

Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

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DESIGN (X) DIASPORA

- implementing sustainable development in developing countries

Abstract

300 billion USD are yearly transferred from western economies to so-called developing countries. However, studies analysing aid programs aimed at local industrialisation emphasise two widely shared conclusions; (i) technologies developed in the west are, as such, usually not socially appropriate; and (ii) aid funded projects often fail after funds have been spent. In fact some of the more successful and recent projects have rather been based on local social involvement than transfer of technologies from the west. Mohammed Yunus and the Grameen Bank approach, building lasting enterprises from responsible credit schemes and Social Entrepreneurship (SE) supporting developing economies through establishing responsible business relationships in actor networks of enterprises are two thought provoking and illustrative examples.

According to Victor Margolin the rather modest history of design for development can be characterized by a tension between; on one side a low-tech crafts approach, based on local needs as originally suggested by Papanek in the early seventies, and on the other side a more high-tech impulse, as in the Ahmehabad Declaration on Industrial Design and Development from 1979. The first relying on present local and traditional production and the latter on a belief that "developing countries" (as the term indicates) basically should follow the development path of the "developed countries". Unfortunately, and in spite of both having pros and cons, it becomes more and more obvious that none of these approaches are socially or ecologically sustainable. Therefore this paper tries to go beyond this dichotomy by suggesting an alternative approach utilizing the fact that new actors are able to leapfrog traditional development patterns. It proposes a hive-off from research in collaborative and innovative product development performed at the Institute of Industrial Design at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design, Norway. It is a conscious attempt to modify the direction of contemporary research within Innovative Product Development, which, arguably, focuses on the efficiency of incremental "sub-innovations", optimizing the western way of living; a way of living that more and more proves to be inherently unsustainable on a global scale. Additionally it suggests that sustainable innovation should originate from a sustainable principle; i.e. that collaborative development teams should be built on durable responsibility structures.

By integrating recent results from design- and migration studies, a conceptual and common understanding emerges, suggesting that many of the obstacles identified could be approached through integrating two actors with different and complementary know-how. Two actors that up to now rarely are systematically utilized for product- and social development in developing countries:

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(i) *Industrial design*; a profession having a tradition of advocating the user's perspective (rather than purely technical and/or economical perspectives) and searching for *alternative*, rather than optimized, solutions.

(ii) *Diaspora*; i.e. emigrants often coming from developing countries, working in western societies and as a group being an important financial contributor to their country of origin through responsible family/location ties. Their remittances have in fact, in recent years, exceeded official development aid by a factor of more than two.

By integrating Design and Diaspora, one can avoid merely transferring technologies from the west and instead; (i) develop products that *either* are designed to be appropriate for the local context *or* designed in order to utilize the local context's comparative advantages, making them truly competitive on a global export market; and (ii) at the same time having a profound commitment grounded in the local social context.

The projects could be seemingly similar to many present projects like: locally adapted devices based on (non-infrastructure) low-cost energy from silicon solar wafers, water turbines adaptations for micro-electric plants (including local infrastructures), cheap permanent or emergency housing, water cleaning and distribution facilities, cooking and household equipment, etcetera. However, by acknowledging the competence of industrial design to handle social user aspects and the importance of local financial commitments, more sustainable results could emerge in interaction between high- and low-tech approaches. The paper therefore concludes with a concrete plan of action including (among other things) a call for establishing a global network of relevant actors.