


# The Role of ICT in the Economic Recovery Plan of Malawi a Critical Discourse Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a critical analysis of the role of ICT in economic recovery plan of a low-income status country. The study analysed the case of Malawi using critical discourse analysis to unravel assumptions and issues in the text of the Economic Recovery Plan. The findings showed a lack of a holistic approach to the proposed solutions in the Economic Recovery Plan. The assumptions on the role of ICT concentrated on ICT infrastructure, liberalization of the telecommunications sector and reforms in regulatory frameworks. Thus, issues from the demand side of the ICT value chain were silent in the solutions e.g. high cost of ICT services, ICT access for the rural dwellers and ICT skills of users in integrating ICTs in their economic and social activities. The study contributes to the understanding of the role of ICT in the economic recovery of countries under crisis.

## KEYWORDS

Critical Discourse Analysis, Economic Recovery Plan, ICT, Malawi

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are now at the centre of public and business organisations. ICTs are integrated into operations of economic sectors including health, education, agriculture and financial services (Tchamyu, Erreygers, & Cassimon, 2019). Further, people in their communities are using ICTs to support their day to day activities. There is a growing consensus among scholars and practitioners on the perceptions that ICTs can support improve the socio-economic development of low-income status economies and redress inequality in communities (Avgerou, 2003; Mansell, 2010; Walsham & Sahay, 2006). Governments, international development agencies and financial lending organisations believe that ICTs can stimulate economic growth of low-income status countries to bypass some of the stages of development and reach the economic status of developed countries (Mansell, 2011; Tan, Ng & Jiang, 2018). Nonetheless, the concept of development in relation to ICTs has been widely contested among scholars (see Brown & Grant, 2010; Thapa & Saebo, 2014; Zheng & Stahl, 2012).

There are many factors that can affect a country to achieve socio-economic development and transformation. Some of the inhibiting factors of socio-economic development are political instability, poor governance, corruption, inadequate financial and material resources and limited economic growth (Brooks & Loftus, 2016; Cammack, 2012). These factors can lead to economic crisis and hardship. Countries under hardships are also focusing on ICTs to support addressing their socio-economic challenges. Conversely, ICTs have been incorporated in economic recovery plans of countries facing economic crisis. For instance, studies conducted in Cuba (Urrea, 2008), Korea (Kim, 2009), the

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European Union (EU) (Braga, 2009), United States of America (USA) (LaRose, Bauer, DeMaagd, Chew, Ma & Jung, 2014) and Zimbabwe (Nyemba & Chigona, 2012) have highlighted integration of ICTs in economic recovery plans. To the knowledge of the author, there is substantial literature on the role of ICT in economic recovery plans but there are few studies conducted in the context of Africa. This study aims to contribute to the literature on this knowledge gap.

The argument adopted in this paper is that while ICTs may be perceived to be antidote to economic challenges and promote socio-economic growth, ICTs are not neutral and may have unintended consequences in government, business organisations and communities e.g. unemployment, pollution, illiteracy, corruption, crimes, addiction and financial exploitation (Majchrzak, Markus & Wareham, 2014; Tarafdar, Gupta, & Turel, 2013). The integration of ICTs in economic recovery plans can lead to decisions, processes and programs that can affect government, business organisations and citizens. The economic recovery plans have inherent values and interests of the different stakeholders who view ICTs differently (Sein & Harindranath, 2004; Sein, Thapa, Hatakka & Saebo, 2018). Hence, there is a need to critique statements in the economic recovery plans and bring to light the hidden assumptions and taken for granted issues related to socio-economic development (Thompson, 2004; Walsham & Sahay, 2006). The focus of this paper is to critique the role of ICTs in supporting the economic recovery of a country facing socio-economic challenges. The study was guided by the research questions: How does ICTs support economic recovery strategies to achieve socio-economic development? What are the assumptions and taken for granted issues of ICTs in the economic recovery plan?

We explore the research questions through a qualitative study using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1989). CDA was considered appropriate to unravel macro-political, social, economic and values related to ICTs and development in the economic recovery plan (Myers & Klein, 2011). The case of Malawi was analysed as an example of an African country that experienced socio-economic crisis (between 2012 and 2013) and had developed an economic recovery plan (Cammack, 2012). It was interesting to establish how ICTs were incorporated in the economic recovery plan to highlight the hidden-assumptions and taken for granted issues of socio-economic development (Myers & Klein, 2011). The study may serve to enlighten policymakers to be cautious of the unintended consequences of ICTs when used in development processes and programs and take corrective actions when considering ICTs in government policies and plans.

The rest of the paper is presented as follows. Section 2 outlines the background to the study. Section 3 discusses the theoretical background of the study. Section 4 highlights the research methodology. Section 5 summarises findings. Section 6 discusses the findings. Section 7 provides conclusions drawn from the study.

## **2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

This section presents a summary of the concepts of development and how ICT are related to socio-economic development. This is followed by an outline of the roles of ICT in socio-economic development. The section also summarises economic crisis and recovery plan.

### **2.1. Economic and Social Development**

Development is a widely contested concept in literature and many authors have described it differently. For example, development is “multidimensional process involving the reorganization of entire economic and social systems. In addition to improvements in incomes and output, it typically involves radical changes in institutional, social, and administrative structures as well as in popular attitudes and, in many cases, even customs and beliefs” (Todaro & Smith, 2012: 109). In line with this definition, development may be viewed in three dimensions in terms of modes of production which affect the state of the economy of a country (Sein & Harindranath, 2004). These include modernisation, dependency and human centeredness. These are summarised as follows (Sein & Harindranath, 2004):

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