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BACK TO THE FUTURE: REFLECTIONS ON TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF MARKET SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING

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The year was 2000. The world braced for a technological apocalypse as computers prepared to party like it was 1999. But when the clock struck midnight, all was Y2-OK. The failure of less advanced technologies, such as voting equipment in the United States, led the Supreme Court to play "Who Wants to Be a President?" and handed the White House keys to George W. Bush. News wasn't fake yet and a catfish was still just, well, a fish that looked like a cat. Most Swifties weren't born, Beyoncé was still in Destiny's Child and Lionel Messi had not begun his football career. Different times indeed.

2000 marked the launch of the Millennium Development Goals, a global call to action to reduce poverty. Coincidentally, in a rainy Scottish city, our first training on market systems development was held. Dissatisfied with international aid efforts that reached too few people or disappeared when donor funding ended, an intrepid group of trainers and trainees embarked on a re-education campaign to do development differently. Although they may not have identified as proponents of what we now call localisation, embedding the ongoing delivery of goods and services in local businesses or government agencies was exactly what they sought to do.

A quarter of a century has passed since the computer meltdown that wasn't and the training that was. Technology continues to evolve and shape our daily lives. Marty McFly would never have believed that one day we'd have little machines that fit in our pockets that replace landlines, cash and the need to strike up an in-person conversation with a potential date (or in McFly's case, his mother). From mobile money to drought-resistant seeds, many people are better off because of new technologies.

But... But. Despite this progress, doesn't it seem like we keep going 'back to the future'? Electoral controversy wasn't confined to 2000; we have just gone from 'hanging chads' to Dominion voting machines and Cambridge Analytica. Chat GPT couldn't tell us how many lessons learnt reports have been written over the last two-and-a-half decades, but a lesson we humans keep learning repeatedly is that any technology must work in a messy socioeconomic reality. It was true for the DeLorean and it's true for next Big Thing in development, too.

We've bounced from state-led development to neo-liberalism to Millennium Development Villages and landed on securonomics (aka protectionism and industrial policy) in what you might call a Sachsian wave. Entrepreneurship, incubators and enterprise development were all the rage back then and have now been re-discovered by some agencies. The microfinance revolution was in full swing at the turn of the century and we're still looking for silver bullets from financial innovation, tech bros and digitised everything: it no longer takes a village, apparently, it requires an app. Integrated rural development has morphed into landscape approaches. Local economic development is out but localisation is in.

The MDGs have been rebranded as the Sustainable Development Goals. We're tasked with being greener and pinker these days – considering the environment and gender more than we did a quarter of a century ago, both of which are good things. That said, the practical reality of using external resources to stimulate change processes that address an ever-lengthening list of objectives is no small feat. Doing All the Development Things at Once seems as daunting as Doc's advice to Marty: "*don't worry, as long as you hit that wire with the connecting hook at precisely eighty-eight miles per hour the instant the lightning hits the tower, everything will be fine.*"

A bright spark (Karr? Kanye?) remarked that the more things change the more they stay the same. Concerns about the effectiveness of aid and how it can have more sustainable impact have not gone away. It feels like the emphasis is always on a shiny new 'what' instead of a concerted commitment to a better 'how'. Twenty-five years since that first training programme, we reckon it's time to go 'back to the future' over the next twelve months to explore what's really changed, what remains the same and where we might go next.

Stay tuned…