



Chapter II

Integrating ICTs in African Development: Challenges and Opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

This chapter reviews the role of information and communication technologies in socio-economic development and poverty-reduction programs in sub-Saharan countries. To this end, the author first provides an overview of the status of ICTs and national ICT strategies in sub-Saharan Africa. He then analyzes the treatment of ICTs in three major policy documents that provide the framework for economic growth and poverty reduction efforts in most developing countries. These are (a) national poverty-reduction strategies, (b) country assistance strategies of the World Bank, and (c) poverty-reduction support credits. The analysis reveals that while a majority of national ICT policies strongly promote the use of ICTs for socioeconomic development, the poverty-reduction and country assistance strategies focus primarily on the use of ICTs in public-sector management. Hence, there is a persistent disconnection between the ICT policies and the poverty-reduction strategies. The author identifies some of the main challenges and the substantial opportunities that would arise from the mainstreaming of ICTs in national development initiatives.

Background

The contribution of information and communication technologies to economic growth in developed countries has been the subject of research, discussion, and debate since the early 1990s.¹ The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has quantified the positive contribution of ICTs to gross domestic product (GDP) growth in several advanced economies.² Some of these countries have taken the necessary steps to create an information society by educating citizens and gradually organizing their economy around knowledge and information.

The potential impact of ICTs on socioeconomic development and the possible use of ICTs as effective tools for facilitating service delivery to the poor have led to a global debate on the role of ICTs as enablers of poverty reduction in developing countries. Based on a series of ICT success stories in developing countries, various researchers suggest that ICTs can help promote local economic growth, expand social and cultural opportunities, increase the efficiency of markets and institutions, facilitate public-service delivery, and provide the poor with a voice in decisions that affect their lives and communities.³

Developing countries and their development partners are investing considerable resources in harnessing the promise of ICTs for poverty reduction and economic growth.⁴ Yet, most ICT success stories have remained anecdotal as scaling up pilot initiatives on a sustainable basis has proven difficult.⁵ This trend has been more pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where the development efforts are often exacerbated by the complexity of challenges in adapting the global knowledge and technology to local conditions and needs.

Clearly there are major differences between the developed and developing countries in terms of requirements for the effective use of ICTs. These requirements include adequate information and communication infrastructure, affordable access to ICTs, well-trained human resources, and incentives for the use of appropriate technologies to improve productivity and efficiency in service delivery and production. These differences are bound to influence how ICTs can play an effective role in the socioeconomic development process.

In September 2000, the United Nations Millennium Summit adopted eight specific millennium development goals (MDGs) to measure the progress of global development efforts. These include the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; universal primary education; gender equality and the empowerment of women; the reduction of child mortality; the improvement of maternal health; the combating of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; the ensuring of environmental sustainability; and global partnerships to attain a more peaceful, just, and prosperous world.⁶

The MDGs are now a benchmark for measuring the success or failure of most poverty-reduction programs, and the more recent national poverty-reduction strategies have incorporated the MDG targets as an integral part of their goals and objectives.

In what follows, the national poverty-reduction strategies, country assistance strategies (CASs) of the World Bank, and the poverty-reduction support credits (PRSCs, which are often a multidonor basket fund for providing budget support to developing countries) are reviewed for their discussion of ICTs as development tools. Key categories for identifying the appropriate ICT discussions in poverty-reduction strategy papers (PRSPs), CASs, and PRSCs are selected from different aspects of the ICT sector, as well as the priority sectors in each country, for example, in health, education, agriculture, and the environment.

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