gigler : Development as Freedom in a Digital Age: Experiences from the Rural Poor in Bolivia before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Development as Freedom in a Digital Age: Experiences from the Rural Poor in Bolivia:

Under what conditions can new technologies enhance the well-being of poor communities? The study designs an alternative evaluation framework (AEF) that applies Amartya Sen's capability approach to the study of

information and communications technologies (ICTs) in order to place people's well-being, rather than technology, at the center of the study. The AEF develops an impact chain that examines the mechanisms by which access to, and meaningful use of, ICTs can enhance people's "informational capabilities" and improve people's human and social capabilities. This approach thus uses people's individual and collective capabilities, rather than measures of access or use, as its principal evaluative space. Based on empirical evidence from indigenous communities' use of new technologies in rural Bolivia, the study concludes that enhancing poor people's informational capabilities is the most critical factor determining the impact of ICTs on their well-being. Improved informational capabilities, like literacy, do enhance the human capabilities of poor and marginalized people to make strategic life choices and achieve the lifestyle they value. Evaluating the impact of ICTs in terms of capabilities thus reveals no direct relationship between improved access to, and use of, ICTs and enhanced well-being; ICTs lead to improvements in people's lives only when informational capabilities are transformed into expanded human and social capabilities in the economic, political, social, organizational, and cultural dimensions of their lives. The study concludes that intermediaries are bound to play a central, even fundamental, role in this process. They help poor communities to enact and appropriate ICTs to their local socio-cultural context so that their use becomes meaningful for people's daily lives, enhances their informational capabilities, and ultimately improves their human and social capabilities.

Dr. Gigler's research offers an answer to one of the most challenging questions in international development: When do ICTs make a difference in the lives of the poor? Based on his research in Bolivia, Gigler offers both an answer and a path forward for development scholars and practitioners: ICTs matter when they give users new options, opportunities, and capabilities. Applying Sen's ideas of development as freedom to questions of ICT use, Gigler moves beyond the increasingly tired arguments about digital divides and offers a new framework for examining the success or failure of ICT projects. --Ethan Zuckerman, Director, Center for Civic Media Massachusetts Institute of Technology This is a remarkable study innovative in its use of the capabilities approach to an understanding of information needs and extensive in its detailed account of how digital technologies are being used by some of the poorest people in the world. This is a must-read for anyone seeking to understand the relationship between the vulnerable democratic potential of the Internet and the structural constraints of political economy. --Stephen Coleman, Professor of Political Communication University of Leeds Research Associate at the Oxford Internet Institute This important book adds a new capability to Amartya Sen's framework, that of informational capabilities. Drawing on in-depth research among poor communities in Bolivia, Benjamin Gigler shows how a human-centered and capability perspective can contribute to making information and communication technologies genuinely empowering for marginalized communities as well as more effective in improving their economic conditions. It should be required reading for those embarking on ICT development programs. --Frances Stewart, Professor Emeritus in Development Economics University of Oxford