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A critique of development participatory communication discourse, its translation into internet-based international development policy for poverty reduction, and implications for African national ICT for development policy

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Abstract

This study critiques the ICT for development discourse within development participatory communication theory and analyses how this discourse is translated into communication policies of international development agencies represented by the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) ICT for development policy, the *Digital Opportunity Initiative* (*DOI) (2001)* and the United States International Development agency's (USAID) *Leland Initiative* (1996). The study further examines implications for the influence of the international ICT for development discourse on African national poverty reduction strategies using Rwanda's National ICT policy (2001-2005). Development participatory communication theory perceives the internet as enabling global participation in the creation of development knowledge for poverty reduction hence international development agencies have created ICT for development policies based on the theory. The paradigm has, however, been criticised by post-development scholars for neglecting the influence of power in participation processes resulting in the exclusion of poor communities from decision making. Existing literature shows that the role of power in the use of the internet for participatory communication has not been critically questioned nor implications for the influence of the international ICT for development rhetoric on African poverty reduction strategies adequately critiqued. Using a critical discourse analysis approach, the study finds that the influence of development participatory communication theory on the discourse within the *DOI* and *Leland Initiative* promoted portrayal of the internet as contributing to poverty reduction by enhancing global economic integration. The study argues from a post-development view that this view promotes the exclusion of the poor from internet-based knowledge production processes by neglecting power dynamics influencing globalization and promoting the universalization of Western knowledge while denigrating local knowledge. The study also finds that the UNDP and USAID influenced the creation of Rwanda's ICT discourse through the provision of financial and technical aid resulting in Rwanda's national ICT discourse portraying use of the internet to achieve economic global competitiveness as leading to poverty reduction. This view ignores external and internal power inequalities influencing participation and promotes a predominantly economic perception of development which neglects use of the internet for participatory communication. Furthermore, Rwanda's globalization rhetoric rests on problematic modernization beliefs of the superiority of Western technology and the inferiority of local development paradigms. Subsequently, the study identifies three possible implications for

the influence of the international ICT discourse on the conceptualization of African poverty reduction strategies. These are; lack of African communicative policy autonomy reminiscent of modernization and colonial times, lack of consideration for the use of the internet for participation as ICTs are primarily seen as tools for commerce, and lack of consideration for power in the framing of African development communication policies. The study argues that the cited implications can collectively lead to the perpetuation of Western knowledge in African poverty reduction strategies by promoting top-down information transfer from developed to developing countries. Consequently, the study proposes the need for creating alternative African national ICT narratives based on local values to enable the participation of poor people in the use of the internet for knowledge production.