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Crowdsourcing International Development

Allen Sangster

Crowdsourcing—the process of harnessing human intelligence, ingenuity, and capital through large-scale networks—has become ubiquitous within the business world. Indeed, large organizations like Dell and the Bamed/MAM Group often form proprietary crowdsourcing communities (also known as innovation communities) dedicated to new product development. In this way corporations leverage the innovative potential of their customer base which, in turn, gains the benefits of products tailor-made for their needs. In much the same way, crowdsourcing can refine complex development issues by closing the feedback loop and including those most affected by the development or aid work in decision making processes. This paper surveys current academic literature on crowdsourcing within the corporate sector and applies lessons learned there to the world of international development. This interdisciplinary blending serves as a unique platform for understanding how powerful a tool crowdsourcing is and how it could transform the way that international aid work is conducted in many locations around the world. Inherent in this approach is the theoretical notion that broad democratic participation increases accountability and corrects poor performance. This paper uses the role of crowdsourcing in disaster relief efforts in Haiti as a case study of crowdsourcing theory within a development context. Finally, recommendations are also given for the ethical construction of crowdsourcing systems and practices.