AFRICA’S VOICES

Radio programmes across Africa increasingly encourage their listeners to call in and participate in topical debates. But listeners’ voices are confined to local levels. Africa’s Voices started as a twelve-month pilot project harnessing the reach of radio and the spread of mobile phone use to gather citizens’ opinion on governance and development issues. A ground tested collaborative platform sustained by local radio stations, Africa’s Voices aims to inform African leaders, NGOs and the wider policy and research communities, strengthening citizen participation in public affairs across the continent.

From Lusaka to Accra, from Kampala to Dakar, what do citizens think about waste management, education or electricity supply in their area? How do they evaluate public service delivery? What are their political and social priorities?

Why Africa’s Voices?

In Africa, Web 2.0, social media, open data and 3G based mobile innovations are some way from reaching last mile communities, let alone enhancing participation and improving pro-poor governance outcomes. New ICT innovations are blooming, but are too often divorced from the context of application and thus the conditions for success. Mediums such as radio remain central to informed public debate. By leveraging mobile phone penetration, interactive radio promises to expand the reach and quality of public debate and opportunities for citizens’ voices, across Africa. Africa’s Voices offers a basis for innovative pan-African broadcast on the quality of public goods, the expectations of African citizens and the performance of their leaders. The University of Cambridge’s Centre of Governance and Human Rights (CGHR) built on its own in-depth social science research and its applied collaborations with social development software innovators FrontlineSMS and FreedomFone, for this field-based pilot of an interactive radio methodology. Through a quasi-experimental approach, we focused on what works - and under what conditions - to produce insights for broader significance to ICT for development and citizen participation research agendas. We have unpacked criteria for success: developing context-friendly technological solutions; optimising for partner radio station capabilities and infrastructural obstacles; designing audience-friendly question and answer formats; targeting motivation and incentivisation strategies; engaging socio-political modes of public debate; tapping local ‘logics’ of political accountability. Along the way, we have fostered lively public discussions, delivered usable analytical outputs back to stations and their audiences, and built a network of radio station partners across the continent.

How does Africa’s Voices work?

During its first year (2012-13), Africa’s Voices piloted a methodology for public opinion gathering in Africa using interactive radio and mobile phones. Radio stations were invited to ask monthly questions to their audiences that answer through SMS. With a quasi-experimental design, the format and content of the questions were tested poll after poll to find the optimal methodology for Africa’s Voices that enables radio audiences to express their opinions in their natural forms and to engage in debates about issues that matter to them. The questions—developed jointly by the radio stations and CGHR—were on ‘public
goods’ themes such as governance, environment, health, gender and education and are clear, topical, and relevant to all audiences. A multi-lingual script introducing the context of the question and alluding to different sides of the debate was read out during weekly programmes inviting audiences to send anonymous SMS with their views.

Text SMS messages were received in stations’ computers using FrontlineSMS and FreedomFone, open-source software tools for managing large volumes of SMS in computers with limited internet connection. The messages were exported through to Cambridge to produce reports based on comparative figures and qualitative analysis of arguments. These were published on the CGHR website and shared with the stations with the aim of informing audiences and key stakeholders, from policy makers and development organizations to the wider research community. The analyses provided by CGHR academics shed light on differences and similarities between countries, underlining failures and achievements, and possible causes and solutions to governance and development problems. Radio producers can also engage governance actors, audiences, NGOs and leaders to radio programmes to respond to these views, enhancing accountability mechanisms and reinforcing the role of local radio stations as major venues of public debate.

How far have we come?

Africa’s Voices started in September 2012 with eight partner radio stations in Uganda (Buddu FM and Better FM), Kenya (Radio Namlolwe), Zambia (Breeze FM), Mozambique (Radio Corredor da Beira), Malawi (Radio Mudzi Wathu), Ghana (Rite FM) and Sierra Leone (Radio Gbafith). New radio stations have joined in a managed process, including stations in Tanzania (Radio Ulanga), Malawi (Nkhotakota Community Radio) and Mozambique (Radio Comunitária da Gorongosa). Currently asking a question about the use of fertilizers, Africa’s Voices has collected opinions from audiences on a number of topics: threats to food security, banning the use of plastic bags, presidential term limits, compulsory basic education, fear of AIDS vs malaria, early marriage, and fear of crime. The pilot started with a baseline in round 1 in all stations, after a pre-test exercise with only two stations. The pilot was concluded in September 2013, comprising six rounds of questions.

**Africa’s Voices pilot questions**

Pre-pilot round: What are the main threats to food security in your area? (Climate change/Land Access/Market Access/Food prices)

Round 1: Should our government ban the use of plastic bags? Yes or No?

Round 2: Which one of these two statements do you agree with? African presidents should be limited by their country’s constitution to serving a maximum of two terms in the office OR Africans should be able to democratically elect a president to serve for more than two terms.

Round 3: What is the minimum number of years that children should be required by the government to attend school? (this round was aborted because the question was misinterpreted by audiences)

Round 4: Which one of these diseases do you fear more? AIDS or malaria? Why?

Round 5: Do you think a 16-year old girl [local fictional name] should interrupt her education to get married to help the family or should continue her studies to seek a better future for her and her family? Why? (a vignette with the details of a story is presented)

Round 6: Do you feel safe walking alone in your area after dark? Yes or No? Why?

(Post-pilot) Round 7: Do you think that farmers are using too much fertilizer nowadays? Yes or No? Why?
Most of the SMS received combine standard answers with personal references (e.g., gender and village) and arguments supporting the answers. The messages are analysed using quantitative and qualitative techniques to obtain a composite picture of opinions of audiences. Due to self-selection of listeners who participate in Africa’s Voices programmes and associated SMS costs, the samples may not be representative of radio audiences. Therefore, direct generalizations of results to general audiences and communities are inaccurate based on the results of the pilot. Currently, the Africa’s Voices team is testing an innovation that enables real time collection of socio-demographical information, in order to build post-hoc panels of audiences. Being implemented in one station in Kenya, this innovation will be scaled up to other stations to allow comparisons between countries and key socio-demographical groups.

More than crude counts of respondents who chose a particular answer, understanding the social representations and beliefs evoked by the questions can provide valuable information to inform policy design with the opinions and expectations of citizens. With careful design, Africa’s Voices holds enormous potential in this regard. For example, CGHR analysed and coded arguments given by respondents in favour (Yes) or against (No) banning the use of plastic bags for each station. Thematic analysis of the messages revealed that the usefulness of plastic bags is the main argument to be against a ban, but that many also emphasise that a ban is not necessary if people take care and dispose plastic bags in the right places (Fig. 3). Investing in recycling systems and environmental education would seem preferable than banning plastic bags. The absence of this motivates the dominant counter-argument, namely that the only way to contend the environmental damage and dirtiness caused by plastic bags is banning them totally and replace them by biodegradable bags (Fig. 4).
What have we learnt?

Interactive radio formats, like Africa’s Voices, can generate new spaces for voice, debate and accountability. As Africa’s Voices becomes more popular among audiences and journalists, audiences’ participation via SMS has increased and has attracted attention of local leaders/representatives. For example, in Radio NamLolwe in Kenya, the Provincial Director of Environment for Nyanza province called the station to congratulate the journalists for doing a good job by promoting exchange of opinions and debate that helped to sensitize the public during the plastic bags poll and in Radio Breeze FM in Zambia, a politician inquired the radio station about Africa’s Voices and expressed interest in the debate around presidential terms limits.

Reasons matter for people expressing opinions. The results of the pilot revealed that audiences’ participation takes different forms. Across all the radio stations and questions, there is a clear preference for longer text messages. The typical SMS response combines a closed format with personal identification (often name and village) and some considerations about the topic (e.g. “African presidents should be limited by their country’s constitution to serving a maximum of two terms in the office, because African presidents never want to abandon power, we cannot allow them have more than two terms”, Radio Nam Lolwe, Kenya). Closed-ended questions with numerical options limit the expression of opinions and it threatens representativeness by excluding those citizens with poor survey literacy or technological skills. Listeners should be given the opportunity to contribute to Africa’s Voices by expressing their opinions through spontaneous forms of communication using mobile phones, including voice and text.

Recognition matters too, voices are unique. Respondents are willing to send personal information, even though they are informed about the nature of the project and asked by the presenters to send anonymous SMS. A common practice in all the stations consists of reading on air the messages that arrive during the programme. Having their opinion and name mentioned on the airwaves seems to be a strong motivation for listeners to send SMS. The CGHR team complies with ethical research standards for handling confidential information by anonymising the answers and masking mobile numbers.

Incorporating voice in local languages strengthens inclusivity. Having embraced free text answers, Africa’s Voices encourages natural forms of expression allowing the questions and SMS to be expressed in local languages (e.g., Swahili, Chichewa/Nyanja, Luganda, Luo and Krio are the main languages). The messages are translated into English by a group of volunteers and uploaded in the Africa’s Voices website.

Interactive programme strategies must tap into audience motivations and tackle constraints. Audiences use Africa’s Voices as a channel to communicate with the stations and to seek visibility in their community. Some messages also include public announcements, greeting to friends and family, offers of services or jobs and feedback about the show or the quality of the transmission. Different respondents use the same mobile number to send individual or collective SMS, suggesting participation from radio listening groups and mobile sharing practices among friends or members of the same family.

A snapshot of Africa’s Voices insights:

- Audiences value having a voice: participation is increasing exponentially in all the stations
- Africa’s Voices is gaining popularity among audiences, stations and local leaders
- People want to express their views: standard multi-choice responses are accompanied by rich textual data revealing opinions
- Participants want to be known publicly, but we must manage security and ethics: personal references are included in the SMS
- SMS are mostly written in local languages
- Africa’s Voices is perceived as a public interactive space: audiences send SMS to radio stations to communicate with the stations and with other members of the community
Who stands to benefit from Africa’s Voices?

Africa’s Voices is exciting because it is a model that generates ongoing benefits for multiple stakeholders, creating a virtuous cycle.

For radio stations: Engaging popular programmes; familiarity with ICT-based interactive formats; data on audience listenership to enhance programming and attract advertising; networks of partner stations.

For communities and local authorities: Public spaces for voice, claim-making, debate; comparative insights within communities and across countries; authorities can demonstrate responsive governance.

For development NGOs: Providing cross-country formats for delivering, monitoring or researching development initiatives.

For donors and policymakers: Insights ‘from below’ into citizens’ opinions, and reasons for them, to help ‘groundtruth’ higher level policy decisions.

For researchers: rich quantitative and qualitative data is generated on both substantive development and governance issues but also processes and contexts of ICT-enabled debate and discussion.

Beyond the pilot

The pilot of Africa’s Voices explored how new communication technologies can be combined with traditional media to enable public spaces for discussion and debate about topics relevant to all African audiences. Beyond the pilot phase, Africa’s Voices aims to be a platform that produces publicly available knowledge about what African citizens think on issues of continent-wide importance, such as grassroots views of the post Millennium Development Goals.

The success of the pilot has motivated us to develop an infrastructure to gather public opinion from radio audiences in Africa that combines cutting edge technology with social science approaches. As an innovative platform valuing hard-to-reach voices from populations with limited digital access, in their natural languages and contexts, Africa’s Voices offers a more valid alternative to gather public opinion than attitudinal surveys. The future Africa’s Voices platform will be open to researchers, governments, donors and development organisations that are eager to collaborate with the CGHR in expanding and learning from the voice of African citizens in radio programmes.

Our research and design agenda for Africa’s Voices includes technological solutions to manage large volumes of SMS with a high degree of data protection, to gather socio-demographical information in real-time, and to extract meaning from big and noisy data through sentiment analysis and semantic networks. We have plans to extend Africa’s Voices to 30 radio stations (approx. 2 radio station per country in 15 countries) over the next two years with circa 6-15,000 SMS per round of questions. The datasets of SMS and the resulting categorizations will be publicly available for download from the CGHR website.

CGHR is actively developing new research partnerships and industry collaborations to achieve our future agenda for Africa’s Voices, and we are exploring options for a social enterprise spin-off that would base the initiative in Africa with strong links to the research team. CGHR welcomes contact from parties interested to collaborate and financially support us in this next phase.

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Africa’s Voices is coordinated by an interdisciplinary team at the Centre of Governance and Human Rights at the University of Cambridge

The Centre of Governance and Human Rights of the Department of Politics and International Studies of the University of Cambridge launched in late 2009, draws together experts, practitioners and policymakers from Cambridge University and far beyond to think critically and innovatively about pressing governance and human rights issues throughout the world. With a special focus on Africa, the Centre aims to be a world-class interdisciplinary hub for fresh thinking, collaborative research and improving practice.

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