The New African Democracy: Information Technology and Political Participation

Conference Overview and Agenda
Dates: May 1st and 2nd, 2012
Location: The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Kenney Auditorium, 1740 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington DC
Keynote: Ebrahim Rasool, South African Ambassador to United States

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) are helping to advance political participation and social movements in Africa.   The use of ICTs for democratic participation and government accountability offer exciting new possibilities that are changing politics and development in Sub-Saharan Africa.   The recent North African revolutions have shown that rising ICT connectivity can facilitate political and social movements, placing new pressures and demands on autocracies and democracies alike.

A major conference organized by the African Studies Program at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies will examine these trends and their implications. The meeting will bring together experts and policymakers to discuss challenges and opportunities for African politics in the digital age.

The conference will address two broad questions:
(i) How has ICT advanced democratic participation, government accountability, and state-society relations in Africa?
(ii) How can policy better support connectivity and the use of ICT for democratic political participation and government accountability and transparency in the region?

To understand the drivers of change, we must look at levels of freedom in a society, how active is civil society, and how densely different societies are connected by ICTs. These factors can be measured and traced. The type of regime, ICT penetration, and levels of social mobilization should be mapped and analyzed for a fuller picture of technology and politics.

Although the IT boom has had a positive impact in Africa, the effects of technology is uneven. Whether it's the printing press or the micro-blog, technology has been fundamental to human progress throughout the world.   But there are many questions as to how technology will be used, as well as the direction and pace of technologically-driven change. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of fixed internet subscriptions in Tanzania sharply rose from 10,000 to 488,000, while Guinea-Bissau has yet to reach 700 subscriptions.   In Kenya, women's self-reported use of the internet was less than half of men's internet use, and even low-tech information sources such as newspapers reported a similar gender-gap in usage.

A more discerning look at ICTs and politics in Africa can yield important policy implications. Collaboration and support from local donors, international foundations, government agencies, and private investors have accelerated the proliferation of ICT's across Africa. How can foreign supporters collaborate more effectively with local organizations to promote good governance through ICT?

Agenda

Day 1

8:45am| Opening remarks

9:00am| Panel 1: Technology and Political inclusion
This panel will analyze the different forms of access to information and communication technologies for political and social change in Africa. This focus on political and social inclusion shifts the discussion of the "digital divide" an issue of physical resources to social development challenges to be addressed through the effective integration of technology into communities, institutions, and societies. What helps and hinders people's ability to make use of those technologies to engage in holding governments' accountable and supporting transparency and rule of law in autocracies as well as electoral democracies in Africa?

Daudi Were, Ushahidi
Tunji Lardner, WANGONet
Jared Ford, NDITech
Dr. Chris Albon, FrontlineSMS
Moderator: Iginio Gagliardone

10:30am| coffee break/light breakfast

11:00am| "Little brother is watching you": Constraints and Successes of Citizen Monitoring and Reporting
This panel will address how many new forms of technology are being used by African's and international allies to solve collective action problems in African politics. How are new technology platforms being used to track government activities and financial flows, provide citizens with the ability to engage on issues they care about, and establish public checks and balances to hold government leaders in Africa more accountable.

Matthias Mordi, Accender Africa
Mendi Njonjo, African Technology and Transparency Initiative (ATTI)
Pascal Kambale, OSF AfriMAP
Moderator: Tunji Lardner

12:30pm|Keynote address and refreshments   "Harnessing ICT for Democracy, Human Rights and Development in Africa" Ebrahim Rasool, South African Ambassador to United States

Day 2

9:00am | TechChange Simulation
Nick Martin, TechChange
Christopher Neu, TechChange

10:00am | Coffee/ Light Breakfast

10:30am | Collaboration and Donor Priorities   This panel will analyze the success stories and failures of government agencies, private donors, and other collaborators to support the role of civil society and incorporate democracy and governance as a key element in foreign assistance programming in Africa. How can donors and collaborators support the legal and regulatory frameworks that provide an enabling environment for civil society organizations, democratic labor organizations and independent media to engage freely with African governments?

Dr. Kole Shettima, MacArthur Foundation
Joshua Goldstein, World Bank Open Development Technology Alliance
Kellie Burk, USAID
Moderator: Matthias Mordi

12:00pm| Analysis and looking forward This panel will analyze levels of transparency and democratic freedom in correlation with connectivity data across Africa. Which countries are engaging rural constituencies with ICTs and how has it affected the democratic process? Looking back to panel 1, what are the barriers to inclusion in high connectivity countries? Why are some countries with relatively low connectivity reported as being highly democratic? What are the political implications of new technologies?

Dr. Folu Ogundimu, Michigan State University
Dr. Iginio Gagliardone, Cambridge Center of Governance and Human Rights
Dimieari Von Kemedi, Alpha Strategy
Moderator: Dr. Peter Lewis

12:30pm | closing remarks
Dr. Peter Lewis