

Social Inclusion in the Digital Era: Rethinking Debates and Narratives in the World Bank Report.

Calisto Kondowe¹ [0000-0002-0845-3157]* and Wallace Chigona² [0000-0002-1059-811X]

¹University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

²University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

kcalistos@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Research and practice of information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D) have been centred on discussing how digital technology can contribute to the realisation of socio-economic development, especially in the developing world. Critical questions continue to be raised about the nature of technology-enabled development and how ICTs influence development outcomes. The discipline is in ferment and is faced with complex and often antagonistic viewpoints on technology-enabled development. Within this tumultuous background, however, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are argued to have made the world more inclusive and activated the long-standing efforts of ensuring inclusive development. On the one hand, technology optimists argue that ICTs offer opportunities for development of developing nations; on the other hand, technology pessimists argue that ICTs reinforce inequality and precipitate new forms of marginalisation. The study is a critical discourse analysis of World Bank Report 2016, *Digital Dividends* (WDR16), to illustrate how the report implied social inclusion and to uncover the narrow views embedded in this report relating to social inclusion in a developing country context. Although the report can be applauded for uncovering the ways in which ICTs enhance inclusion, this is, however, in a narrow view. A critical analysis of the report reveals that the use of ICT brought new forms of exclusion.

Key Words: World Bank, critical discourse analysis, social inclusion, digital divide, ICT4D.

Introduction

Over the decades, a broad discourse has emerged that ICTs offer a potentially powerful mechanism to enhance the global development agenda (Kondowe & Chigona, 2018). However, researchers are puzzled by the fact that, though ICT initiatives are intended to lead to development, inclusion and poverty eradication, the opposite seems to be evident, as disparities within and between nations have become the new elephant in the room in the ICT4D landscape. The global divide and digital divide have raised questions about whether ICTs are a solution to the inequality challenge between the rich and poor groups of people and/or whether ICTs are tools to close the development gap between the global south and north (Kondowe & Chigona, 2018). This ongoing debate has witnessed the division of ICT4D scholars into two antagonistic bands: the optimists and the pessimists. The optimists argue that ICT has a potential for development (Mann, 2004; Sahay, 2001; Walsham et al., 2007; OECD, 2012), while the pessimists feel that ICT reinforced poverty and inequality or the idea of digital divide and cyber apartheid.

Indeed, numerous researchers have called for critical studies that examine the role and impact of ICTs in development (Donner, 2008; Donner & Escobari, 2010; Duncombe, 2009; Heeks, 2010a; Heeks & Molla, 2009). ICTs are conceptualised as catalysts to eradicate poverty and further the achievement of sustainable development goals, among other development agendas. Recent studies have, on the one hand, described remarkable success in using ICTs to help developing countries create new opportunities. Moreover, they are argued to have made the world more inclusive and created opportunities for the poor and the previously marginalised. On the other hand, these studies often cite contexts where ICTs have not fulfilled expectations and these costly ICT investments are doing little to improve the standard of living of the people. ICTs have thus reaped mixed results in the development space, posing a challenge to the discipline in laying the basis regarding how ICTs contribute to development.

Within ICT4D discourse is a growing body of research and several studies that are trying to come up with a conceptual understanding of the long-standing debatable relationship of ICTs and development. Some studies articulate the link between ICT, economic growth and poverty eradication and inclusion of the poor (May, Waema & Bjastad, 2014; May, Dutton &

Munyakazi, 2014; Miroro & Adera, 2014). There is also growing literature on ICTs in developing countries: for example, Walsham and Sahay (2006) and Avgerou (2008); however, several researchers have argued that much of this literature does not address the question of what is meant by development (Heeks, 2006; Thompson, 2008). This study argues from the onset that debates in development thinking are complex and there is a need to engage with development theory for a comprehensive analysis of technology-enabled development. It thus articulates social exclusion from a development studies discourse in a bid to critique the limited articulation of the relationship between ICT and inclusion embedded in the WDR16.

ICTs, Social Exclusion and Inclusion Discourse

Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. Recent development discourse witnessed the emergence of the social exclusion and inclusion concepts, which seek to address poverty and human wellbeing (Njoki & Wabwoba, 2013). These concepts emerged in response to failure of earlier developmental discourses, such as poverty eradication, to come up with convincing arguments and solutions to rising poverty and growing disparities within and between nations (Steyn & Johanson, 2011). Before the concept came to be used, it was common to describe social divisions and inequality in terms of concepts such as poverty, deprivation and disadvantage (Muddiman, 2000). The understanding was that the poor or disadvantaged members of society lacked adequate resources with which to achieve acceptable standards of wellbeing and with which to participate in the customary activities of society (Townsend, 1979). Social exclusion is conceptualised as involving the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to most people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. The social exclusion-inclusion debate thus seeks to fix the flaws that cause the exclusion within the society. As such, the society is held accountable for its policies and norms. The study has the primary understanding that the way ICTs are viewed and conceptualised depends on the way development is seen and conceptualised; as such, this paper explored the implied meaning of social inclusion and how ICTs are portrayed in the report as contributing to social inclusion using critical discourse analysis (CDA).

Although there are debates around technology enabled development, there is an almost overarching theme that is gaining momentum from the optimist's views that portray ICTs as tools and catalysts for development. The relationship between ICTs and development is manifest in a few instances but, in most cases, it is implied (Kondowe & Chigona, 2018). In this paper, I argue about the implied role of ICT in enhancing social inclusion in developing countries. ICTs are implied to enhance public participation

(Zanello & Maassen, 2011; World Bank, 2016), which enhances citizens' voice and holding governments accountable. With open government initiatives, ICTs are also seen as contributing to openness and improvement of service delivery, as the citizens have close access to government (National Democratic Institute, 2013; World Bank, 2016). Not only are citizens passive recipients, but they become active participants and get to be involved in decisions about programmes and services that affect them (Zanello & Maassen, 2011; World Bank, 2016).

Research Methodology

The study utilised the critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology in its investigation of how the World Bank frames social inclusion within ICT-enabled development. CDA was applied not only as a theoretical framework that explores the relationship between language use as discourse and unequal power relations, but also as an analytical method that analyses diverse linguistic features and discursive strategies by which a certain ideological bias is exercised in texts within the WDR16. It is important to note that CDA as a research tool can be used in exploration and analysis of various policy documents (Byungura et al., 2016). Accordingly, CDA was used in this study to create a deeper analysis of knowledge about how social exclusion is perceived and conceptualised in ICT4D using the WDR16 as an example. Over and above an analysis of the implied meaning of social inclusion, the approach enabled a critical analysis of this implied meaning.

As an inductive study, I focus my discussion around the arguments in the report, which refer to contemporary processes, which are ICT-driven and are variously identified within the CDA by such terms as “public participation”, “service delivery”, “advancing voice”, “connected people” and “inclusion”. These terms and inferences in the ICT4D space have an extremely large bearing on how social inclusion is understood and conceptualised. These terms were used as the central focus to analyse texts that were extracted to discuss the implied meaning of development within the report.

The rationale behind selecting the WDR16 on digital dividends was purposive. I basically believe that policy reports are the most valuable resource for recognising the positions and arguments of certain stakeholders. I also see ICT4D as a power struggle for domination, and the World Bank as the hegemony of ICT4D, having much control of the direction which it will take. Further, policy reports, in particular those produced by international organisations, are the most important discursive resource to investigate the way in which the discourse of development is being constructed, disseminated, and argued. The World Bank has had the predominant role in global development issues and now has taken a leading role in ICTs. The organisation is seen as the custodian of development and shapes the direction of

development. It is also seen as an institution with technical capacity and competency to deal with development. Although history has condemned some of the policy options that have failed the global South, to date, the World Bank is the key institution – sometimes referred to as the hegemony of development – as it provides policy options to development practitioners and shapes the terrain and landscape of global development. I thus analyse texts within the report to elicit what they mirror in development theory. The study utilised only Part 1 of the report, which contains three documents that summarise ICTs and economic growth, expanding opportunities, and promoting service delivery, respectively. I read the full report and purposively focused on Part 1 of the report as it forms the summary of the report. The texts which were analysed were purposively selected, as they formed the summary or main argument of the section concerned. This study is part of the major PhD work in progress which analyses the full report and a wide variety of literature sources.

Findings

Whether ICTs promote development or perpetuate poverty, marginalisation and inequality is the major question that has caused ICT4D study to be in ferment. The report uses “depoliticisation and the common interest” (Ziai, 2015:13) strategy in order to position ICTs in development. The discourse employed by most development agencies assumes that ‘development’ is something that benefits everyone and therefore no one can object to it (Ziai, 2015) in (Kondowe & Chigona, 2018). The WBR16 positions ICTs as having a transformative potential in all spheres of the economy with the potential to include the poor, and the previously marginalised and disadvantaged groups to actively participate in the economy and in decisions that affect them. This section focuses on how the report articulates ICTs and enhancing economic inclusion of the poor, enhancing participation and enhancing access through improved service delivery.

The Optimistic View of Technology and Development

From a general perspective, the title of a report symbolically compresses the main idea or issue, and, in several instances, the main claim is articulated. The title is rhetoric: “digital dividends” intends to justify and motivate a shift that would entail making ICTs to be seen as positive contributors to development. The rhetoric also attempts to shape and pursue a new way of viewing ICTs within the development spectrum. Rhetoric statements set precedence on how the social reality should be viewed, experienced and interpreted (Fairclough, 2003, Guo, 2013). It thus sets the underlying tone of positive contribution of ICTs in development, while choosing to ignore the negative impacts of ICTs, which is digital divide. The main title, *Digital Dividends*, introduces the main claim and the underlying assumption in the report, which is that ICTs can provide digital opportunities or that they have positive impacts to the development

story. Although the report acknowledges other shortfalls of technology, from the onset, the report is biased towards the optimistic view and underspecifying the challenges and other unintended outcomes associated with ICT4D.

Although there are many debates which are complex and often dispute the fact that technology is a contributor to development, the report purposively overlooks such debates and controversies and selectively focuses on the positive aspects of ICTs. It is from the onset that the report is bold in showing that it is written from the ICT optimist standpoint. Foucault (1984) states that, sometimes, meanings attached to discourses treat them as the general domain of all statements. The optimistic view of technology is not a new phenomenon, but has been existing for centuries, and, although Marxist thinkers have critiqued the role of technology in society, it has been the hegemonic and predominant view. ICTs are thus seen as important for progress and functioning of society.

ICTs and Social Inclusion of the Poor

Unlike most literature and research in ICT4D, the report does not acknowledge the longstanding debate of the complex relationship between ICT and development from the onset. The report claims that the digital revolution is necessary to unlock digital opportunities and improve the lives of the poor. ICTs also stimulate productivity, innovation and other efficient ways of operating, which, in turn, leads to profitability, which is the much-desired force to improve GNP and GDP. Growth is seen as the catalyst to trickle down to the poor, creating jobs, which has the potential to transform the lives of the poor.

<Extract 1>

We must take advantage of this rapid technological change to make the world more prosperous and inclusive..... For many people, today's increase in access to digital technologies brings more choice and greater convenience. Through inclusion, efficiency, and innovation, access provides opportunities that were previously out of reach to the poor and disadvantaged.... New technologies allow women to participate more easily in the labor market—as e-commerce entrepreneurs, in online work, or in business-process outsourcing. (Foreword)

In the first statement, “*We must take advantage of rapid technological change*”, the wording is suggestive in nature. It glorifies ICTs and makes it a non-negotiable for organisations and countries to tap into it if development is to happen. It claims ICTs to be catalysts for development and, without ICTs, development is at stake. This statement is accomplished by the metaphor “digital revolution”. Metaphors are used in a number of ways to create social realities and may thus be a guide for future action, which reinforces the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent (Guo, 2013), thus underscoring a specific

understanding of the reality while ignoring others. ICTs in this narrative are positioned as prerequisites for development and should be taken advantage of.

The central argument in the report is the concept of “legitimization through the promise of betterment” (Ziai, 2015:10); this is articulated as ICTs being seen as a tool to deliver to the promise of economic growth and inclusion of the poor. At the heart of global development, be it inclusion of the marginalised and the poor, improving efficiency and effectiveness of businesses or improving service delivery, which are major challenges faced globally and mostly by developing countries, are ICTs, which come as a solution to these challenges and offer the potential to respond to these challenges. This legitimization of ICTs thus takes the position of being catalysts to developmental challenges and a driving force for the global development agenda.

ICTs Expanding Opportunities

The main argument within the claim that ICTs expand opportunities is that they made it possible for companies to have a wider reach in the global market. Technology thus sparked tremendous growth in trade and commerce. For example, Alibaba revolutionised and transformed China’s market and linked it to the global market and there were new business opportunities that were created (World Bank, 2016).

<Extract 2>

Digital technologies can improve overall welfare and reduce poverty, but without complementary investments, they can also worsen inequality. In Africa alone, 11 million youth are expected to enter the labor market every year for the next decade. Born in the internet era, they live in a world full of new and exciting opportunities. Farmers use mobile phones to get price information and technical advice. Women facing barriers to work outside their homes can work online and better balance work and family.

It is clear that the use of ICTs is seen as having far-reaching positive contributions that go beyond the economic benefits discussed in the earlier section. ICTs are seen as major contributors to poverty eradication. They have benefits that spill over to the general populace. It is important to note that there are a number of controversies around opportunities that are created by ICTs. Although, in the developed countries, technology has opened up opportunities, the case is not the same with developing countries, as there are a number of challenges that are faced. Connectivity challenges due to data costs and skills continue to exclude a large number of the population from participating in the information society. Moreover, although this is widely contested, there is, however, an acknowledgement across several scholars that ICTs have brought with them the main challenge of cyber apartheid. There is evidence that

ICTs have achieved positive results for developed countries; however, the information economy has been critiqued by neo-Marxist scholars that it reinforced exclusion of developing countries (Heeks, 2008).

ICTs and Service Delivery

It is important to note that the role of governments is to deliver on public goods or to serve the citizens. This section will summarise the third policy content; however, it will not form part of the discussion of this study as the study focuses on the two key policy contents discussed earlier. ICTs, as an important catalyst for development, have for decades been glorified for its contribution to enabling government's capability to empower citizens through accessing government information, enhancing democracy and citizen participation, which, in turn, promotes transparency and accountability. The report reiterates the importance of ICTs as a tool by which governments can reach the masses, be accountable and allow for public participation. It is also seen as an empowering tool for citizens.

<Extract 3>

Governments have invested heavily in digital technology....and for the poor to get an official identity allowing them to receive welfare payments and vote in elections. Digital technologies have also enabled governments to receive regular feedback from service users, improving service quality.

One of the main propositions of ICT optimists is that these technologies enhance public participation. This is in line with democratic principles where every person in a society is entitled to have access to resources. Openness will make the citizenry hold the government accountable and influence the government for the welfare of citizens and equal opportunities will be made available. It has been acknowledged in ICT4D literature that several governments are using ICTs, and a greater share of government jobs in developing countries is ICT-intensive than in the private sector. Almost all governments now have websites, which allow governments to connect with the public and for them to do business with the organs of the state, such as personal tax management. Although it is clear that ICTs have enabled accountability and open government, its role need not be over-emphasised, as the poor are unable to access these technologies because of affordability issues. Participation in many instances has been of the elite and has led to continued marginalisation of the poor.

Discussion

Through using metaphors, rhetoric statements, “depoliticisation and the common interest”, and “legitimation through promise of betterment”, among other strategies, the report gained mileage in positioning ICTs as catalysts to enhance inclusive development. Although these strategies can be applauded for acknowledging ICTs and their contribution in the social inclusion discourse, their weakness

was an overemphasis on the positive and underspecifying other challenges of disparities and continued marginalisation of the poor.

The private sector is seen as a means of providing more and various economic opportunities in different societies, especially for the poor and marginalised. Although the analysis may be true, however, to focus on growth alone generates a risk of creating or exacerbating inequality. Inclusive development which is ICT driven may exclude the poor who may lack access. Although private sector profits are important to later lead to creation of employment opportunities for the poor, in reality, however, trickledown economics does not happen. In many instances skills are important for active participation in the labour market.

Although ICTs can be applauded for enhancing social inclusion and improving the lives of the poor, there are new forms of social exclusion that are sparsely discussed. The digital divide and cyber apartheid are suffered by those unable to benefit from ICT mainly due to lack of access and affordability. Moreover, within the social inclusion and inclusive development debate, ICTs can be critiqued for doing less in terms of including the poor than reinforcing the status quo of the rich having a better advantage over the poor. The rural populace still faces infrastructure challenges and remains excluded in the digital economy. The poor are still marginalised in the developing world as they lack access to ICTs, hence making them face continued marginalisation. In many instances, however, the rich and those with skills continue to enjoy the benefits while the poor continue to face exclusion. Participation in holding the government accountable and in enhancing public participation is questionable also on the above argument: the rich, educated and literate stand to benefit more than the poor in terms of public participation. On this basis, social inclusion, which technology enhances, can thus be questioned.

Conclusion

Although ICTs have made the world more inclusive and activated the long-standing efforts of ensuring inclusive development, their approach can be questioned, as the poor still face exclusion and continued marginalisation. The report needs to be commended for covering the holistic process of development as it moved from the mere technocentric and market-related approach of the previous decade. On the other hand, it can be critiqued for over-emphasis on positive contributions of ICT4D and overlooking its negative impacts due to the strategies that it employed to argue in support of ICTs and inclusive development. ICTs have witnessed new forms of exclusion; however, they remain underspecified in ICT4D studies in particular, the WDR16. Propounding technology as a solution to social exclusion and as an effort to include the poor is questionable. There is a need to deal with access and affordability issues,

as those who cannot use ICT are likely to be excluded from benefiting from the technology, which in many cases are the poor.

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