

Chapter 2

Policy and Socio–Economic Contexts for IT Based Public Sector Reform in Postcolonial Developing Countries: The Contrived vs. the Actual

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ABSTRACT

IT based public sector reforms takes place within a contested policy and socio-economic context but one that often appears non-controversial since the pursuit of development is generally desirable. In this chapter we explore this context from two discursive perspectives, the dominant international ICT development dialogue associated with western institutions, and from postcolonial theory that emanates from reflections on the postcolonial condition found in most developing countries. They are presented as representing a contrived and an actual context respectively that give rise to policy-practice gaps. The discussion brings out the limitations of developmentalism when conceptualizing IT innovations and change in postcolonial developing countries, and suggests an approach that factors in postcolonial theory in bridging these gaps. This would strengthen existing innovative approaches and provide new analytical perspectives that factor in history, time, global geo-political structures, and the submerged potentially destabilizing voices in former colonies. Future research directions towards post-development and their challenges are also highlighted.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter contributes to the expansion of contextual approaches by drawing contrasts between *contrived* and *actual* contexts in developing countries. By contrived I mean contexts that are implied by a given approach, in particular, the dominant developmental models of progress within which public sector reform initiatives are usually framed. The actual [context] would refer to what actually exists in the proposed implementation domain, with or without the proposed information technology (IT) based reform initiative. The distinction between the contrived and actual contexts as defined may also be framed within the philosophical debate between forms of idealism and realism (Weber, 2004). However I use the terms in their everyday sense similar to Heeks' (2002b) notion of western design context vs. developing country usage context in his discussion of IT project failure in developing countries. The contrived context differs from Heeks' pragmatic definition of a western design context; it is more general as that implied by predominant paradigms informing international development policy and aid efforts for information and communication technologies (ICT). The actual context is taken as that implied by postcolonial theory, and is proposed as a better reflection of developing country contextual realities.

Postcolonial theory is associated with post-structuralism and critical social science theories in western philosophy. Although it is well known in the liberal arts, its possible practical implications for development policy are less well understood. We shall attempt to show how such a perspective may be used to bridge the policy-practice gap in IT based public sector reform initiatives. First we introduce IT based public sector reform and E-Government adoption in developing countries, and then highlight key issues in the international development and policy context. Dominant development policy paradigms are then contrasted to the postcolonial theory perspective in undertaking

IT based reforms. We include examples of current research where such a perspective has been adopted as an improvement when transforming policy into practice, though inadvertently.

The arguments presented would apply to countries that were once territories colonized by European powers mainly in Africa, Asia and Latin America, collectively termed the tricontinental countries (Young, 2001). Over the last decade the term developing country has taken on new meaning with the rise of emerging economies e.g. China and Brazil as important players in the global economy and geo-politics. Some Asian countries are now classified as developed, middle income, or newly industrialized economies (NICs). This does not preclude their inclusion because it will be shown that the manner of their 'development' was because they selectively appropriated the idea and domesticated it strategically, which lends support to the postcolonial thesis and proposals in this chapter.

BACKGROUND

There is near universal consensus on the efficaciousness of adopting ICTs in the whole world including developing countries (Avgerou, 2003). ICT for development (ICT4D) and E-Governance are widely championed by international development agencies as important avenues out of poverty for faster integration into the global economy. It is frequently cited as a major opportunity for them (Mansell, 2002) and in the public sector, E-Government is associated with good governance (CAFRAD, NEPAD, & UNDESA, 2003; Grindle, 2004). In the year 2000 the G8 leaders adopted the Charter on the Global information Society and established a public-private partnership, the Digital Opportunity Task Force (DOT Force), to champion ICT globally. This resulted in a report that put ICT at the heart of development (Digital-Opportunity-Initiative, 2001). ICT was thus recognized as an *enabler* of development beyond the

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