BUILDING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY THROUGH ICT

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INTRODUCTION

The inevitability of an increasingly interconnected world and the growth of the use of ICT in developing countries have brought the benefits of ICT for development (ICT4D) to the forefront, not least in the area of democracy and human rights. While the Arab Spring demonstrated the potential of social media in spectacular ways, in its aftermath it has become clear that there are no shortcuts to building democracy. Even so, ICT has a clear role to play in strengthening the foundations of democratic society, from citizen engagement and participation, to openness and transparency in government. As evidenced by smart interventions at local levels, ICT empowers local communities to demand their rights and to hold government accountable, thus strengthening good governance. Although its full potential has yet to be realized, it is clear that ICT contributes to the conditions for rights-based development. Why else would governments intervene through censorship, restrictions and even intimidation of local efforts to build democracy with the help of ICT?

This paper draws on the work of Spider, The Swedish Program for ICT in Developing Regions. Spider is a resource center and knowledge broker in ICT4D, based at the Department of Computer and Systems Sciences at Stockholm University. Established in 2004 with financial support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), Spider serves as a node in a network of actors from academia, government, business and civil society. Spider offers a unique combination of research and practice, focusing on the thematic areas of democracy, education, and health. Currently Spider supports innovative ICT4D projects and research in Bolivia, Cambodia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda, along with collaborative networks, including the ICT4Democracy East Africa network.

Focusing on ICT for democracy, this paper provides a short summary of ICT4D in research and practice. An overview of some of the research and education initiatives carried out at Spider’s partner universities offers an insight into the critical role of academia in developing knowledge and expertise in ICT4D. This is followed by an analysis of the results and lessons learned from Spider-supported ICT for democracy projects in East Africa and Cambodia. Carried out by local organizations, these projects offer an empirically grounded understanding of the opportunities and challenges of using ICT to strengthen democracy at the grassroots level in poor and marginalized communities. Swedish and local researchers have been engaged for research on the projects to deepen the analysis. The paper concludes with policy recommendations based on the experiences of ICT for democracy in practice.
SWEDISH RESEARCH IN ICT4D

The implementation of technology in low resource settings requires innovative approaches, deep understanding of the context and extensive follow up. ICT4D is a multidisciplinary field of both theory and practice, covering access and use of technology as well as the supportive infrastructure of electricity. Researchers in ICT4D provide innovation as well as scientifically grounded analysis of lessons learned. ICT4D is a strong emerging field of research that spans a variety of scientific disciplines, ranging from technical development such as computer sciences and informatics to more qualitative disciplines like media studies and anthropology. Research networks play an important role in strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration and the sharing of research results. Through higher level education, new generations of ICT4D scholars and practitioners are able to build on the insights gained from state-of-the-art research. Swedish academic environments provide a multi-faceted approach to ICT4D, dating back to the late 1990s.

The Royal Institute of Technology has launched the Technology Transfer Alliance (TTA), a non-profit association of universities providing students and faculty members with opportunities to participate in advanced development cooperation projects for academic credit. TTA supports members that want to offer their students and staff problem-oriented, project-driven learning opportunities. TTA also acts as a broker of contacts, linking different stakeholders, projects and technologies together. The purpose is to encourage knowledge sharing between higher educational institutions to support capacity building regarding the use of ICT and renewable energy. Students at all levels, teachers and researchers participate in real-world ICT-projects. The goals of many of the projects have been to develop specific services, software or hardware to improve connectivity in rural Africa.

Access to high quality university education in the application of ICT in various development contexts is key to capacity building and sustainability of ICT4D. The Department of Computer and Systems Sciences (DSV) at Stockholm University is launching a unique Master Program in ICT4D with open courseware freely available online for individuals and teaching institutions in developing regions. The first of its kind in the world, the Master program builds on the department’s research in ICT4D, a profile research area with over 20 ongoing research projects.

The International Network for Postgraduate Students in the area of ICT4D (IPID) is an international network of over 700 postgraduate students doing research in ICT4D, hosted by Örebro University. IPID operates through inter alia support to doctoral as well as master students and increased visibility at international conferences. IPID strives to be a research-meeting place as well as a social meeting place for students interested in ICT4D. IPID’s members represent over 280 universities/research organizations from around 60 countries.

For over a decade Malmö University, in collaboration with Danish universities, has been active in education and research within Communication for Development, or ComDev for short. An online international Master program aimed at providing in-depth knowledge of various aspects of globalization, emphasizing the role of culture, media and new information and communication technology from a global development perspective. The ICT4D research within ComDev concerns the role of social media as part of the social mobilization of
overthrowing governments and changing political dynamics (even when governments stay in power), where the role of social media is being celebrated as well as contested, and where the fundamental dynamics between media and communication, citizenship and social change are up for re-examination.

**M4D** (Mobile communications for development) is a growing academic field within the wider ICT4D field. Driving the recognition for M4D is the Center for HumanIT at Karlstad University in Sweden that has not only published extensively through its masters and PhD programs, but has also organized international biennial conferences in M4D. These occasions have brought together practitioners, academics, techies and policy makers to share project results, and analyses of trends within the fast-moving implementation of mobile technologies in development contexts.
ICT FOR DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN PRACTICE

With support from Spider, local organizations in East Africa and Cambodia have leveraged ICT to encourage community participation in governance, while holding those in power accountable for poor service delivery. The results are more transparent structures, empowered and knowledgeable communities that understand and exercise their rights through ICT. In empowering communities with knowledge regarding their basic rights and offering them a strategic use of ICT to demand and express their rights, local actors have encountered a number of unexpected developments, some of which will be explored below.

Although marginalized groups have limited access to ICT, including mobile and Internet connectivity as well as the supporting infrastructure of electricity, a smart combination of technologies can help sustain and spread grassroots-oriented development efforts in various ways. While the radio remains at the core of many information seeking practices in rural communities the mobile phone has become similarly ubiquitous in many developing regions. But before ICT and democracy can forge an alliance, there is a need to enlighten the communities in ways in which a basic mobile phone or a simple radio can inform a community member’s civic engagement. The mobilization, training and advocacy that local organizations have brought to rural communities, in East Africa for example, have contributed to active engagement from previously compliant communities.

Empowered Participation
In order to pool the participation and commitment towards technically mediated democratic processes there is a need for empowerment in the form of capacity building and knowledge sharing and when necessary, providing the technologies as well as the required ICT skills. In their advocacy work the Kenya Human Rights Commission engages with the communities through their grass root partners, the Human Rights Networks (Hurinets). In the run up to the general elections in March 2013, the Hurinets were trained on how to use various ICTs, such as, video recording, bulk smsing, blogging, and Facebook updates.

The Ugandan chapter of Transparency International (TIU) has mobilized and educated communities in Northern Uganda about their right to access health care. A toll-free center has been installed, through which communities can call in and report bad service delivery at the various health centers. Women of Uganda Network has focused on the engagement of women in democratic processes and some of their results show that more women are currently changing the livelihood sectors by asking why particular government services meant to reach many communities fail to do so.

Even though the infrastructure in many of these communities makes the use of ICT challenging, the members are aware of their rights, and they are exercising them in ways that continue to produce significant changes in their communities. Badly constructed buildings, roads, water pipes or boreholes are documented, reported and receiving attention. Community members are finally demanding better service delivery.
Access to Information: A Cornerstone of Democracy

The ability to access and share information, whether through individual, group or mass communication is a cornerstone of democracy as it is a foundation for decisions that citizens take in everyday life as well as in elections and as a part of civic participation. Heavy handed restrictions in the area of information sharing and communication are clear signs of repression and authoritarian tendencies. ICTs play a central role in the information ecology of modern societies. On the one hand this entails collecting and making information available, and on the other to use established and new media to inform the population.

Openly providing information and encouraging participation in processes of democratization requires a delicate balance between inducing change and confronting an oppressive system that could retaliate. At the same time, the lack of information is not necessarily carried out consciously at all levels of government, in many cases the ignorance of the rights and obligations is on both sides.

The project Dialogue on Development in Cambodia, led by the Open Institute, attacks this challenge from two directions at once, training both youth and local level government on the right of access to information, good governance and democracy. ICTs are introduced as a tool to search for information and radio, television, Internet and social media are used to involve youth in discussions about good governance and participation in elections. Research carried out on the project indicates that social media and television can be useful tools in engaging the youth but that these need to be used strategically where the message is adapted to the medium.

ICT also offers the possibility to collect and make widely available information that may only be available to a select few due to limited access, distribution, or format. The project Open Development Cambodia, undertaken by East West Management Institute, compiles and presents official information on land concessions and industrial developments in Cambodia in maps and summaries that enable NGOs, citizens and other actors to get an informed view of what kind of industrial development is going on in the country. Similar initiatives rely on crowdsourcing platforms such as Ushahidi to gather information on Violence Against Women to strengthen the knowledge and evidence for further advocacy and lobbying efforts. While Open Data initiatives require a clear commitment from the top for a more transparent and accountable state and government, organizations and activists are already initiating this process from a grassroots level by collecting, aggregating and making data available from a variety of sectors and topics.

The possibility to combine various communication technologies is crucial in a development context where there are considerable challenges in terms of basic infrastructure, as mentioned above, but also limited literacy and ICT skills. By adding an outreach through mobile phones, either through SMS or Interactive Voice Response Systems to radio and other traditional media, local actors have a diverse toolkit to disseminate and gather information from the population, in this way closing the loop.
Digitizing Democracy

As mentioned above, the use of ICT in democratic processes has a number of technical demands none more demanding than a functioning infrastructure. Organizations collaborating within the East African ICT4Democracy network have had to combine a number of methods to address this challenge. These include face to face mobilization for knowledge sharing, the use of traditional media such as the radio for outreach, and the formation of grassroot networks that function as information outlets to the wider community.

We must also keep in mind the cost of using ICT. If reporting bad service delivery through ICT is a paid service, the cost will be a hindrance to many ordinary citizens, not to mention marginalized populations. In one of their projects, TIU installed a toll-free centre to complement the outreach through radio jingles and talk shows which the community can call in and report bad or corrupt service delivery at health centres in Northern Uganda. While this toll-free service was established for the use of the community health information, the health workers have themselves taken to using the same service to explain their absence or lateness to work but also to ask for a forum of their own, to voice their grievances. Additionally, the community is now calling into the same toll-free number seeking medical advice.

Another example can be drawn from the Commission for Human Rights and Good Governance (CHRAGG) in Tanzania who developed a SMS platform for reporting human rights violations. The initial project has successfully negotiated with mobile service providers in order to provide an affordable service to Tanzanians. But a free or reduced cost service often begets additional unforeseen ‘costs’. The SMS platform is facing challenges as a flood of advertisements from mobile operators become intermingled with real reports. ICT enables civic engagement at the same time as this engagement opens up a feedback loop. Citizens that engage with ICT in addressing their democratic rights expect timely responses which is one of the outcomes of digitizing democracy. Dealing with an increased number of reports of bad governance requires additional resources that actors engaging in ICT-enhanced governance do not always have. The lack of response from local government should not only be interpreted as a lack of commitment to the citizens but may as well be due to lack of resources and ICT skills. This underscores the necessity to work at all levels of democratic process, grass-roots, local government and even higher.

Mediated Anti-Corruption Campaigns

ICT can play a significant role in the fight against corruption, not least through social mobilization, as exemplified by the Chanjo campaign in Tanzania. Chanjo (“vaccination” in Swahili) has centered on a music tour and open public debates, combined with free distribution of music through Internet and mobile phones. The tour has been documented with photo and video as well as through a blog and Facebook, with results shared in a documentary film, based on anthropological research on the campaign.

By offering people a voice, the Chanjo campaign has shown that ordinary citizens encounter corruption in various forms in their everyday life. Here a rather simple form of ICT – a microphone – has proven a potent tool for empowerment. When presented with an opportunity to share their experiences and voice their concerns, people have spoken up. Men
have been more inclined to speak up than women, a pattern that reflects deep-seated and highly engendered norms on public speech. Even so, the campaign has given a voice to the voiceless, with performances staged in public spaces accessible to poor and marginalized groups. In addition to enjoying a rare opportunity for music entertainment, people have had a unique chance to speak up in public and to get their statements recorded on video.

The use of social and mobile media has proven more problematic, although with lasting value. While the tour has reached over 27,000 people through live performances in 17 regions, the campaign blog has only received some 8,000 hits (see: http://www.chanjoyarushwa.blogspot.com). Nonetheless, the number continues to grow and since the blog will remain even after the tour, the messages it contains will also live on, along with the music available online for free download. Last but not least, people continue sharing the music through their mobile phones, thus spreading the message even further.

**Identifying and Overcoming Challenges in ICT for Democracy**

In the excitement about the use and effectiveness of new technologies there is a tendency to ignore or underestimate the challenges involved. Security and privacy issues may not be given due consideration and potential repercussions can be overlooked. As much as these challenges show the potential power of ICT, they must also be recognized for the limitations they place on the use of ICT for democracy and human rights, along with the risks involved when engaging in such efforts.

While local organizations encourage communities to use ICT in their civic engagement, those in power are not beyond controlling or limiting the use of these media, particularly where the subordinates are perceived as a threat to power processes. Examples from local actors include restricting bulk SMSing to specific times that can be monitored in Kenya, to censoring radio documentaries in western Uganda, to outright intimidation of would be users of the various platforms that have been introduced.

The online anti-corruption platform Not in My Country (www.notinmycountry.org) has faced serious challenges and security risks in Uganda. By offering an online site where university students can rate the performance of their teachers, the initiative tackles poor service delivery in higher education. However, students are being threatened by their lecturers and administrators not to use the website. Meanwhile, although the site also offers a secure means of reporting actual corruption cases, students have felt unsure of how well their personal details are protected. The team behind the site is very fearful of repercussions and their need for security has even impeded efforts to secure further funding.
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

➢ Ensure access and availability of infrastructure for all
The lack of infrastructure is a fundamental hurdle to the use of ICT for democracy, including the supporting infrastructure of electricity. It is imperative that infrastructure is available to all. Smart ICT solutions based on Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) should be encouraged, along with affordable access.

➢ Place privacy and security issues on the implementation agenda
As various organizations contribute to the delivery of social services they will inevitably come to handle and store sensitive information. To protect the integrity and safety of citizens, privacy and security should be addressed in technical development, policy making, and legislation. Security issues are also imperative to safeguard that politically sensitive information does not fall into the wrong hands.

➢ Affordable feedback loops
Increased engagement of the grassroot population in democratic processes calls for the establishment of routine feedback mechanisms, which can be costly. Steps must be taken to create an enabling environment for affordable connectivity and services. Efforts toward strengthening public private partnerships are encouraged.

➢ Build ICT skills of public sector actors
As information channels are becoming more readily available, there is an increased need among government officials to learn how to respond to increased demands for openness and effectiveness. Institution building in ICT for democracy should include building the capacity of public servants to handle information flows.

➢ Strategic use of available technologies
While new technologies often allow innovative uses, traditional media such as radio and television are still relevant and at times far more effective due to higher accessibility. New ICT should not replace old or already available technologies, but add yet another tool for outreach and communication.

➢ Build on global experience - adapt to local context
To make effective use of ICT in democracy and human rights, initiatives must pay close attention to lessons learned from previous implementations and at the same time be keenly aware of the local context. Evaluation and monitoring are key to ensuring that local efforts can build on lessons and results from global experiences.