ENHANCING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION THROUGH INFORMATION & COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

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Introduction

The rapid rise in the use of new information and communications technology (ICT) tools among citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs), is increasingly complementing – and challenging – traditional democratic institutions and processes and directly affecting the relationships between government and the citizens they represent. Examples include the use of social media for mobile organizing in Arab Spring countries, web portals and text messaging systems that enable direct communications between constituents and their elected leaders in Uganda and crowd sourcing election day experiences and adapting low-tech computers and phones in order to increase opportunities for participation in the earthquake reconstruction process in Haiti.

Despite the fast growth in the use of such technologies, there is little data available on the impacts they have had on issues, the organizations adopting them, the political institutions and processes they are intended to influence, or how to best provide technical assistance. As these tools are employed with greater frequency, it is vital that donors, academics and democracy assistance organizations understand their impact in order to provide effective assistance. In 2012, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI or the Institute) received funding from the National Endowment for Democracy to investigate these topics. The Institute’s citizen participation (CP) and ICT divisions are currently in the process of researching several country-level programs that sought to use ICTs to support citizen participation.

The assertions of this paper reflect initial results of this work, using a broad array of programs in Uganda as a case study. Uganda was chosen because it has become a veritable proving ground for the use of ICTs to enhance participation and promote transparency and good governance. The research analyses two prevalent assumptions. One is the seeming oversimplification that the addition of ICTs alone would be able to provide the types of experiences necessary for individuals to meaningfully participate in ways that develop their citizenship skills and contribute to democratic development. The other is the notion that ICTs’ capacity to increase communication channels and access to information will adequately alter deeply entrenched power inequities.

It is presented as a work in progress intended to generate dialogue and feedback to inform the broader endeavor.
Citizen Participation

NDI regularly evaluates its programs and conducts research so that the Institute and its local partner organizations can help citizens practice the art of citizenship and the potential of their participation can be fully realized. This has produced a theory of change regarding citizen participation and democratization that informs NDI’s work. The theory delineates NDI’s views about the role that citizen participation plays in democratic development and underscores the idea that participation is instrumental for democratization because it is through this participation that citizens develop a voice, expand political space, and foster government accountability. It posits that, while each of the democratic dimensions of “voice, space and accountability” is essential to democratization, there is an underlying interrelationship that exists in practice and is necessary to ensure good democratic governance. Absent the connection between these dimensions, meaningful participation is stunted and democratic progress languishes. These ideas are illustrated below.

For the purpose of NDI’s theory of change, participation is a reflection of citizens’ voice in political life. It can take a variety of forms, such as awareness raising, voting, advocacy, community organizing, or monitoring government institutions. Space refers to the avenues and opportunities (e.g., voting, meeting with an elected leader, writing a blog, joining a union, attending a city council meeting, etc.) that exist for citizens to access information, express their preferences, and engage government. Accountability denotes the fundamental principle of democracy whereby citizens have the right to demand accountability and public sector actors have an obligation to be accountable.

Citizen-centered activism — driven by real community needs and desires — is a powerful force; it can help transform how politics is practiced and the quality of life in communities. Citizens the world over want to improve their well-being and are often very interested in taking peaceful action, when they believe that they can make a difference. Citizens that care about an issue and have the opportunity to express their “voice” in decisions, will readily participate in organized efforts to foster positive, lasting change. Long-term democratic development requires citizen activism as a means of building a culture of
accountability and ensuring that the government works to benefit citizens. Moreover, the activism helps institutionalize participatory political practices and maintain the “space” necessary for such participation. When organizing and voicing their preferences, citizens learn the art of “citizenship.” They become more willing to participate and better able to make a constructive contribution to the political process. As a result, democracy itself is strengthened.

Citizen activism not only helps deepen democratic governance, it can also contribute to socioeconomic development. This proposition has been argued convincingly for more than a decade. The question becomes how to get citizens organized and active and what type and quality of participation matters most in trying to ‘make democracy deliver’ real improvements in people’s lives?

Methodology

NDI’s citizen participation theory of change provides the framework for exploring how ICT tools have enhanced citizen engagement in political processes by a) utilizing or creating new spaces for public participation, b) enhancing the quality and quantity of citizens’ voices in these spaces, and c) promoting government accountability. Research is still in process and has included a review of NDI programs that included ICT tools as a means of enhancing citizen participation, interviews with program staff in Washington, DC, and two roundtable discussions; one comprised of select staff from across the Institute and one made up of external experts in the field of ICT and democracy development. In addition, NDI researchers conducted a review of literature related to ICT and participation and attended two presentations by academics at which they presented findings from their research into the impact of citizen participation programs in Uganda. This process helped identify specific countries and programs for in-depth case studies. Uganda was one of the locales selected for further analysis. NDI’s researchers wanted to learn about the strategy and the quality of the many programs using ICTs to encourage citizen participation in Uganda’s a complex political climate.

A team of researchers -- one each from the ICT and CP divisions -- traveled to Kampala the week of November 26-31, 2012. They conducted key informant interviews with NDI staff, local partner organizations and select public officials involved in two programs NDI implemented with local partners: Uganda Watch, a national crowdsourcing, domestic election and violence-monitoring platform used by a coalition of CSOs during the February 2011 election; and UsPeak, a constituency communications platform being tested with 100 MPs. In addition, a “most significant change” exercise was conducted with leaders of the Uganda Watch coalition. More broadly, researchers also interviewed select individuals involved in politics, the ICT and development sectors in the country and those conducting programs in which ICTs were expected to enhance transparency and participation. A 40-question guide was used for the interviews. Lines of inquiry included:

- How implementing organizations define Uganda’s complex political landscape and attempt to influence it, including the barriers/democratic deficits they attempt to address and how citizen participation fits into their strategy
- Specific types of participants or participation that the groups aimed to engaged, such as youth, women or people with disabilities (PWDs)
The type of relationship organizations have, or seek to have, with program participants (e.g., organization members, “issue constituencies” or simply recipients of information)

Whether organizations work to engage individual citizens directly, work with pre-existing community associations, use mass advertising and media or some combination of these

Levels of formal and informal cooperation and coordination amongst groups, including partnering, formal coalitions and networks

How and why organizations have used ICT tools to enhance their citizen participation efforts and how they chose those specific tools

Challenges and best practices associated with this type of intervention

How these organizations are measuring impact

Uganda

Once hailed as a reformer and credited with stabilizing Uganda and putting it on a path toward development and economic growth, President Yoweri Museveni’s reputation has been tarnished by rampant corruption, human rights violations and backsliding on key development indicators.

Information from Afrobarometer and other sources indicates that many Ugandans have become disillusioned with the state of democracy in their country, and attendance at community level meetings has gone from highest to the lowest in the region. A deeply entrenched culture of impunity means that political leaders have little expectation they will be held accountable for their actions. Ugandans feel disempowered, fearful about using traditional channels for participation and cynical that attempts to voice their opinion will result in change.

At same time, Afrobarometer survey data demonstrates that the demand for democracy has dramatically increased, particularly with the return of multi-party competition in 2005. Those who feel disillusioned with democracy remain most committed to it as a political system because they believe it should act as a barricade against bad governance. This has been interpreted as suggesting these “disenchanted democrats,” who still demand democracy but are dissatisfied with its quality, may participate if given new opportunities outside the traditional channels. For several years, donors have been using Uganda as a testing ground for ICTs to serve as catalysts for these new opportunities. Myriad programs have deployed ICT tools aimed at increasing citizens’ access to information and their participation in service delivery, human rights reporting and political processes such as elections, budget monitoring and constituent relations. While programs have different objectives and methods, they hold in common the use of ICTs and a goal of increasing communication between citizens and government while improving transparency. Based upon interviews with key individuals, it is clear that these are seen as necessary steps on the pathway to government accountability, not ends unto themselves. Yet, despite these numerous examples, it’s not clear that the use of ICTs has so far been effective in achieving this goal.

Impressions

Although data from the research is still being analyzed, in aggregate it illuminates broad patterns that indicate that, with some exceptions, the promise of ICTs has yet to be realized for Ugandan citizens and
those organizations seeking to promote government accountability. Foremost among these is that many implementing organizations seem to have an idealized view of citizen participation that assumes a lack of communication channels and access to information underlies the accountability problem in Uganda. This perspective operates on the assumption that if citizens are given more opportunities to express their individual viewpoints and more access to government information, the problem will be self-correcting. This is reflected in the approach commonly taken to raise awareness of new programs and ICT tools available to citizens, treating them solely as products to be marketed via radio spots, billboards and, to a lesser extent, word of mouth. These efforts generate some individual citizen texts, calls to MPs or inquiries for information on budgets or other processes, although not nearly the desired amount.

Several additional concerns emerged. First is that while the ICT tools may be new, citizens were using them mostly for the same old reasons of personal patronage. For example, MPs reported that they mainly received requests for money for individuals. Second is that the process used by many programs in effect crowd sources inputs. This offers in-depth information on individuals’ concerns, but no opportunity for the deliberation and dialogue that forge citizenship and common policy requests and enable government actors to understand and prioritize community rather than individual concerns. Third, in instances such as monitoring service delivery or local budgets, citizens were provided with abundant information and an opportunity to communicate, but there was little discernible change in activism. While tens of thousands of citizens had engaged in these programs via mobile platforms, participants were not aggregated or mobilized in ways that matter politically. Fourth, ICTs were often deployed because they lowered the costs involved in getting information to or from citizens with slight regard to long-term political implications. Finally, ICT tools taxed the resources for already-stretched CSOs, with a negative impact on their operations. In some instances, ICTs were substituted in toto for an overall engagement strategy, mitigating positive outcomes.

These dynamics can be more closely examined through the lens of NDI’s citizen participation theory of change and the dimensions of voice, space and accountability.

**Voice**

Participation was encouraged and facilitated, but too often, these efforts lacked the fundamentals necessary for strong and effective citizen voice. Focus was on processes and information, not issues that were of broad and deep concern to citizens and around which activism is more likely to occur. In addition, where information was delivered, it tended not to provide citizens with the knowledge or experiences necessary to understand how they could act upon it and influence decision-makers. NDI’s experience has shown that information is necessary but not adequate for citizens to participate in civic life, a realization that many organizations in Uganda were clearly struggling with. Fundamental citizenship competencies were rarely enhanced and little coordination or aggregation was done to build the social and political capital necessary for a strong citizen voice. Notable exceptions to this were a few organizations that used ICTs to more deeply engage and educate their existing members, or poll them regularly on policy matters before parliament.
**Space**

ICT use has helped create spaces for citizens to express their voice, state their opinions, access government information, monitor and report on government activity and, to a lesser extent, interact with public officials. These spaces have also been a way for government to recognize and respond to pressures before they blow. A number of programs were working to include community gatherings and other face – to – face meetings, and these offer the hope that participants will have the opportunity for the dialogue and deliberation that are necessary to form democratic norms. There was some evidence that openings had been created for citizens and CSOs to use evidence gathered via ICT tools to engage and influence public officials on matters of electoral violence. However, CSOs expressed frustration about their – and citizens-- absence in most places where decision-making happens.

**Accountability**

Progress was cited in creating expectations that citizens have a right to basic government information such as budgets and service delivery. This can be an important step for activism that builds towards accountability, but it is too soon to know if this will be the case in Uganda. Political events around the time research was conducted would indicate that there has been no forward progress in holding elites to account.

**Conclusion**

The analysis suggests that while there is no doubt the numbers of citizens participating in ICT – driven programs is impressive, the type and quality of this participation is, in aggregate, not the type that would be expected to help citizens become the drivers of change for the democratic and socio–economic outcomes the implementing organizations hope for. Citizens must engage in a variety of activities beyond communication and information sharing in order to build a counterweight to entrenched power inequities. These may include joining civic associations, civic education, deliberation and dialogue, negotiating, lobbying, mobilizing and civil disobedience.

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4 Johan Hellström, PhD student at DSV, University of Stockholm, an evaluation of Uganda Watch, web presentation on Thursday, November 15, 2012 and Macartan Humphreys, Professor, Department of Political Science, and Director, Center for the Study of Development Strategies at Columbia University, presentation on the AFLI scorecard of the Ugandan Parliament at the NDI retreat in Warrenton, Virginia, July 10, 2012
Representatives of the following organizations provided invaluable insight into Uganda’s political context and the challenges and opportunities for citizen participation and the potential of ICTs: UNICEF, ACODE, AFLI, DEMGroup, CEW-IT, Green Light Movement, RIC-Net, CCEDU.

As defined by an index developed by Afrobarometer, in which “demand” or “commitment” shows respondents not only prefer democracy but also reject three non-democratic alternatives: military rule, presidential rule (without recourse to a legislature) and one-party rule.