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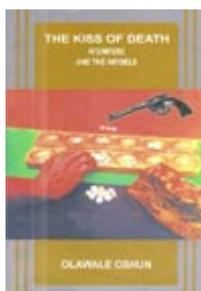
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How Nigeria Can Win The ICT Race in Africa

Written by Mercy Ette

Sunday, 29 March 2009

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 attention of ordinary readers but for a journalist-turned-university lecturer, the story of Nigeria's engagement with information and communication technologies, ICTs, is a compelling tale. 'Development and Communication Technologies in Nigeria: Prospects and Challenges' by Patience Akpan-Obong is not just an authoritative text on the subject but also a 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 the drivers of 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 in themselves.' But this book offers more than just a narrative; it also provides an engaging examination of theories of development, especially those related to communication and information, and how they influence debates on the relationship 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 a socio-political environment. She provides a brief historical overview of the emergence of development theory before taking on board new perspectives that have been put forward over the years. These new explanations, she argues, challenge some common understandings of previous decades.

One of the new positions is the 'basic-needs' approach which offers a different 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 basic needs. The author argues that Africa had already recognised the advantages of this approach 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 economic growth 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 focuses on specific issues, for example, communication, by exploring theories that illustrate a link between communication and development. Works



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premise that media of mass communication can facilitate modernis Obong questions arguments that find correlation between low level of c and low level of development and argues that the causality between c technology and economic development cannot be taken as given but m being subject to other factors in society.

Although there is no standardised and all encompassing theory development, Akpan-Obong attempts to synthesise dominant viewpoints authoritative platform for an analysis of development of ICT and their socio-economic growth and development in Nigeria. She identifies fro underlying policies and structures in Nigeria's engagement with ICTs fo and delineates their contributions at different levels.

Information and Communication Technologies in Nigeria is a book for makers, scholars of development and ICTs and non-specialist readers. former head of the Political Desk of *The Punch* newspaper and i columnist for the paper, writes fluently and rigorously about a subject appeals to a certain readership. She puts her journalistic skills to ef unpacking theoretical explanations that underpin the subject in a detaile style. Woven into the narrative are interviews and conversations with the Nigerian ICTs sector. A succinct summary of Nigeria's n development plans provides a context for an analysis of the country's a problems of under-development and points out how the state has alw development process in the country. In fact, it was not until the 1980s t sector became active in development initiatives. However, in the ICT: private sector has been the driving force in moving Nigeria from telepho of 0.45 percent in 2001 to 38.09 percent by 2008. This rapid developr tagged 'a revolution' by many observers.

In a section detailing patterns of ICTs usage, the book examines the d policies and focuses on usage by four ministries and the Presidency. T approach enabled the author to examine how policy statements on It diffusion were translated into practice. In one chapter, the book focuses usage based on responses to questionnaires administered to 408 N Service Corps members in Port Harcourt, Lagos and Abuja. Some of tl from the analysis were predictable and Akpan-Obong recognised this. she acknowledged that her respondents belonged to age groups mo 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 sr optimistic picture of Nigeria's prospects for socio-economic developme Obong argues that potholes and detours on the information supe hamper growth. Some of these hurdles are the state of the country's infr public power supply. Consequently, the success of ICTs as tools for ec is dependent on other factors. This, notwithstanding, the author r optimism expressed by those she interviewed was well founded becaus level, it would appear that the appropriate institutional framework has b through the formulation of policies and establishment of implementing ag As a late comer to the ICTs arena, Nigeria has recorded significant ac the utilisation of the technologies and quickly recorded some of the l rates in the penetration and diffusion levels of ICTs. It is on that not Obong writes that Nigeria is a major actor in the ICT sector in Africa. view that the African giant could provide continental leadership as 'interesting policy approach to growing its ICTs sector' and the acti private sectors. Unlike other African countries where the state spearhe of ICTs, Nigeria's more flexible approach could enhance its chances i front-runner in Africa. Akpan-Obong suggests this could be achieve development and production of ICT hardware and software for export Africa. The country could also lead the way by developing local c internet.

Given these possibilities, it is understandable why Akpan-Obong is Africa's crippled and sleeping giant could wake up and lead the way ICTs for socio-economic growth. Her arguments are convincing and are credible empirical evidence. In essence, Akpan-Obong believes tl prospects for development and economic growth through the applic despite the poor state of the country's infrastructure. Given the dramatic ICTs in major cities in Nigeria, her conclusion is not unfounded.

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