

Digital Participation and Democracy in East Africa

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Introduction

The following is a summary of a roundtable meeting, held at Chatham House on 22 June 2017, on the subject of digital participation and democracy in East Africa. Maria Sarungi, director of Compass Communications and founder of the #ChangeTanzania platform, discussed how technology is changing democracy in East Africa, with a particular focus on Tanzania.

From Uganda's yogera.ug platform, which enables users to report government service delivery problems and corruption to relevant officials, to Kenya's Mzalendo parliamentary monitoring site, technology is enabling citizens across East Africa to scrutinize and hold politicians to account more effectively. Can digital tools help to strengthen democracy in the region, and is it vulnerable to the same threat of state interference as more established channels of participation?

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-memoire for those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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Maria Sarungi

Margaret Mead famously said: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.' This quote embodies the vision of the #ChangeTanzania platform. Change comes from citizens, people who think things through, and who are committed. Change has to be grassroots- and citizen-led, because citizens are the key to democracy.

Today, Africa is experiencing a quiet digital revolution. Unlike in the West, where revolutions and citizen movements have been about occupying physical spaces, the digital revolution in Africa has happened without much noise and has changed the way Africans do a number of things. Technology has enabled Africans to engage, create and inform. New technologies have also generated opportunities for wealth, job creation and democracy. In 2011 there were only about 5 million Tanzanians online. Today, there are around 19 million Tanzanians online. This is due to several factors, including the continent-wide youth bulge as well as the surge in mobile phone penetration.

The increase in access to new technologies across the continent has generated an increase in citizen engagement on sociopolitical and economic issues. There are examples of this in the rise of young tech entrepreneurs who engage with their audiences and customers primarily through social media outlets such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. On the political level, we have also seen the rise of active citizens and citizen platforms that are challenging the traditional idea of democracy in Africa, which is that people vote for the party they feel speaks to and for them the most. With active digital citizenry, citizens speak for themselves.

One of the foundations of Julius Nyerere's *ujamaa* was the idea that citizens could engage directly with their leaders. Chiefs used to have councils, which would act as forums or arenas for debate and discussion. Effective democracy in Africa will require the citizens' ability to engage with their leaders on the one hand, and on the other, the responsibility of leaders to respond to their citizens. This goes against what is practised today, which is governments and government officials 'preaching' solutions to citizens without consulting their thoughts or opinions.

Active citizenry means engagement is self-initiated. Citizens initiate interactions among themselves and later with politicians. This also means that in active citizenry, discussions are unregulated, and topics can range from personal to community-based to national issues experienced by citizens from all walks of life.

Examples of citizen engagement in Tanzania are manifold. We have JamiiForums, a popular online discussion forum, which receives around 1 million unique views per month; 80 per cent of users are Tanzania-based, and nearly 300 threads can be created in a day. There is also the WhatsApp effect. WhatsApp is the leading social media platform in Africa, partly because some mobile operators give free WhatsApp usage to their subscribers. In Tanzania in particular, there are large WhatsApp groups (with up to 250 members) that are political discussion groups, some of them reportedly including high ranking officials' phone numbers.

One important example of active citizenry is what we can call the 'Mange Kimambi effect'. Mange Kimambi, who has nearly 1.3 million followers on Instagram, started off talking about fashion and then, in the 2015 Tanzanian elections, she campaigned for the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party. Within a year, however, she had become one of the biggest critics of President Magufuli and the CCM. She stopped talking about her personal life and fashion, and began focusing exclusively on politics. Since then, she has launched her own mobile app and has declared herself a freedom-of-expression activist, using her platforms to engage with her followers on political issues.

Perhaps what is most important about Mange Kimambi is the profile of her followers. They are overwhelmingly women with limited education but with increasing access to the internet and social networking platforms. They have often been viewed as apolitical, but Mange Kimambi is causing them to become engaged, and they are leaving hundreds of comments under political posts, for example about something the president has said. Kimambi has managed to successfully build around her an information ecosystem in which people don't just follow her, but also send her information, news tips (for example on big corruption cases) and videos of high-profile public events. Kimambi now lives in the US, and when she tried to return to Tanzania in 2015 she was arrested. She claims that if she attempted to return, this would happen again as she has made a lot of influential enemies.

The digital revolution has also had an impact on how spaces are governed. Physical spaces are traditionally governed through laws and restrictions on print media, associations and gatherings. Governing virtual spaces has also proven contentious. In Tanzania, the government recently passed a cybercrimes law which targets citizens sharing the 'wrong' information. But this has not managed to curtail people's digital habits. If physical gatherings are easy to disperse, gatherings happening under a hashtag on a digital platform are harder to control.

One thing that has been detrimental to democracy in Africa is the strong emphasis on partisanship. For this reason, movements aspiring to bring about democratic changes have to be non-partisan to gain credibility and unify populations across party, religious and/or ethnic lines. In terms of methods and tactics, #ChangeTanzania prefers petitioning to marching. The reason for this is that while marches are spectacular and newsworthy, it's hard to gauge whether they translate into active citizenry. What sets #ChangeTanzania apart is the fact that it is issue-focused, as opposed to putting people on the payroll of social causes. Traditional civil society groups often fall into the trap of transforming into 'machinery', fitting in with certain donor requirements instead of really engaging on issues that matter. This is a transformation #ChangeTanzania is keen to avoid for itself.

#ChangeTanzania's successes include its 2013 SIM-card petition, which successfully channelled popular anger about the TZS 1,000-per-month SIM-card tax proposed by the government. This tax would have hit

the poorest people the hardest: mobile phone providers revealed that 70 per cent of their clients do not spend more than TZS 2,000 per month. MPs in Dodoma, receiving hundreds of millions of shillings in salaries and expenses, could not understand the popular backlash. There is no word in Swahili for 'petition', so #ChangeTanzania had to develop its own petition platform, which is available in Swahili, and educate citizens on its importance. Despite the petition, the SIM-card tax was approved by MPs and signed into law by President Kikwete. After continued pressure via #ChangeTanzania, however, the president – in an unprecedented move – reversed the tax. Through the #ChangeTanzania platform, people understood how effective petitions can be in bringing about change in Tanzania.

The future of democracy in Africa will be guided by those with a big digital presence who can successfully navigate the world of digital media. The future challenge of democracy in Africa will be balancing economic interests, national security and democracy, and understanding that through digital media anyone can become everyone.

Summary of question and answer session

Mobile-to-mobile apps such as M-Pesa have injected a new kind of energy in African and Tanzanian society. How can the use of such apps empower people and transform informal activism into more structured activism?

Will change in Africa come from abroad, or from inside the continent?

How do social groupings on WhatsApp (more curated) and Instagram (less curated) interact to form the citizenry ecosystem you described?

Mobile applications are crucial to the quiet digital revolution. However, when it comes to money transfers, the danger is that monies could be difficult to trace. We can look at #ChangeTanzania as a movement that has gradually morphed into an enterprise. It is registered as a not-for-profit company, but it remains at heart a movement. When it started, some key government officials were unfriendly to #ChangeTanzania, but this perception changed when they saw what was possible through citizen platforms.

Change in Africa will not come from abroad. Whenever it does, it is unsustainable. and often it comes with strings attached. After the elections in 2015, some activists went quiet, especially after the cybercrimes law was passed – which is ambiguous and leaves discretion for officials in interpretation and application. This ambiguity hurts Tanzanian democracy more than it helps. Phenomena such as Mange Kimambi should be a lesson for the government. The more you make it illegal for people to express themselves, the more opinionated they become.

Tanzania used to be one of the few countries where parliamentary sessions were broadcast live. When President Magufuli came to power, he decided that parliamentary sessions could no longer be broadcast live because it was too expensive. This was a terrible idea. About a month ago, however, parliament itself started livestreaming via YouTube, and it has given the media access to the satellite feed. What changed was that after the cancellation of the official live broadcast of parliamentary sessions by the president, opposition MPs used their own cell phones to record sessions and disseminate the recordings via various WhatsApp groups, and from there they spread further. Suddenly the government was unable to control the narrative of what was happening in the parliamentary sessions.

What is the role of traditional civil society organizations in this digital citizen revolution? Outside of regulation, what are positive roles a government could play? What is the role of international organizations?

What is the trajectory of the way in which traditional political organizations will use these new technologies?

CSOs that continue to behave as traditional institutions will die. It is easy for governments to influence traditional CSOs, which means these organizations are limited in what they can do, at least in the physical space. With the increasing importance of virtual spaces, CSOs are trying to make the switch to being digital. However, when these CSOs shift to virtual spaces, they carry with them old, hierarchical ideas about communication (i.e. me speaking to you, and sending you a message). The only way traditional CSOs will survive is if the ideas they try to communicate resonate with citizens. It will only happen if they adapt to what is happening on the ground; currently, they are too detached.

The positive role of government is that there is no replacement for it in reaching out to people on the ground. The ability of government to organize on the ground will always be stronger. The two can merge if there's a two-way communication once the government and political parties acknowledge that they don't know everything. Governments, CSOs and international donors tend to call social media citizen activists elitist, but this is not true, and it is the wrong perception of the digital platform in Africa.