

Chapter 3

ICTs and the (Re)Production of Development Knowledge in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) have been promoted by Western development agencies in Africa and other regions of the developing world. There are legion of intellectual (theoretical) and practical policy-oriented arguments advanced by the proponents of an ICT-driven agenda and to justify why this paradigm offers an effective pathway out of poverty and under-development in the global South. This chapter proposes a critical theoretical approach for analyzing and interpreting the implications and impacts of this ICT-driven development agenda for Africa and other regions striving for home-grown and locally-driven development agenda. Drawing on aspects of critical theoretical lenses including Foucault's knowledge-power dynamics and neo-Gramscian concept of hegemony, the chapter explores how the ICT-driven development paradigm being championed by key international development agencies may in fact, help to perpetuate unequal power relations in the production of development knowledge whereby ideas and practices of the "developed" and "advanced" West are privileged and imposed on the "less developed" and "backward" regions such as Africa. The chapter provides a historical overview on development theory in the African context from the era of modernization theory to the neo-liberal turn in order to examine if and how the ICT-driven paradigm offers any departures from the path-dependency model embedded in earlier theoretical and policy interventions.

INTRODUCTION

One of the defining features of the contemporary global system is the unprecedented growth in the use and application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a significant part of

the process of globalization and connectedness of countries, economies, societies and cultures. Thus, more than at any point in human history, there is an increased use of various tools and gadgets for communication and for linking people and societies together resulting in what Castells (1996) calls

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‘the networked society’. It is thus argued that the unprecedented interconnectedness of societies and economies through the processes of trade, commerce and communication has resulted in the emergence of a ‘global village’ where time and distance are compressed and information is received and shared spontaneously. Thus, the potential of information and communications technologies (ICTs) to accelerate economic growth and sustained development within countries and globally has become one of the central arguments in relation to the perceived benefits of the process of globalization. For that to happen, however, there is the need for all countries, societies and peoples to have access to the facilities and opportunities presented by ICTs. It is within this context that this chapter seeks to critically interrogate the claims made on behalf of ICTs, the idea of digital divide between developed societies and the so-called developing world. The rest of the chapter is organized as follows: In the next section, the author offers a synthesis of Foucault’s re-conceptualisation of power and Gramsci’s idea of hegemony, examining how it helps us to understand the ways by which individual conduct is regulated in the modern era. Next, drawing on key postcolonial and critical development scholars who take Foucault as a point of departure, the author explores how Africa and other regions of the global South have been discursively constructed by the West over the years from the colonial period to the present. In doing that, the chapter weaves together the work of Michel Foucault, Edward Said and what other critical development and postcolonial theorists have explored regarding the power inequalities embedded in the production and mainstreaming of development knowledge. The final part of the chapter unpacks the ‘new’ drive for ICTs for development discourse, within the context of processes of globalization and neoliberal economic reform policies. The chapter concludes by suggesting that these policies not only reproduce Africa and other

regions of the global South as the ‘underdeveloped Other’ of the West, they also help to legitimize the (re)imposition of a neoliberal agenda.

PROBLEMATIZING ICTs FOR DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), is used here in reference to a set of activities that facilitate, by electronic means, the capturing, storage, processing, transmission, and display of information, globalization and connectedness of countries, economies, societies and cultures (Castells, 1996). In recent years, the discourse on ICTs and their role in economic growth and poverty reduction have gained widespread support within debates on development. In particular, ICTs have been promoted by key global development actors as the new missing link in the development process of developing countries (see UNDP, 2001; World Bank, 1998). The claim for the linkage between ICTs and development originated from American economists such as Machlup (1962), Drucker (1968), and Bell (1973). These scholars predicted that in a post-industrial era, there will be a direct link between economic growth and ICTs. Perceiving a post-industrial era as an information age, they conceived ICTs as central to development because of their ability to transmit information on a global scale. Two key developments in the United States seemed to have confirmed the claims of the information theorists: the first was the phenomenal increase in computer usage in United States in the mid 1960s, resulting in the ICT sector making a significant contribution towards the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Crawford, 1983). The second development was the widespread use of the Internet by the Clinton-led Democratic administration under the auspices the Global Information Infrastructure (GII) programme to provide information on basic

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