

ICT for development reconsidered: a critical realist approach to the strategic context in Kenya's transition to e-governance

Njihia, James Muranga

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Abstract:

This study contributes to critical information systems research understanding of the broader strategic context of information systems initiatives in developing countries. It investigates contextual influences with structural impacts that may lead to instabilities and discontinuities in the immediate project context using a critical realist paradigm. It was informed by literature on development as discourse, ICT4D policy and technology transfer, E-Government adoption, and information systems research paradigms and applications in developing countries. A disconnection was observed between ICT4D policy practice that favors positivist technology diffusion models and research findings that suggest interpretive and critical contextual approaches. A theoretical framework was developed to reconsider ICT4D from a postcolonial country perspective by integrating critiques of modernity from Critical realism and postcolonial theory. An empirical case study investigation of change in Kenya's transition to E-Governance was then conducted and analyzed using a critical realist research framework, the Morphogenetic approach, supplemented by Q-methodology to study subjectivity. Finally ICT change was interpreted using critical realist concepts for structure, culture, and agency, with an overriding direction towards greater freedom. The main research contribution is a new approach to ICT4D where change is conceived within a dialectical framework that assumes people are moral and ethical beings possessing values. Research findings have implications for understanding the strategic context of E-Governance and ICT4D, time and temporality in contextual integrative frameworks, and suggest an alternative approach to strategy analysis in situations of rapid political and institutional change. They highlight the importance of political leaders and development agencies as mediators and interpreters of the strategic context. Development was conceived as a dialectical process towards transformative praxis, which together with the suggested approach to the strategic context, may require us to rethink the meaning of IS project success or failure in postcolonial developing countries.