Chapter 7
Using ICT to Resolve the Modernization Paradox for Rural Communities in Africa: A Theoretical Exploration and Conceptualization

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ABSTRACT

Rural communities are being heavily influenced by the ongoing modernization process taking place in all African economies and nations. Theoretically the modernization process is intended to help lead to an increase in the economic well-being of the citizenry. However, one of the unanticipated outcomes of continuing urbanization and modernization, particularly for rural communities would be the loss of local social relations within such communities. This is similar to what happened in the Western context, where modernization, in the form of industrialization resulted in the loss of social relationships and increasing sense of alienation as cities formed. There is therefore a very real fear that in the African context, the ensuing modernization will result in a paradox where modernization may lead to an increase in economic well-being, but have the unintended consequence of increasing alienation and reducing the sense of community that exists in rural villages. The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. First, the authors theoretically explore the possibility of using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to develop a sense of community in rural villages and thus offset and mitigate the more negative aspects of the modernization process. Second, they propose a way to conceptualize this potential paradox by integrating the well established sociological concepts of Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (individualism) with current paradox models of diversity and similarity curves. Such an approach has pedagogical utility in helping to describe and explain the modern paradox confronted by most of the African countries.

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INTRODUCTION

Countries in Africa are going through major economic and socio-cultural transitions associated with the modernization process. This modernization however produces a classical paradoxical situation where while, in some instances, it may result in the in increasing economic well being of farmers, it unfortunately may have several unintended consequences such as loss of sense of community, and increasing feelings of alienation and anomie. This is historically consistent with what happened in the Western economies, where the modernization process and its resultant industrialization has resulted in both economic wellbeing of their citizenry and an increasing loss of sense of community and relationships, particularly in larger urban cities.

The purpose of this essay is three fold. First, we argue for using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to develop community and thus leading to a situation where increasing levels of modernization would result in both increasing levels of economic well being and decreasing levels of alienation. We will however point out that, ICT should in no way be considered a panacea as its design and implementation, in the African context, is likely to face several daunting challenges and problems. Second, using the economic model of supply and demand as a heuristic, we will propose a way to conceptualize this paradox and its resolution by integrating the well established sociological concepts of Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (individualism) (Tonnies, 1957) with current paradox models of diversity and similarity curves (Ofri-Dankwa & Julian, 2002, 2004). Finally we highlight the pedagogical implications of this essay.

Two caveats are however in order. First, while we recognize that the main focus of this book is on agriculture, we set out specifically to present a theoretical essay focusing on the broad effects of modernization on the rural communities in Africa, taking into account while there is some evidence of urban agricultural enterprises (e.g. Ezedinma & Chukuezi, 1999), that to date, most of the agricultural production in Africa comes from the rural communities. Second, though we generalize about the effects of modernization in Africa, we are very much aware that Africa is by no means monolithic and have distinct communities and regions. The trends that we highlight however have broad and general applicability.

Modernization and Loss of Community in Africa: A Modern Paradox

African countries are slowly going through the developmental process, in part spurred by modernization process. Indeed, many developing countries in Africa are experiencing some of the implication of modernization, in some ways are similar to the process that the US and other Western economies experienced them during the industrial revolution.

From a sociological perspective, the industrial revolution and its modernization process lead to rapid social changes. One of the earlier thinkers and scholars of the consequences of this urbanization process was Wirth (1938) who suggested that urbanization, if unchecked could result in social disorganization and the disintegration of the sense of community. Wirth (1938) pointed out that as people began to move into urban communities from rural places they dissolve intimate ties that were established in rural communities and fail to make these ties in the new urban communities. These ties are difficult to make in urban areas, according to Wirth (1938), because “diverse population elements inhabiting a compact settlement thus tend to become segregated from one another in the degree in which their requirements and modes of life are incompatible with one another and in the measure in which they are antagonistic to one another” (p. 15). Hence, as people gather in these large, dense and heterogeneous areas it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for intimate ties and
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