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How Nigeria can win the ICT race in Africa

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A book authored by a Nigerian journalist examines Nigeria’s approach to the development of ICT and concludes that the country is on its way to becoming a leader in Africa.

It is not a subject that would readily grab the attention of ordinary readers, but in the hands of a journalist-turned-university lecturer, the story of Nigeria’s engagement with information and communication technologies, ICTs, is a compelling narrative of Nigeria’s attempt to harness ICTs for socio-economic development.

Patience Akpan-Obong explores Nigeria’s engagement with new technologies at various levels against the backdrop of theoretical assumptions about their potential to drive economic development. The result is what the author describes as a compendium of the development of ICTs in Nigeria both as means to socio-economic development and as ends by themselves. But this book offers more than just an authoritative text on the subject but also an engaging examination of theories of development, especially those that focus on communication and information, and how they influence debates on the connection between socio-economic growth and ICTs.

Akpan-Obong premises her argument on the interconnection of ICT and development, but is quick to acknowledge that development must be contextualised against the backdrop of socio-political environment. She provides a brief historical emergence of development theory before taking on board new perspectives that have been put forward over the years. These new explanations, she argues, contradict some common understandings of previous decades. One of the new positions is the ‘basic-needs’ approach which offers a more useful perspective on how to achieve economic growth through equitable distribution of resources. This approach de-links development from economic growth and focuses on empowering the poor with essential tools for the realisation of their potential.

The author argues that Africa had already recognised the advantages of this in the 1980s and cites the Lagos Plan of Action, which was drawn up by the defunct Organisation of African Unity, as an attempt to implement ‘internally driven strategies for development and collective self-reliance.’ This approach, however, was overtaken by structural adjustment programmes and not given time to yield results. Drawing on a broad typology of theories on development, the book traces the various levels of theoretical assumptions about ICTs and development and as ends by themselves.
Syndicate

Information and Communication Technologies in Nigeria is a book for makers, scholars of development and ICTs and non-specialist readers. Obong questions arguments that find correlation between low level of technology and economic development and argues that the causality between technology and economic development cannot be taken as given but must be subject to other factors in society. Although there is no standardised and all encompassing theory of development, Akpan-Obong attempts to synthesise dominant view point authoritative platform for an analysis of development of ICT and their socio-economic growth and development in Nigeria. She identifies underlying policies and structures in Nigeria’s engagement with ICTs and delineates their contributions at different levels.

In a section detailing patterns of ICTs usage, the book examines the policies and focuses on usage by four ministries and the Presidency. It approach enabled the author to examine how policy statements on ICT diffusion were translated into practice. In one chapter, the book focuses usage based on responses to questionnaires administered to 408 National Service Corps members in Port Harcourt, Lagos and Abuja. Some of the analysis were predictable and Akpan-Obong recognised this. She acknowledged that her respondents belonged to a group of users of ICTs. Her data also confirmed that while the penetration level continued to rise, diffusion remained uneven.

Interviews and conversations with many key players in the ICTs sector paint an optimistic picture of Nigeria’s prospects for socio-economic development. Obong argues that potholes and detours on the information superhighway growth. Some of these hurdles are the state of the country’s infrastructure and public power supply. Consequently, the success of ICTs as tools for economic development is dependent on other factors. This, notwithstanding, the author’s optimism expressed by those she interviewed was well founded because it would appear that the appropriate institutional framework has been established. The utilisation of the technologies and quickly recorded some of the highest growth rates in the penetration and diffusion levels of ICTs. It is on that optimistic premise that media of mass communication can facilitate modernisation. This is a book for makers, scholars of development and ICTs and non-specialist readers.

Given these possibilities, it is understandable why Akpan-Obong is optimistic about Nigeria’s prospects for development and economic growth through the application of ICTs. She argues that users of ICTs in major cities in Nigeria, her conclusion is not unfounded.