

# Life histories in cyberspace: life writing as a development tool for rural women

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## Abstract

Increasingly, information and communication technology (ICT) is being used as a development tool. For example, a recent innovative experiment by the FIDAMERICA development cybernetwork (sponsored by IFAD, the International Fund for Agricultural Development) in Latin America used an electronic network to collect, post and discuss rural women's life histories, intending to support gender mainstreaming in IFAD projects. However, cybernetworking processes can also reflect contradictory agendas and power relations that ultimately make them a site of contestation. In the FIDAMERICA case, the authors did not participate in the electronic conference, nor were there any subsequent efforts to connect them or to develop this process further.

In this paper, I argue that the analysis of increasingly complex cybernetworked development efforts must incorporate a correspondingly sophisticated technique that can uncover the nuanced relations of transnational cyber communication; and I propose that an actor-network approach should be investigated as an analytical framework in these cases. I then apply this approach to the case study, using field research conducted with the participants of the FIDAMERICA electronic life history project in Central America. I conclude that an actor-network approach is a fruitful means by which these processes can be both understood and improved.

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Does the enlargement of opportunities for cultural resistance afforded by some technological networks, ... balance out with the narrowing down of real spaces by the forces of a transnational capitalism fueled by the same technologies? (Escobar, 1999, p. 31).

Is [autobiography] the model for imperializing the consciousness of colonized peoples, replacing their collective potential for resistance with a cult of individuality and even loneliness? Or is it a medium of resistance and counter-discourse, the legitimate space for producing that excess which throws doubt on the coherence and power of an exclusive historiography? (Sommer, 1988, quoted in Watson and Smith, 1992, xiii).

## 1. Introduction

In 1995, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) established FIDAMERICA, a cybernetwork of IFAD's approximately 30 development projects located throughout Latin America. Heretofore, the IFAD projects had been operating relatively independently within a hierarchical structure emanating from its central headquarters in Rome; and FIDAMERICA was part IFAD's overall operational restructuring in response to the perceived benefits of organizational integration.<sup>1</sup> As one of many cybernetworked initiatives since then, FIDAMERICA

<sup>1</sup> "Milestones in IFAD's History" historical documentation no longer fully available. For summaries see: <http://www.ifad.org/events/past/anniv/mile94.htm>.

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conducted a life history<sup>2</sup> gathering project in 1997 to identify local women leaders associated with the IFAD projects. Set up as a “*Concurso*” or contest, and conducted within the structure of an international electronic conference, the project literature states that the life history project was intended to

stimulate the telling of life histories by women leaders, so that other peasant and indigenous women in other countries could learn lessons from their experiences. Across this dialogue, we wish to strengthen communication and exchange between peasant organizations across Latin America. Also, we hope that this project will permit rural development organizations at all levels to learn from these autobiographies, and that they will go on in their work to support the development of new women leaders.<sup>3</sup>

Submissions to the *Concurso* were encouraged by monetary prizes for the winners,<sup>4</sup> and the result was that FIDAMERICA received life histories from over 100 local women leaders, most of who were beneficiaries of local IFAD projects. Subsequently, the life histories were published on the FIDAMERICA website, winners were judged during an electronic conference and a small book of winners’ stories was published. But when I asked the director of FIDAMERICA, “how did this process work, and what were the outcomes and impacts of the life histories and the conference for the authors?” the response was that beyond the publication of the booklet, “who knows.”<sup>5</sup>

The agenda of the *Concurso*, as stated in the project literature, included information sharing and communication among Latin American peasants, gender sensitization for development organizations, and ultimately leadership development and empowerment for rural women. This initiative is broad and noble, and represents a potential first step towards ICT related development participation by those on the frontiers of cyberspace. However, as I will show in this paper, a deeper investigation of the details of this process reveals a somewhat more complex story. Alternately, although the cybernetic life histories were simultaneously a vehicle

for the sensitization of IFAD staff to the realities of their beneficiaries’ lives, a model for the formation of an alternative collective subject, and a moderate vector of empowerment for their authors, the *Concurso* was also a truncated cybernetworking initiative for Latin American *campesinas*. Although the literature stated that it intended to strengthen communication and exchange, most of the women whose life histories appeared never knew about their placement online, the e-conference, nor did most of them receive any feedback beyond a certificate of participation. No form of broader communication among them has materialized. In the world of ICT for development (currently shorthanded as ICT4D) the seductive glossy screen of development websites and their contents can conceal a deep well of complicated, contradictory, and downright messy relations among the actors represented there. On the one hand, ICT4D holds enormous development potential, and at the same time, it can complicate progressive development agendas, obscure the role of the technology in this endeavor, or even exaggerate the contribution of ICT to development.

The multiple outcomes of the *Concurso* for the *campesina* authors must be seen within the evolving patterns of interface between ICT and development in the context of global change. Increasingly, the ICT enabled processes of neo-liberal globalization have been challenged by civil society actors using these same technologies to exert agency over global processes at multiple scales.<sup>6</sup> In principle, these groups use ICTs to seek alternatives to neo-liberal globalization and an expansive notion of participation in development processes; but thinking about these groups in “resistance” to globalization sets up a binary opposition that is dangerously simplistic as an explanatory device. On organizational, technical, and theoretical levels, a more sophisticated approach to the analysis of cybernetworking dynamics would highlight the complex and contradictory elements of ICT enabled development networks; the differential power relations that these invoke and produce; and the internal and external sites of struggle where these processes play out.

For example, cybernetworked development organizations comprise a heterogeneous range of differentially motivated individuals (including elite, well-educated

<sup>2</sup> Although the *Concurso* literature bills it as an “autobiography” contest, I am using the term “life history”, because in most cases, the texts were collected as oral histories, sometimes written and reworked and always typed into the computer by intermediaries. As I will show below, these words are politically loaded, and I have chosen the one that seems to align most clearly with the intentions of both authors and organizers of the event; although FIDAMERICA and IFAD staff and authors randomly used the words autobiography, life history and testimonial.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.fidameria.cl](http://www.fidameria.cl).

<sup>4</sup> See [www.fidameria.cl](http://www.fidameria.cl).

<sup>5</sup> Personal conversation, August 15, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Well rehearsed examples include anti-globalization social movements and NGOs devoted to social justice and environmental protection; local resistance groups linked to transnational support and advocacy movements, such as the *Zapatistas* in Chiapas, México, or Narmada Bando Andolan in India; alternative trade networks linking to local collectives of such products as cocoa in the Andes and coffee Central America. (For example see Ribiero, 1998; Balit, 1999; FAO, 1999a, and Zapatista, International Rivers Network, NETAID, World Bank, IFAD, and IDRC websites, [www.ezln.org](http://www.ezln.org), [www.irn.org](http://www.irn.org), [www.netaid.org](http://www.netaid.org), [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org), [www.ifad.org](http://www.ifad.org), [www.idrc.ca](http://www.idrc.ca).)

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