

New communication technologies and citizen-led governance in Africa

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“The only technology that compares to the mobile phone in terms of pervasiveness and accessibility in the developing world is the radio. Indeed, considered together, radios and mobile phones can serve as a broad-distribution, participatory media network with some of the same citizen media dynamics of the Internet, but accessible to a much wider, and non-literate audience.”

Ethan Zuckerman, 2007¹

New ICTs such as mobile phones hold great potential to affect governance in Africa. Their pervasiveness and ability to interact with older communication technologies such as radio influences how citizens act and behave, how they voice their concerns and claim their rights, and how leaders govern. Examples of innovations combining mobile phones with other media are emerging in areas ranging from election monitoring in Nigeria, Sudan and Malawi, to corruption tracking in Mozambique. At the same time, the role of radio and mobile phones in inciting violence and promoting sectarianism has caused concern, as illustrated in the aftermath of the highly contested elections in Kenya in 2007.

The Centre of Governance and Human Rights (CGHR) at the University of Cambridge' two-year pilot project studies the significance and nature of these transformations, to develop an empirically grounded framework that can capture the ways in which new ICTs interact with the structures and practices characterizing governance in Africa. This applied research project is developed in collaboration with the creators of FrontlineSMS, a free and open source software which turns a laptop and a mobile phone into a central communications hub and enables users, such as local radio stations in Africa, to send and receive text messages with large groups of people.

The intention of the project is twofold. On the one hand, it analyses how audiences interact with radio stations through mobile phones, how different actors, including members of the audiences, radio workers, and state officials perceive these interactions, and what the practical implications are upon public discussion and information flows on political and social issues as well as upon access to and quality of public goods, accountability mechanisms and power configurations. On the other hand, the project tests the ability of a new version of FrontlineSMS, tailored to meet the needs of radio stations, FrontlineSMS:Radio, to affect the way African media and citizens interact as well as the possible effects of these interactions on governance processes.

This paper presents the theoretical background and questions that the project ambitions to discuss and answer. The first section integrates critical insights from the literature on ICT for Development and on governance in Africa to outline and clarify the main objects of analysis. Section two introduces

¹ <http://ethanzuckerman.com/blog/index.php?s=%22vastly+exceeds+internet+usage%22>

and justifies the Human Development and Capability Approach (HDCA) as the primary analytical framework guiding the research methodology.

1. COMBINING LITERATURES ON ICTS AND AFRICAN POLITICS

Over the past decade, both literatures on governance processes in developing countries and the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in development have undergone very similar transformations, but have been little aware of the advances made in each other's camps. The increasing availability of empirical case studies has promoted better understanding that both institutional and technological innovations in developing countries involve struggle and contestation, rather than the unmediated adoption of what already exists in different contexts. On the one hand, among ICT for development (ICT4D) scholars, efforts to find ways to bridge the digital divide, increasing global access to the *same* technologies available in developed countries, have been superseded by the examination of the unique applications and uses of new technologies emerging in different corners of the developing world. On the other, the "good governance" agenda endorsed by international financial organisations as well as the literature evaluating African societies against a historically situated yardstick have been challenged by critical analysis of the political dynamics in force in contemporary Africa (Bayart 1989; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Olivier de Sardan 2008).

In both traditions, the idea of *hybridity* is gaining currency and analytical richness, and has been variously employed to recognize and study the structures, practices and tools emerging at the intersection between local realities and global influences. However, the search for and analysis of hybrids has so far been quite stove-piped: today we know more about hybrid media (Leeuwis and Van den Ban, 2007) and hybrid forms of political order in developing countries (Boege et al., 2009; Ferguson, 2006), but we know little about the ways in which one type of hybridity may influence and contribute to the existence of the other. How do mobile phones interact and are integrated with pre-existing means of socio-political communication? Which types of processes do they influence in contexts where the form and function of the state is profoundly different from an ideal Weberian model that still undergirds most "good governance" programmes? In turn, how are political structures characterized by a high level of patronage and recourse to coercion shaping a media space that is becoming increasingly plural as a result of the internal and external pressures to liberalize and guarantee freedom of expression? An initial contribution of our project is to build a bridge between these two academic families, designing conceptual and methodological tools able to capture the complexities characterizing such diverse objects of analysis. We endeavour to avoid the common pairing of a rich understanding of governance processes in Africa with a thin conception of ICTs or, *vice versa*, a grounded knowledge of how new technologies are reshaped and domesticated with too simplistic notions of how governance practices and institutions operate on the continent.

Why scholars working in ICT for Development should broaden their definition of governance

In the past few years, the ICT for Development field has reached a certain level of maturity (Thompson, 2008). Despite the persistence of some forms of technological determinism among corporate agents and cyber-utopians (Morozov, 2011), most recent programmatic interventions and

studies have developed greater awareness that ICTs are not consensual objects with an agreed set of characteristics and possible effects, but nodes surrounded by tensions, which can be appropriated or resisted by different actors to pursue potentially competing goals. Some scholars have stressed how power and politics influence the adoption and adaptation of new technologies, motivating decisions commonly interpreted as being merely technical (Mansell and Silversone 1996, Wilson III, 2004; Wilson III & Wong, 2007). Others, echoing somewhat the arguments previously put forward by the advocates of technological blending (Bhalla and James, 1988; ILO, 1984) and appropriate technologies (Carr, 1985; Stewart, 1987), have advanced ways to look for local fits for new tools which build on local knowledge and habits, and allow users to progressively shape and master innovation, rather than be forced into new programmes from above (Heeks, 2002; Madon, 2002; Walsham, 1993, 2001). Such understanding has guided practitioners to design programs and applications that better interact with the political and social forces operating in different contexts, and has offered scholars improved tools for studying how new technology is re-shaped to fit in pre-existing networks, but also contributes to their partial re-configuration (Gagliardone, 2010; Morawczynski, 2009).

However, within the same ICT for Development field, the critique levelled towards a Western bias in transferring technologies to developing countries seems not to have translated into a similar understanding of the problematic application of a specific model of governance to different contexts, particularly in Africa. In most cases, the dominant paradigm still tends to interpret civil society and the state as autonomous and opposite, to stress the significance of Western-style citizens groups and media organizations acting to check on a corrupt and unaccountable central authority and to see ICTs as tools that can be used to reinforce this process. While this dimension is relevant, and there are an increasing number of cases where ICTs have indeed been used by citizens to successfully challenge abusive governments and keep elected representatives more accountable, it is unable to comprehensively capture the complexity of how governance processes work in African countries (and in general) and the different spaces in which ICTs can come to play a significant role.²

Large-scale and comparative research programmes on governance in Africa (Booth, 2011) and on the impact of citizens' engagement on governance processes in developing countries (Gaventa, 2010) are beginning to show us how citizens' participation may matter in ways that are significantly different from those experienced in (mostly idealised imaginings of) Western democracies. These differences reflect heterogeneous historical heritages and depend on the one hand on the types of and relations between actors and institutions participating in governance processes, and on the other on the kinds of strategies and opportunities meaningful to citizens seeking to influence decision making and enhance access public goods and services.

One important feature of governance features in Africa is that a multiplicity of actors often occupy the same socio-political spaces: state institutions, development partners, 'traditional' authorities, community and religious organizations, foreign non-governmental aid organisations and private operators. Olivier de Sardan (2011), Blundo and Le Meur (2009), Booth (2011), and Joshi and Moore

² Our project thus adopts an open idea of "governance", analysing the political life of individuals not simply in relation to the central state, but also to other structures they perceive as relevant in constructing their experience of "the political". At the same time, we have decided to continue using the term citizen, interpreting it not as a given, but as a process, as a socio-political category that is still being shaped, also through the participation in processes of the kind this project addresses.

(2004), among others, have provided evidence of how the provision of a specific service, especially at the local level, is seldom the outcome of a single effective formal authority exercising its stated functions, but rather the result of co-production and co-delivery emerging from a confluence of organized groups of citizens, local nodes of the administration, NGOs and other entities.³

These aspects have profound implications for the roles citizens may play within these complex networks. The first repercussion is on accountability. Most “good governance” programmes have stressed the role of citizen participation as a way to make public institutions more responsive (Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008). But in spaces that are occupied by a variety of actors, all somehow participating in the provision of certain kinds of goods and services, different forms of accountability co-exist at the same time. NGOs may address the local populations as their main beneficiaries, but are ultimately accountable to donors; bureaucrats are accountable to central authorities; local chiefs are accountable to their “communities”. Within these spaces, the ability to raise voice may have important implications on the access to goods and services people need and value, but the actors to whom claims have to be addressed may vary significantly in different locations: in certain conditions it may be of little use to target a state that is little able to function, while it may be more effective to demand greater accountability from NGOs whose stated mandate is to deliver specific services. This in turn affects the type and content of communication that citizens employ.

A second important consequence relates to how citizens may be encouraged to take more active and creative roles in order to access public services and goods and influence political actions. The empirical cases presented for example by Booth (2011) Olivier De Sardan (2011), but also by Newell and Wheeler (2006) and Cornwall and Coelho (2007), show how it is often up to the individual or to an organized group of individuals to move through and activate different formal and informal institutions in order to reach a desired outcome. Depending on the context and on the distribution of power characterizing each specific location, this form of citizens’ engagement can take on different shapes. It can become an essential ingredient for experimenting forms of co-governance, where the participation of the citizen is encouraged by central authorities in order for example to fight corruption at the local level.⁴ Alternatively, citizens may need to activate and possibly create networks that are in competition with the state, challenging the power and legitimacy of formal authorities. In contexts where the notion of citizenship is constantly debated and the conception of the individual as entitled to specific rights is not always grounded in stable institutions or practices, the very processes leading to

³ Olivier de Sardan (2011) offers a rich illustration of how a service may be delivered through a complex combination of formal and informal actors and institutions. As he described, “the particular delivery configuration of the component ‘evacuation of patient in case of obstructed pregnancy’ includes as essential actors the midwife or nurse, people who are able to pay for the transport, the ambulance driver, elements of the FNIS (National Security Corps) and a functioning operating theatre and blood supplies at the referral centre. It also assumes the availability of the ambulance itself and the means of obtaining it. The general configuration for the delivery of babies involves in addition, traditional birth attendants (TBAs) and trained TBAs (matrones), the mayor’s office, the President’s Special Programme, various projects supporting maternal health, and even the chieftdom, as well as a staffed and equipped health unit, and maintenance procedures for the ambulance”. As he continues describing, different items composing this process, such as the ambulance or the blood supplies, may have been provided by a different actor, such as the central government, or an NGO, or by a group of citizens.

⁴ This was the case, for example, of a campaign launched by the Ugandan government to inform parents and teachers about the disbursement of public funds to local schools as to have them checking on the possibility that local officials could capture the funds allocated to the schools (Reinikka and Svensson, 2003)

obtaining certain services, goods, or rights may act as “schools for citizenship” (Cornwall and Coelho 2007), allowing individuals to learn about their rights.

Within both the dimensions characterizing governance in Africa explored above, and namely the multiple forms of accountability and the unique forms of engagement required from citizens to obtain specific outcomes, new ICTs are and can play a significant role, but their contributions have not been adequately assessed to date. The next section addresses some of the reasons that may have motivated this neglect and highlight possible ways forward.

Why the critical tradition looking at governance in Africa should embrace ICTs as new objects of analysis

The claim by many authors that have explored empirically the complexities of governance processes in Africa is that rather than focusing on the problematic aspects of governance in Africa as compared to ideal-type models, the development community should concentrate on understanding what in Africa ‘works’, and from this more realistic and less normative perspective, devise strategies that can allow the poor to have access to what they need and value. From this point of view, areas other than those usually addressed in “good governance” programmes have emerged as critical for improving governance outcomes on the continent. In many of these areas, from relying on traditional networks rather than on organizations built around ideal types of civil society, to understanding how different informal and formal authority structures relate to one another, to allowing a multiplicity of actors to coordinate for a provision of a specific public service, new ICTs such as mobile phones, which are increasingly pervasive and able to integrate with various other locally relevant means of communication, are having significant effects. Coordination has been often indicated as centrally important. According to Olivier de Sardan, for example, in order to improve the performance in the delivery of public goods, “coordination seems to be by far the most important factor. Monopolies of provision no longer exist, if they ever really did. No mode of local governance, no institution and no privileged actor is a sole player in respect of any of the goods. Given that there is nearly always a variety of delivery configurations, what matters are the conditions under which each delivery configuration optimises or not the possibilities for collective action, and tackles the bottlenecks identified for each good” (Olivier de Sardan, 2011, p. 38).

Authority and its relation to ‘the public’ are constituted in diverse ways, such that different modes and practices of political communication matter in different contexts. In societies where oral communication still plays an important role, voice and critiques can be expressed through forms that appear less challenging to power, such as poetry and music, but have actually represented most trusted and effective means to articulate dissent and propose alternatives (Matt Bryden, 2005). Englund (2011) has shown that is important to pay close attention to how media professionals censor dissent and political opposition using local idioms to mediate public discussion. New ICTs are having effects on these practices and also hold new potentialities that require investigation.

To date, however, the same authors who have explored the complex networks characterizing governance in Africa have paid little attention to the role that new communication technologies are playing or may play within them. One finds no clear explanation for this neglect, however there is still limited understanding of how new ICTs are being developed, often locally, to connect with and be shaped by pre-existing social and political practices. Early ICT for development programmes may have fallen foul of the error of being largely imposed from outside and above, but much has changed in recent years. Studies in related areas such as how ICTs impact livelihoods show how users

appropriate new technologies to enhance strategies embedded in their cultural and social contexts, with significant, but unexpected, transformative effects. Horst and Miller's study on the uses of mobile phones in Jamaica and Morawczynski's exploration of mobile banking in Kenya, for example, indicated how the popularity of these new ICTs built on the opportunity they offered to capitalize on existing personal networks as a means to access resources. The uses of mobile phones developed by the majority of poor Jamaicans and Kenyans bore little resemblance with the expectations that mobile phones could promote entrepreneurship or generate income, but had nonetheless significant effects on the users' lives Miller, examining the coping strategies of those in extreme poverty in Jamaica, concludes: "The mobile phone is highly effective for ameliorating the worst forms of suffering associated with poverty [...] [It] is not much used for making money, but it is vital to getting money".⁵

These and similar studies (Bruijn et al., 2009; Nyamnjoh, 2005) indicate that ICTs that are pervasive and cut across different social strata have the potential to bring significant, but often unpredictable, changes into people's lives. An important objective of this project will be to develop a framework able to capture those particular changes that affect governance processes in Africa, examining how ICTs may be re-shaped to fit into particular socio-political contexts and how they can contribute to their reconfiguration.

Which ICTs and which governance processes?

The two academic traditions explored above encourage employing extensive conceptions of governance and ICTs and letting the citizens and users defining the specific objects of analysis to be investigated. In line with this approach, governance is framed as the exercise of social and political authority and the use of traditional and non-traditional institutional resources to coordinate and control activities that are essential to the life of the community, and ICTs are placed in the larger context of the communication practices characterizing a specific location. Within these broad conceptions, the project will let local actors define how these socio-political arrangements and communication forms matter and operate in their everyday lives. This will enable the research to concentrate on processes, technologies and actors that citizens themselves experience as being relevant. It will be possible to analyse both formal and informal governance processes and how they integrate in the provision of specific public services and goods; to explore for example how citizens use ICTs to raise their voice and keep elected officials accountable, but also to map how they combine ICTs creatively to gain access to services and goods.

This open approach can prove particularly useful to explore phenomena that are still emerging and understudied, but may also incur two main risks. The first being that the objects of analysis eventually become too underspecified and the amount and variety of data too large to manage. The second risk is that the focus on "what works", on descriptively accounting for political authority as it is presently configured, and, alongside this, on analysing the complex and creative communication strategies adopted by individuals and groups to advance their interests, holds only limited evaluative potential. In the absence of any normative framework for evaluating the quality of individual and social change processes, the transformative effects of new ICTs on governance remain understudied.

⁵ Indicate also the problematic consequence "The very fact that the mobile phone is used for the immediate amelioration of suffering is closely linked to the degree to which it is not part of any such development of entrepreneurialism. The money that might have been used for capital accumulation..."(Miller, 2006, p. 45)

The first risk is mitigated by our focus on a limited interactive space. The project will focus in particular on the space emerging at the intersection between radio broadcast and mobile telephony and more specifically on the use of text messaging promoted by local radio stations to act upon governance processes. Concentrating on this particular hybrid form of communication allows an exploration of the increasing intertextuality and intermediality that characterize the flows of most types of information, but at the same time it specifies which segment of the continuum will be analysed. For each radio station, the research will narrow down the focus on a particular type of public service or good which the station has addressed (e.g. the provision of drinking water in an urban slum, the management of the Constituency Development Funds by the local authorities) and study whether and how the interaction with audiences through text messages has shaped the debate on that particular issue and if it had practical consequences on the provision of that particular good or service (e.g. did the attention raised on the provision of drinking water force local authorities to act? Or did it highlight a need that was later matched by NGOs, private operators or a combination of different actors?)

The second risk will be addressed by approaching objects of analysis of the kind illustrated above through a normative approach that, on the one hand, is deeply concerned to account for actual and specific human experience, value-conceptions and local practices, and on the other hand, provides a workable framework for analysis that can guide generalisable evaluation and comparison. Such an approach must provide appropriate analytical tools for assessing the well-being and actions of individuals and groups as well as the socio-political arrangements formed by these individuals and groups. In the next section, the Human Development and Capability Approach is introduced as the chosen framework, indicating how it fulfils these requirements, how it speaks to prominent policy frameworks and paradigms, and how it can be combined with insights emerging from both the academic traditions exploring governance and the uses of ICTs in Africa to analyse the emergence of new forms of citizen-led governance.

2. APPLYING THE CAPABILITY APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF ICTS AND GOVERNANCE

The theoretical orientation for this research will draw upon the Human Development and Capability Approach (HDCA), pioneered by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, employed by various policy actors including the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and to which this study aims to make an important empirical and conceptual contribution.

Our research focuses on how citizens employ and value new ICTs in their exercise of political agency and in seeking to influence socio-political outcomes of importance to them. We are concerned to account for how ICTs – new and old – are made to work in unique local ways to shape contextually specific governance practices and institutions. The ‘benefit’ – actual and potential – of new ICTs to citizen-led governance must be evaluated using criteria richly informed by what is empirically and normatively meaningful in local contexts, but which equally has comparative utility and overall conceptual coherence. The evaluative framework that we employ – which specifies the kind of evidence we pursue and how we interpret such evidence – must provide appropriate analytical tools for assessing effects of ICTs upon both the well-being *and* agency of individuals and groups as well as the socio-political arrangements formed by these individuals and groups. Ideally, the framework we employ should also allow us to engage with and meaningfully influence mainstream policy debates on ICTs and governance in Africa. The HDCA fulfils these demands well, and this section introduces its relevance to our project, how it guides our research questions and methodology and how we propose to make a contribution to its further development.

The HDCA has provided a compelling alternative to income/growth-centred methods for conceptualising the ends of development, evaluating well-being/poverty and influencing policy-making. It has evolved as a theoretical framework into a normative proposal to reframe development as “a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy to lead the lives they have reason to value” (Sen, 1999, p.3), and its influence now extends to welfare economics, social policy, political philosophy and international development.

The HDCA is first of all an evaluative framework and, especially in the work of Sen, is not a generic template for ideal designs of political institutions or social arrangements. It has its intellectual roots in the ideas of diverse thinkers, from Aristotle to Adam Smith, and their concern with actual human living rather than abstract and ideal conceptualisations of ‘the good’ and ‘the just society’. The HDCA thus focuses upon the real freedoms that people have reason to value and that constitute their quality of life. It is ‘inescapably pluralist’, grounding the evaluation of individual and group progress in the freedoms they have to pursue goals and values they regard as important (Sen, 1999). This aspect has proved critical in the case of ICTs, helping to appreciate them for their nature as “multi-purpose technologies which could empower individuals to attain development outcomes of their own choosing” (Kleine, 2010, p.674).

There are three important aspects of the HDCA that act as guiding influences in our research. First, the HDCA distinguishes between the freedoms, or opportunities, an individual has, from her actual achievements, the ‘beings’ and ‘doings’ that make up the realised states of affairs in her life. The former constitute ‘capabilities’ and the latter are achieved ‘functionings’. Distinguishing capabilities enhances the anti-paternalistic quality of the HDCA, avoiding “imposing a particular notion of the good life, but instead aiming at providing a range of possible ways of living” (Roybens, 2005, p. 353). More importantly, this distinction is especially important for understanding slippery phenomena such as political agency and meaningful political participation. For a start, the opportunity to participate should be valued in itself, and its actual exercise as a meaningful functioning, whether a particular policy outcome is or is not achieved.

Secondly, the HDCA accounts for individual and societal diversity by considering both how personal and socio-environmental conditions (e.g. literacy, or the ability to get radio reception, or the distance to purchase mobile top-up credit) and institutional and cultural contexts (e.g. the availability of a complaints procedure or the cultural permissibility of political dissent) affect individuals’ ability to use what they possess to reach what they value. This is especially important for understanding the differential uptake, use and value placed upon ICTs by citizens in different contexts or from different demographic groups. It places importance on distinguishing and explaining generic capabilities at the population level and categorical differences in group functionings.

Thirdly, and most importantly for the phenomena this research project focuses on, the HDCA distinguishes between ‘well-being’ freedom and ‘agency’ freedom. Both well-being and agency have prior normative importance, and the capability-set “stands for the actual freedom of choice a person has over alternative lives that he or she can lead” (Sen, 1992, p. 114). Yet, agency freedom, “what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important” (Sen, 1985, p. 203), relates more directly to the political dimension of social life, to the ability individuals and groups have to change policies and norms and achieve results they set for themselves (Fukuda-Parr, 2003). Indeed, political capability and agency freedom centrally underpin the normative foundations of the HDCA (Srinivasan, 2007). For Sen, “the exercise of freedom is mediated by values, but the values in turn are influenced by public discussions and social

interactions, which are themselves influenced by participatory freedoms” (Sen, 1999a, p. 9). Free expression and social and political participation are of *intrinsic* value to individual agency and well-being (they are constitutive of freedom), but Sen emphasises their *instrumental* and *constructive* roles in shaping social arrangements, policies and outcomes: “individual freedom is quintessentially a social product, and there is a two-way relation between (1) social arrangements to expand individual freedoms and (2) the use of individual freedoms not only to improve the respective lives but also to make the social arrangements more appropriate and effective” (Sen, 1999a, p. 31).⁶ With political capability being so vitally intertwined with individual freedom, attention rightly turns to its determinants and how it is advanced. Beyond civil liberties and political rights, the actual freedoms citizens enjoy depend upon a whole variety of factors that shape the nature and quality of participation. New ICTs and their various effects represent one such factor.

In understanding how ICTs influence citizen-led governance, our focus will be especially upon how they impact upon human agency and political capability across the three above-mentioned dimensions. This focus encourages us to move beyond rhetoric of the kind that has characterized the debate on the digital divide, and to appreciate ICTs in relation to how individuals value, adapt and use them, rather than as a simple measure of actual or mechanically predicted well-being. Measuring how ICTs impact upon political capability thus involves pursuing several inter-related questions. Investigating these questions involves exploring the practices individuals employ in order to attain what they value, how they inhabit the political space and possibly contribute to transforming it in order to exercise their rights or improve access to certain goods and services (Drèze and Sen 2002) .

- 1. In what ways are public interactions experienced through ICTs of *intrinsic* value to individuals?**
- 2. To what extent are interactions engendered by ICT innovations *instrumentally useful* in changing political outcomes?**
- 3. How are ICTs shaping or altering existing informal and formal governance institutions and practices?**
- 4. In what ways are interactions experienced through ICTs *constructively important* in shaping citizens’ value formation processes, including ideas of “citizenship”?**

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⁶ Similarly, Alkire (2002, p. 130) underlines, “in Sen’s account choices [...] have three possible kinds of effects. One is that that they may be personally valuable or of intrinsic importance to the chooser(s); another is that they have instrumental or transitive effects that improves outcomes for example on well-being; a third is that they have constructive importance in dynamic value formation”.

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