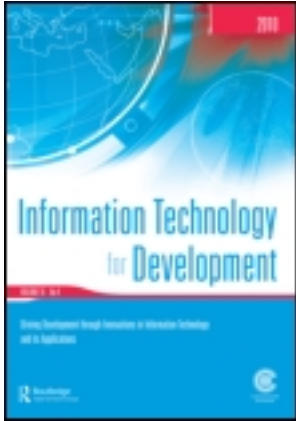


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Information Technology for Development

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/itd20>

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Published online: 19 Feb 2010.

To cite this article: Sajda Qureshi (2009): Assessment of the social factors in information and communication technology access and use, Information Technology for Development, 15:4, 235-236

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/itdj.20132>

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# Assessment of the Social Factors in Information and Communication Technology Access and Use

## Editorial Introduction

**Sajda Qureshi**

*Editor-in-Chief*

There is evidence to suggest that use of information and communication technology (ICT) can play an important role in the growth of small businesses and their communities, countries, and regions. In this sense, ICT can be employed to bring about increased competitiveness if it enables businesses to create new jobs and increase productivity and sales through access to new markets and administrative efficiencies. These outcomes can be achieved through measurable improvements in the lives of people living with limited resources to sustain themselves. It is often the access to ICTs that enables broader development objectives to be realized. In particular, social development objectives, which concern the provision of services such as education and healthcare, can be realized through judicious application of ICTs. It is often the ways in which ICTs are used that can potentially enable people to lead better lives. However, these gains are not always realized, nor are they within the reach of those who need them the most. The papers in this issue recognize an important fact: ICT implementations are influenced by social processes that determine the outcomes and often have political ramifications. Although diverse in their methods and analyses, these papers all provide unique insight into well known yet not always well understood social factors in ICT access and use.

The first paper in this issue, entitled “Factors Affecting ICT Expansion in Emerging Economies: An Analysis of ICT Infrastructure Expansion in Five Latin American Countries,” is authored by Ojelanki Ngwenyama and Olga Morawczynski. They state that, since the early 1990s, international institutions have been pushing developing nations to deregulate and heavily invest in ICT infrastructure as a strategy for accelerating socioeconomic development. After more than a decade of continued investments, some countries have still not achieved expected outcomes. Recently, the International Telecommunications Union has called for empirical research to assess the performance and impact of ICT expansion in developing countries. In this paper, the authors respond to this call by investigating factors affecting the efficiency of ICT expansion in five emerging economies in Latin America. Their findings demonstrate that deregulation is not sufficient to effect efficient ICT expansion and argue that existing conditions (economic factors, human capital and geography, and civil infrastructure factors) must also be considered. They conclude by asserting that policymakers can more easily realize socioeconomic development through the

application and implementation of ICTs if they consider these conditions while cultivating their technology strategies.

The second paper is authored by Rahul De' and Aishwarya Lakshmi Ratan and is entitled "Whose Gain is it Anyway? Structural Perspectives on Deploying ICTs for Development in India's Microfinance Sector." The authors suggest that structuration theory is one of the key meta-theories that deconstruct the complexity of technology introductions in the context of organizational and behavioural change. In this study, they use a structural lens to examine two pilot ICT implementations in the Indian microfinance sector. Specifically, they explore the interactions between the ICT intervention, the organizations and people implementing the change, and the structural and institutional context within which these projects were rolled out. They illustrate how an "ICT for development" intervention is inherently a political process, involving choices around defining efficiency and targeting particular social welfare improvements, with varying repercussions for the microfinance institution and client. Where the client's context, constraints, and welfare are placed at the heart of the "efficiency" discussion during the technology's design and implementation, the development impact is seen to be far greater and more sustained.

Thomas Molony authors the third paper in this issue, which is entitled "Carving a Niche: ICT, Social Capital, and Trust in the Shift from Personal to Impersonal Trading in Tanzania." The author suggests that, although the research community is now starting to provide a more detailed understanding of the magnitude and details of small businesses' greater access to ICT, there is still a poor understanding of social capital and trust. This paper aims to contribute to filling the knowledge gap by profiling three Tanzanian businesswomen who have managed to enter the high-profit area of bulk exporting African blackwood ("ebony") carvings. Their experience shows the successful use of a spread of ICT applications, and e-mail in particular, as crucial tools to build on existing networks and to maintain trust with wealthy foreign buyers. With the help of ICT to deal with these relationships, the women stay in touch by "keeping up appearances" at a social level—albeit at a distance. In doing so, they are managing to do what institutions are yet to achieve: the move from personal to impersonal exchange. Their experience has implications for how other entrepreneurs can use ICT to leverage resources, ideas, and information from contacts outside their own social milieu.

The practice paper in this issue is authored by George S. Oreku, Jianzhong Li, Kimutai Kimeli, and Fredrick J. Mtenzi and is entitled the "State of Tanzania E-Readiness and E-Commerce: Overview." The authors provide a view into Tanzania's state of e-readiness and the challenges faced in being able to take advantage of e-commerce. This overview throws light onto the frustrating lack of resources that impede countries such as Tanzania from taking advantage of ICTs while being aware of the potential applications.