

The Effect of Politics on ICT4D: A Case of Econet Wireless's Struggle for a License in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe is the best contemporary example of how politics can affect economic development. Equally as significant, and yet under studied, is the effect of politics on Information and Communication Technologies for development (ICT4D). In this case study of government of Zimbabwe's five year battle to prevent Econet Wireless from operating a mobile phone network, the authors present the fear for the conviviality of ICTs as a reason why dictatorial states often restrict free use of ICTs and how this can inhibit its role in fostering development. Using a combination of aspects of Thomas Hobbes' political theory and Sen's capability approach the authors show how passions like fear for the power of ICTs in private hands and the appetite for proceeds from the telecoms sector fuelled a five year legal battle that was eventually won by Econet. A framework for assessing the motives behind restrictive political action and the concomitant erosion of political freedoms which inhibits free ICT use and investment in the sector is also presented.

Keywords: *Capability Approach, Conviviality, Defense, Fear, Freedoms, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), Politics*

INTRODUCTION

The English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes asserted that people are ruled not by reason but by passions like appetite for power and the aversion for pain and death. These passions fuel a violent effort to attain security which eventually instills fear in others (Hobbes, 1968). Using Hobbes' (1968) thinking we suggest that the conviviality of ICTs makes authoritarian regimes paranoid about who controls the ICT sector and the power they are capable of wielding with both ICTs and the proceeds from the

lucrative business. According to Illich (1973) convivial tools are tools that give the person who uses them the greatest ability to enrich their environment with the fruit of their own vision. We argue that it is this fear (of the conviviality of ICT) and appetite (for power and money) that breeds repressive legislature that stifles free use of ICTs.

Over the last two decades, adoption of ICTs has been show-cased as a new development mantra for the global south (Avgerou & Madon, 2003; Unwin, 2009). Inhibitors of ICT in developing countries have been associated with the digital divide issues like lack of infrastructure and ICT skills. Studies have mainly addressed

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economic (Avgerou, 2003), technological (Furuholt & Kristiansen, 2007), demographic barriers (Stark, 2010) and organization level politics (Dube & Robey, 1999) while ignoring the motive behind macro-level political issues (Madon et al., 2009) affecting ICT innovation in developing countries. Avgerou (2010) suggests there is a need for '*studies of the political actors and institutions through which economic models and technological potential are translated into industries, information infrastructures, and 'empowered' societies*' (p. 15).

The impact of politics on information systems development has however been addressed at organisational level by Sabherwal and Grover (2010). Their taxonomy relates to political action of individuals but excludes the macro-level political dynamics that we find to be critical in developing countries.

There is a need for ICT studies to assess the macro-level politics for structural barriers to ICT adoption in developing countries (Heek & Bhatnagar, 1999; Ameripour et al., 2009). To fill this void, we assess the motives of dictatorial politics on ICTs through the challenges that Econet Wireless (referred to hereafter as Econet) faced in acquiring a mobile license in Zimbabwe. The Key issues that shape the socio-political environment in a way that affects ICTs are analyzed using Hobbes's (1968) fear-defence-fear calculus and Sen's (1999) capability approach. We believe that an understanding of the political imperatives that affect ICTs in dictatorial states will allow the comprehension of how political barriers function and enable ICT strategists to manage their impact on innovation in many developing countries.

Between 1993 and 1998, Strive Masiyiwa (a telecommunications businessman and founder of Econet) fought Government of Zimbabwe's refusal to award Econet a mobile license. Armed with an unpaid legal firm, a dwindling team of unpaid workers, trusted friends and his Christian faith, Masiyiwa overcame, state monopoly, presidential decrees and tender board manipulation. This gave birth to Econet, Zimbabwe's largest mobile phone network that now operates in several African countries, New Zealand and

the United Kingdom. The fact that Econet faced similar troubles in Nigeria and Kenya shows that African governments get worried when ICTs are in non partisan hands. The conviviality of ICTs could be feared for its potential to shift political power in totalitarian regimes as discussed by Ameripour et al. (2009).

Zimbabwe is a Sub Sahara African country widely known for its severe political instability and unprecedented economic decline under the government of Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (Zanu PF). In the early 1990s it ended a civil war that saw the massacre of 20 000 Ndebeles and culminated in the unity of Zanu PF and Zimbabwe African Peoples' Union (Zapu PF). Zimbabwe had Africa's highest literacy level (Dardley, 2003), a liberation war grounded government, an emerging black business class and an independent judiciary. It was under this background that Strive Masiyiwa attempted to launch Econet and a negative interplay between ICTs and politics ensued.

After this introduction we present a brief account of Hobbes' (1968) 'fear-defence-fear' theory, Sen's (1999) view of development, and a historical background of Zimbabwe's political scenario. This is followed by a case of Econet and a framework for analyzing the impact of politics on the ICT Sector. Then discussion, limitations and conclusion sections finalize the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Politics has been defined as the exercise of power (Sabherwal & Grover, 2010) and power as '*the ability of individuals to affect the behaviour of other individuals and the way things are done*' (p. 421). The impact of politics in information systems (IS) has mainly been addressed at organisational level (Rowlands, 2007; Sabherwal & Grover, 2010). This has been done in ways that arguably justify our use of the term politics for referring to the impact of authorities' decision on IS innovation.

In comparison with socio-technological issues at organisational level, the impact of

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