

Chapter 6

Cultural Acceptance of ICTs: Perceptions in Practice

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has generated much debate both in and out of academia in relation to theories ranging from economic advancement to imperialism. In the context of the 'low-income' economies, a dominant discourse associated with ICTs persists. The discourse of development predicts that nations which have joined the global market will use ICTs to harness global knowledge that will enable them to be competitive and therefore attain development. This has led to change in policy from international to local as ICTs are embraced as the next big development tool. Recently however, there have been reports of more failures of ICTs initiatives than success as professionals in the industry complain about unsustainability of the systems. A genuine issue is that so far analysis of this discourse has tended to be economically or technically deterministic, with little attention paid to social and cultural perspectives. In order to understand how the role of norms, practices and politics of people in particular communities play in this discourse in 'low income' economies, over 1000 semi-qualitative questionnaires were analysed from five geographical locations in The Gambia. A key conclusion that has emerged from the research is that there are different attitudes towards the ICTs in the different locations, which vary from full acceptance to rejection of ICTs. Such diverse reactions are underpinned by the religion and information ecologies in which gender plays a critical part. This result challenges the ICT4D agenda, and might be applied to reports of unsustainable ICT initiatives, especially in Africa.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-799-2.ch006

INTRODUCTION

New Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been accompanied by such extreme ‘hypes’ that debating them in ‘real’ terms seems less colourful. ICTs have now been firmly accepted as instruments of advancement both by governments and ruling bodies in the global North and South. However, the hype which asserts that countries in the global South—which mostly are considered low-income economies (see www.worldbank.org/data for a definition of low-income economies)—will be able to turn their economic misfortunes around, and leapfrog to ‘developed’ status, has led to overly-energised ICT for Development (ICT4D) policies and initiatives, thoroughly endorsed by global agencies, ranging from bi-lateral to multi-lateral agencies.

Whilst literature on how to achieve speedy ‘development’ in order to be significant in the global market is excellent, it is also very important to debate the impact on social and cultural values and their roles in the ICT-led development agenda. To date, debates on development in the context of new technologies have focused more on economic and technical issues rather than cultural and social issues. Furthermore, there seems to be a general assumption that the introduction of ICTs into civil society automatically embeds an ICT culture. Little consideration is given to the fact that for ICT-led development to impact on society, first there needs to be an ICT culture (such as a cyber culture from Internet use, or a cellular culture from cell phone use). In other words, it is one thing to introduce new technologies to countries of the South, but if existing local cultures form resistance to such changes, there will be an insignificant ICT culture, which will in turn constrain ICT-aided development.

Whilst for local and national governments and their sponsors, a key aim is to create new policies and re-align old ones, in order to generate access to ICTs for their peoples, there are other factors that must be included in the ICT adoption process.

Assumptions are made in the socio-cultural context. These include assumptions about how norms, beliefs, practices, and protocols play a part in the link between ICTs and the communities to which they are introduced; how these normative values help or hinder human processes in engagement with ICTs; and how much they underpin how people in a community use ICTs to support their information ecologies (that is, information and communication needs, priorities and structures), in order to create cyber and cellular cultures.

This chapter’s contribution is to show how some of the assumptions made in translating policy into practice affect the way communities engage with and perceive new ICTs. In the following, I provide a brief theoretical background of the ICT4D agenda in which I highlight the economic and technical monopoly of the discourse, and then briefly describe a case study and the methodology used; and the communities that were studied, and their cyber and cell cultures (to the extent that they exist). I then discuss findings under the following headings:

- Religion as a cultural discourse. How the secularism of people’s norms, practices and protocols in the different locations and communities is underpinned by the moral symbols of religion, and the role that gender plays alongside them; and,
- Locations and their information ecologies. How the secularism of the norms and practices has reinforced complex existing inequities that enabled a hierarchy of power relations, which determines the type of information and communicative structure (or information ecology) of each location, and the subsequent different priorities and information needs, and essentially, attitudes towards new ICTs, in the different locations.

In conclusion, I summarise the problem and make recommendations that add to current

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