



Towards an empowerment framework for evaluating mobile phone use and impact in developing countries



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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the dominant optimism around mobile phone contribution to socio-economic development in the developing world. It argues in favor of how mobile phones could empower socio-economically marginalized young people to overcome their marginality by examining its use within the broader socio-cultural, economic and political contexts. Drawing on the information and communication capabilities of mobile phones, this paper uses an ethnographic data and a synthesized empowerment framework to analyze the relationship between mobile phone usage and empowerment of marginalized young people in Sierra Leone. In doing so, the paper focuses on the socio-culture, political and economic uses of mobile phones. The focus on these uses is based on the argument that for mobile phones to empower marginalized young people their uses should facilitate economic, political and socio-cultural issues underpinning their marginality. The study results suggest that mobile phones empower marginalized young people to communicate and access vital livelihood information to articulate their everyday activities. However, it is not strongly evident that the use of mobile phones completely emancipates them from socio-economic and political exclusion.

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1. Introduction

There are almost seven billion mobile phones subscriptions at the global level, and three quarter of these subscriptions are from developing countries (ITU, 2014). In Sierra Leone, mobile phones subscriptions have grown exponentially from 2000 in 2002 to 3.5 million in 2013 (NATCOM, 2014). Alongside the rapid global penetration of mobile phones, there are optimisms that their uses have facilitated socio-economic opportunities for poor and marginalized people living in developing countries (e.g. Aker and Mbiti, 2010; Donner, 2006). Indeed, researchers have documented the potential benefits that mobile phones have accrued to the poor, including fish folks in Kerala (Abraham, 2007), grain traders in Niger (Aker, 2010), mobile women in Bangladesh (Aminuzzaman et al., 2003), small business owners in Rwanda (Donner, 2006), rural and urban dwellers in Ghana (Sey, 2011) and Burkina Faso (Hahn and Kibora, 2008). However, in spite of this, there are still concerns that the relationship between mobile phones and socio-economic development remains unclearly established. A particular reference can be drawn from three contested research groups that underpin mobile phone studies in developing countries. The first group, the technological deterministic proponents, believes that the mobile phone is a panacea for ameliorating the problems of poor people (e.g. Ekine, 2009; Scott et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2011). Here, the mobile phone impact is often determined by the outcome of development projects or mobile phone applications (Sey, 2011). The second group of researchers are critical that the increase in access to mobile phones strengthen and widen existing socio-economic disparity

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between poor people and the privileged segments of society (Buys et al., 2009; Etzo and Collender, 2010; Han, 2012; James, 2009; Wade, 2002). Finally, there are those who view the mobile phone as a means to achieving the development of human well-being (Aminuzzaman et al., 2003; Donner, 2006; Horst and Miller, 2006). A community of researchers from this tradition links mobile phones to socio-economic development by examining their everyday uses in the socio-economic, political and cultural milieus of the users (Hahn and Kibora, 2008; Sey, 2011; Slater and Kwami, 2005). Despite the divergent views, the three research approaches share a common denominator. That is, their focus on mobile telephony and its societal, economic, social and political impacts.

This paper is associated with the third group of researchers, but it takes a different view by linking mobile phone impact to mainstream participatory development thinking. Under this thinking, development is understood as the freedom to choose one's livelihood direction (Sen, 2001). In this context, marginalized individuals are expected to be empowered to map their own development trajectories by participating in development processes and holding accountable institutions that affect their lives (Huesca, 2008). While the processes traditionally occur in particular development project settings (Van de Fliert, 2010), the individual efforts outside this framework often go unnoticed or ignored. This paper attempts to make this connection by arguing in favor of mobile phones as crucial tools for empowering marginalized young people to make informed choices, expand their livelihood opportunities and enhance their well-beings (Gigler, 2004). The argument is underpinned by the understanding that mobile phones offer effective information and communication capabilities to the marginalized to enable them become active participants in their own development agenda (Beardon, 2004).

Overall this paper has two specific objectives. First, to suggest an empowerment framework that links mobile phone usage to human development outside the strictly economic formulations of the technology (Heeks, 2010; Madon, 2000; Thomas, 2012; Warschauer, 2004). The framework emerges as a conceptual map of this study verified by the research data and key empowerment theories. Second, the study applies the framework to critically examine the relationship between mobile phone usage and the empowerment of marginalized young people in Sierra Leone. This paper defines marginalized young people in Sierra Leone as anyone aged 18–35 that lack or have limited access to political, social and economic opportunities either as a result of the state, community and family neglect or individual agency deficiency (Peeters et al., 2009; Heggen, 2000).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: The second section re-conceptualizes empowerment theory to develop the framework. The third section briefly describes the research design. The fourth section provides a brief review of the institutional landscape of the mobile telephony industry in Sierra Leone and the acquisition and ownership pattern among the marginalized young people. This is followed by the presentation of the research results and discussion in section five and the final conclusion in section six.

2. Conceptualizing empowerment

2.1. Empowerment as an individual attribute

The empowerment concept is often understood in terms of power relations between people with less power and people with more power (terms as having power above others) (Rowlands, 1995; Sen, 1997). Empowerment in this case is inherently the end goal (Luttrell et al., 2009). It is achieved by addressing power inequities between people with less power and people with more power (Rowlands, 1995; Sen, 1997). Another form of empowerment is characterized as 'power to' and 'power within' (Rowlands, 1995). Here, empowerment is a change process involving a bottom-up participation of people with less power to pave a way for a greater control over decision-making processes that affect their lives (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1997; Rowlands, 1995). In this context, empowerment is instrumental because change depends on the agency of people with less power to critically reflect on their situations, identify possible solutions and take concrete steps of actions based on the choices available to them (Freire, 1972; Gigler, 2004). This paper specifically draws on this understanding of empowerment to explain the relationship between mobile phones and empowerment. The argument for this is that mobile phones are personal tools; therefore, how they are used and what they are used for solely rest on individual choices and expected outcomes. In other words, empowering poor people through mobile phone usage involves an *agentic process* — a process whereby people take the lead in making choices and being able to transform those choices into desirable outcomes.

Studies have employed this perspective of empowerment to develop frameworks to evaluate the outcome of individual uses of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in development project interventions (Gigler, 2004; Kleine, 2010). In this article, an empowerment framework is suggested as a way of evaluating individual uses of mobile phones unbound from particular development project interventions.

2.2. Empowerment Framework

The framework is based on research data from Sierra Leone and key empowerment components drawn from studies by Schwerin (1995), Kabeer (1999) and Alsop and Heinsohn (2005). Schwerin employs the concept of empowerment as 'power with' to understand community mediation process. Kabeer draws on similar understanding of power to conceptualize empowerment as a change process in terms of one's ability to make strategic choices. According to her, key attributes for enabling less powerful people to make strategic life choices are resources, agency and achievements. Alsop and Heinsohn also identify agency as an important attribute of empowerment, but take a step further to incorporate the 'degree of empow-

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