

Access to ICT in Sub-Saharan Africa, Civil Society and Governance

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I. Introduction

This memo seeks to elaborate on access to ICTs - one of the three major layers proposed by Seán Ó Siochrú in his report to the Social Science Research Council “Global Governance of ICTs: Implications for Global Civil Society.” The choice of the access layer was influenced by several factors including bias to the circumstances of sub-Saharan Africa where access to physical infrastructure remains one of the key governance challenges both from the perspective of communications right and multilateral cooperation including GATS agreements negotiated under the World Trade Organization.

- First, access to information and knowledge is imperative for meeting the global development challenges. For the majority of the people in the south particularly to those inhabiting Sub-Saharan Africa, meaningful access, use and social appropriation of ICTs are required at this point in time to bring about social and economic advancement and make their voices heard at global levels. Lack of access to information is a key barrier to the enhanced community livelihoods, raised voices of fledgling national social movement organizations and to overall human progress in the south. There should be a new form of governance that promotes the widest possible access to ICTs, information and knowledge, if the potential of ICTs for development is to be realized.
- Second, the ever-increasing availability of development, scientific, entertainment and educational content presents tremendous opportunities for civil society organizations and their clientele in the south, but, this has been impeded by multiple factors including government control. Observations since the introduction of the Internet to Africa over a decade shows that improved access to ICTs in the south could lead to availability of more content and to the crumbling of control. (Content and control in sub-Saharan Africa are the subjects of subsequent memos.)
- Third, access to ICTs in the south has been a key subject of global debate, governance, research and international cooperation for sometime culminating with global attention to the “digital opportunities” and the World Summit for Information Society (WSIS). Analysis of complex issues that surfaced and progress so far could help us to “speculate” the future institutional architecture, global governance and the role of Trans-national Civil Society Organizations in promoting universal access in the south beyond WSIS.
- Fourth and more importantly, seen from perspectives TCSOs and local social movement organizations and NGOs whose business involves responding to

African development problems other than ICTs (e.g. relief, rural development, gender, human rights and governance), access to ICTs is fundamental to their improved networking. CSOs need access to ICTs to improve their understanding global governance that impact on their day-to-day work and on the livelihoods of their clientele. There are also TCSOs whose business is promoting access to ICTs- access in the south remains a core agenda in their advocacy work. Their focus on the issue of access has already opened up to wider range of topics such as market failure, ownership, control, global inequality and participation of developing countries in global ICT governance issues.

- Fifth, Seán notes that “the future of civil society is likely to be influenced more and more by internal dynamics, as it internalises struggles with government and private sector.” National level activity is critical in sub-Saharan Africa where governments need to be faced with informed advocacy groups that exert pressure on them to speed up access to communications and information and to comply with international standards. TCSOs need access to local social movement network to work on core aspects of governance together, establish links between national policies and the complex global governance issues and develop coherent advocacy strategies within national, regional and international contexts.

II. Various Perspectives of Access

Access means different things to different people. The viewpoints on access range from physical connection to infrastructure, social capability like education and skills to make better use of ICTs to the availability relevant content and applications that promote their appropriation.

- First, physical access to telecommunications has been a key concern of international community for over a decade, although this seems to have gained more attention over the last two decades, following Maitland Commission’s “Missing Link” report in 1984.
- Second, bridging the gaps in information and knowledge between countries, among communities and between individuals polarised by age, gender, social and economic status, disability and connections to political power has been the main preoccupation of the “digital opportunities” movement at least for the last three years. There has been a broad concern that the gaps in access to ICTs and resources around the world are increasing and “the information revolution could paradoxically become a cause of even greater inequality and worsening poverty” among international community (McNamara and O’Brien, 2000).
- Third, there has been a limited discussion on “access for what?” so far. The strategic use of ICTs for development is expected to be treated sometime in the future.

The growing schism between those who and those who do not have access to information and knowledge is also regarded as a distinct human right issue. The right to communication and information is a key human right problem to be addressed within universally accepted rights such as Universal Declaration of Human Rights of

1948, the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Option and Protocols of 1967 adopted by the United Nations. The right to communicate and universal service have been the subjects of several studies and policy debates in international diplomatic and standard bodies like the ITU for over a decade (McIver, 2001). More recently, right to communication has become a key agenda of Civil Society Organizations like the Association for Progressive Communication within the framework of Communications Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) campaign that argues for the ability to share information and communicate freely using ICTs for the realisation of fundamental human rights enshrined in the above declaration and Covenants (APC, 2003).

Furthermore, access to information and knowledge has been a principal subject of international cooperation ranging from negotiation related to trade in service within multi-lateral frameworks such as GATS, bilateral agreements and technical assistance for developing countries. In effect, national progress in access to ICTs in sub-Saharan Africa has been a consequence of colonial legacy, neo-liberal values, structural adjustment programmes promoted by International Financial Institutions and technical assistance that often promote projects with the intention of subsidizing multinational corporations.

It can be argued, that technical assistance has been setting the agenda of national ICT policies and ICT trajectories in poorer countries where local capacities are inadequate. Locally, access to ICTs has been restricted by complex network of constraints ranging from problems of poverty and injustice, the extent to which national ICT policies promote connectivity, leadership and local governance.

Therefore, access to ICTs and its impact on TCSOs networking in Africa should be seen from the contexts of the history of multi-lateralism and the political dynamics of states. This memo aims to analyse ICT access in sub-Saharan Africa from four different perspectives – the digital divide, international cooperation, design and implementation of ICT policies at national levels and the rising activities of national and TCSOs.

a. The Digital Divide and Access

The digital divide in Africa has a significant bearing on the quality of networking among the TCSOs and their interaction with national CSOs. The disparity in access regulates the extent to which TCSOs do their business and network among each other and their support to and relationship with local civil society organizations like professional associations, media groups, advocacy groups for gender, environment, development and human rights. Access that is available to TCSOs' clientele matters a lot, since the locus of most of their activities is at national levels.

Irrespective of the ongoing debate on what digital divide actually represents, sub-Saharan Africa is a poorly served region, when it comes to infrastructure. Sub-Saharan Africa is characterized by high level of disparity in access to the ICT and usage, low level of digital and information literacy, limited quality, availability and affordability of the physical network including telecommunications, electricity and transport networks. The continent is home for about 12% of the world's population,

yet it shares less than 3% of the phones, 1.5% of the world computers and barely over 2% of the world's Internet users. National disparities are even worse since the divide trails the contours of economic progress of states: over 75% of Internet activity takes place in South Africa, about 12% in North Africa, and the remaining 48 countries share 11% of its use. Other barriers to TCSO access to ICTs in Africa include:

- The urban/rural divide where the majority of their clientele in rural areas lack basic access to telephones
- Divide along the fault lines of age, disability, religion, gender, 'connection to political power, wealth, employment, health and literacy
- Linguistic and cultural diversity of TCSOs constituencies that poses challenges in disseminating relevant content on governance
- Unreliable and inadequate infrastructure (transport, energy, water, logistics, etc.)

Cost is another significant barrier to access to information and communication technologies by local CSOs for the reason that, even if the device and connection costs decrease, the cost of training and upgrading remains.

On the other hand, there is over-utilization of the available bandwidth. Access speed has now become a key dividing factor in sub-Saharan Africa. Accessing multimedia is a nightmare with the bandwidth being congested day by day. A survey by Jensen (2002) shows that almost 60% of African countries have bandwidth that is less than that of a typical institution in the developed world. Only six African countries have a reasonable outgoing bandwidth. Africa's link to North America is 20 times less than that of Latin America that has somewhat a comparable size of population. Local loops are generally outdated and unable to support reliable connections.

This lack of access to physical infrastructure has been a key barrier to TCSOs and local civil society organizations progress to the next level – using network technologies creatively for information production and dissemination, campaigning, internal and external collaboration and research (Surman and Riely, 2003). Where the technology is available and accessible, CSOs face difficulty to appropriate it because they often do not understand ICTs implication to their work and cannot afford extensive use other than word processing and e-mail due to high usage fees. Factors that impinge on strategic use of ICTs in sub-Saharan Africa include:

- Low level of ICT literacy
- Lack of skills to sift through the wide array of information
- Inadequate capacity to publish information
- Limited availability of content relevant to the problem at hand, and
- Cultural and linguistic barriers.

Additionally, ICT use depends on the availability of social support networks that provide resources, information and guidance to CSOs; significantly these are in short supply in Africa. Although increasing access to ICTs particularly to the Internet has improved the understanding of their benefits, a lot still remains to be done in increasing strategic use of ICTs by CSOs and their clientele in sub-Saharan Africa.

The underlying cause for the physical infrastructure divide is rather complex and beyond the scope of this memo. It is mediated by historical and global governance factors outlined in Seán's report, but, more importantly by local poverty and injustice and the extent to which public policies provide incentives to the diffusion of ICT and supportive infrastructure.

It can be argued that the key governance question for access to ICTs in sub Saharan Africa is more of local than global. Even if the global environment changes and a global universal service regime is implemented through tax-based financing, sell of public goods like radio frequency, revitalizing Official Development Assistance (Guermazi, 2003) or employing new funding paradigm through remittances (Robinson, 2003), enhanced access to ICTs in Sub-Saharan Africa cannot be achieved without enabling legal and regulatory frameworks, a climate for innovation and the political will of the governments to constantly craft and implement policies that promote universal access.

Actually, it is local policy and capacity that matters. For example, even with a body of knowledge on innovative financing mechanisms, institutional and regulatory frameworks and new technological solutions for promoting universal service that has been accumulated over a decade, there are a few African countries that managed to develop expertise and invested resources in bridging the infrastructure gap. The introduction of e-rate and telecentres in Africa was largely unsuccessful. Despite compelling arguments for the use of open source software to cut costs and reduce the barriers of language and access, there are limited user base and software engineers to press the Open Source agenda forward. In spite of debate of the possibility of low cost computing, there has been almost no Africa-specific breakthrough in either the hardware or software fields (Southwood, 2003). Building local capacity and supporting the development and implementation of local policies and ICT programmes is the key governance challenge facing TCSOs and international actors.

II. International and Regional Cooperation and Access

International cooperation has been a persuasive force that shaped the direction of ICT development in Africa including TCSOs access to ICTs and networking. International cooperation had many forms and roles in the ICT arena in Africa. While some international institutions provided direct support to ICT development by making financial and equipment aid, building human resources and providing technical assistance, others included ICT support in their funding of other development projects like construction of roads and management of water resources and environment (Hafkin and Wild, 2002). International financial institutions provided technical assistance on privatisation of telecommunications and forced state-owned telecommunication companies to crumble by denying them loans for operation and expansion. Most specifically, the mixture of ICTs initiatives during the 1990s were the key factors that shaped the state of affairs of ICT in development in Africa sometimes undercutting the efforts of TCSOs and local actors.

Although the participation of TCSOs in major international cooperation efforts is improving, there is still a wider gap between the needs of TCSOs and their clientele and the digital opportunities proposals being put forward by the international cooperation actors. The latter continued to promote market oriented neo-liberal

approaches that overlook fundamental needs of the people on the ground or propose projects that subsidize trans-national corporation directly or indirectly. Thus far:

- Civil society organizations have not been invited to most bilateral and multilateral negotiations involving ICTs at national and regional levels. For example CSOs were unable to tap into resources made available through development aid agencies to provide ICT advocacy, research and knowledge production and dissemination. The funding of development aid agencies does not seem to budge away from serving the interests of same donors.
- At global levels, CSO are far more represented in the mundane “ICT for development” or “digital opportunities “ meetings organized by the United Nations and other regional agencies as compared to the most fundamental issues like trade in services, TRIPS and Internet governance.

An uphill battle lie ahead of TCSOs and local civil society organization in Africa to influence global ICTs governance issues promoted by the WTO and the World Bank in favour of universal access of their clientele.

III. National ICT Policies

Sub-Saharan African countries have gone through two major ICT policy shifts over the last ten years that influenced progress in access to ICTs and TCSO participation and networking. The first policy regime was the drive for privatisation of the telecommunication sector. This was spurred, among others by sector reform around the world, the desire to improve telecommunication services, rapid changes and convergence in technology, the tightening public sector budget, the basic telecommunications agreement for accession to the World Trade Organization and the Structural Adjustment Programmes driven by International Financial Institutions. The euphoria about investment in telecommunications sector and lack of resources by the incumbent state owned operators have also speeded up the urge for privatization in the mid 1990s.

As a result, a fair degree of liberalization has been achieved in some domestic telecommunication markets particularly in mobile services in Africa and private investment in Internet service has become a commonplace. The number of mobile phones that by passed fixed telephones lines in 2001 showed that hands-off approach to regulation and private investment are crucial for improving access to ICTs in the region.

On the other hand, despite commitment for developing telecommunication infrastructure neither sufficient resources nor political will was adequate to transform African countries as desired. Even with global censure of traditional public monopolies, most governments are still unwilling to allow unrestricted entry and unable to eliminate limits on private and foreign ownership. Others did not free the airwaves for community broadcasting. While most countries permitted private Internet Service Providers (ISPs), the majority preserved national gateways to which ISPs connect maintaining overall control of Internet diffusion. At the extreme some countries still maintain monopoly of Internet services. Widespread use of the Internet has not been achieved in rural areas.

Progress in universal access was also slow. Neither public monopoly nor the market was able to deliver the long awaited universal access. In many cases the process of sector reform led to merely handing over public monopoly to private monopoly by granting exclusive rights for longer periods. It was also “difficult to formulate, implement and enforce effective universal service due to lack of specialist expertise and facing powerful corporations sometimes diplomatic pressure from their corporate homes” (Ó Siochrú, 2003). Poor regulatory mechanisms, weak institutions and absence of public interest in telecommunications policies were other factors that contributed to lacklustre progress.

This had a number of implications to TCSOs. On the positive side, the opening up of domestic market and the redefinition of national interests in telecommunication sector was helpful to advance low cost connectivity to civil society organizations and a few people that were able to access to email and able to overcome the notoriously unreliable telephone networks and postal systems and costly fax services in the 1990s. Most of the pre-Internet connectivity to Africa was provided by TCSOs such as the Association for Progressive Communication and the ORSTOM-RIO.

Conversely, sector reform brought a number of governance issues to the table and stretched the advocacy work of TCSOs. Issues that surfaced include:

- Promotion of access to wider information and knowledge than mere access to telephones
- Scrutinizing public and private monopoly and providing alternative voices on regulation in the public interest
- Increasing public interest in telecommunication regulation
- Improving knowledge of the public and local CSOs on access rights and innovations in technology, regulation and financing to promote universal appropriate universal access

The distraction from a relatively sustained effort for telecommunication sector reform came around the mid 1990s with interest in the Internet for development and the shift of development agencies from telecommunication policies to broader ICT policies. This represents the second and present policy regime advanced by international cooperation in Africa. This regime argues that the solutions to challenges of access would come from fostering private innovation and investment in communication sector while preserving equity and universal serviced and promoting ICTs application for sustainable development. This led to a shift of focus from specific policy and regulatory in telecommunication sector to broader policy issues (e-strategies). Consequently a number of countries initiated national ICT policies and strategies.

However, the adoption of national policies did not automatically lead to implementation of ICT programmes that promote universal access except for countries that had financial resources and other building blocks such as skilled human resource, good leadership, predictable and stable investment frameworks, political stability and incentive for private sector. It was also difficult to achieve coherent policy proposals that promote African position for mobilizing support at national, regional and international levels.

In part, there was lack of expertise in articulating the actual needs, in prioritising interventions and building the blocks for embracing information and communication technologies at national levels within the context of international governance regimes. To a degree it was due to proliferation of competing institutions and initiatives that were driving the ICT agenda at national and regional levels. These and other e-strategies related issues represent the key regional governance challenges to TCSOs in Africa.

Although the shift from telecommunications regulation to broad-based ICT policy raised a number of issues TCSOs instigated before and created promises for access and networking among them, e-strategies did not embrace civil society wholeheartedly. The participation of civil society organizations in policy formulation and implementation has largely been ad hoc and the future direction CSOs influence is uncertain, in part due to lack of appreciation of CSOs as a key partners for design and implementation of policies both by public and private sector.

IV. Civil Society Response to Challenges of Access to ICTs

Africa related TCSOs have not yet received systematic treatment. Therefore it is very difficult to pin down the barriers to ICT use and the role TCSOs play in promoting access to ICTs. However it is possible to divide TCSOs into two broad groups and analyse the situation of TCSOs networking and their role in ICT governance. The first cluster comprises the majority of TCSOs deal with development issues other than ICTs but whose language and practices often extend beyond their purported objectives. In effect, there is increasing support to ICT in development by TCSOs whose main business has little to do with ICTs but rather focus on responding to urgent development challenges like food shortage, peace and security, displacement, environmental degradation or post-conflict reconstruction.

ICTs have become central to the business of almost all of these groups. ICTs are being used for information production and dissemination, campaigning including new form of electronically-assisted activism, internal communication and more importantly for collaboration with their counterparts elsewhere including international and regional organizations and their clientele except for the barriers of cost, quality and availability discussed elsewhere. Those with fewer resources have face the most trouble to make best use of ICTs.

The second and perhaps most important group of TCSOs are those whose business is promoting ICTs. These include trans-national advocacy networks such as the Association for Progressive Communications and donor driven development networks such as Sustainable Development Network. These have played a key role in providing access to civil society organization and other constituencies beginning with low cost technologies such as Fido and UUCP in early 1990s and culminating with improving capacities of groups such as women, human rights NGOs, professional associations and media groups in order to raise their voices at global levels. ICT-related TCSOs have recently been instrumental in lobbying for civil society participation and recognition at the World Summit for Information Society.

In effect, TSCOs like the APC and the Open Society Institute have been involved in opening space for civil society and bringing civil society organizations together to enable them to articulate ICTs use from different disciplines. There has been increase in use of mailing lists for collaboration and communication. For example, the African Information Society Initiative list (<http://www.bellanet.org>) is extensively used by CSOs to bring heterogeneous collection of interests to more coherent voices in order to promote various aspects of ICTs access from open source software to low cost connectivity.

Analysis of content of TCSOs discourse around information society shows that although the formation of TCSO around ICTs in Africa is still at a relatively early stage particularly in confronting governments and pulling coherent positions together, there has been a significant progress and willingness to share, to network and cooperate. It indicated that coalition between various group is a possibility for informing local policy with international debates, building links for future campaigns and shaping public awareness and encouraging reforms at local levels. It also demonstrated that although TCSO are flexible, expansive and institutionalised in a formal sense, some form of leadership is essential particularly at early stage of self-organization.

The APC played a key leadership role not only in organizing civil society organization in Africa as part of its work for empowering and supporting groups and individuals for peace, human rights, development and protection of environment through strategic use of ICTs but also in the quest to articulate ICT needs and contribute to the debates of information society development in the region. The APC Africa Internet rights project that played the crucial role in the process advocates for guaranteeing the right of people to use the Internet in order to freely exchange information and opinions, building civil society awareness on ICT policy issues in the context of basic human rights and providing means to monitor and engage ICT policies issues in the interest of social justices and human development (Africa ICT Policy Monitor project, 2003)

Access to ICTs has also been part of the Communication Rights in Information Society (CRIS) campaign that gained prominence recently through the work of TCSOs like AMARC, APC, Article 19, GreenNet and One World Online and other Africa-based TCSOs such as WomensNet, Schoolnet Africa, West African NGO Network (WANGONET), Southern African NGO Network (SANGONET), ENDA Tires Monde. The CRIS campaign aims to promote the right and equitable access to information and communication particularly to the disadvantaged communities and the expansion of open public spaces. Such TSCOs focus on right to communication assumes internal policy reforms can be achieved through external pressure; at the same time it calls for an equal internal pressure to bring about changes in global governance regimes.

V. Conclusion- Bridging Gaps of Access, CSO Networking, Local and Global Governance

This memo argued that the role of trans-national civil society organizations and governance should be seen within the context of national policies, the contribution of international cooperation to ICT development in Africa and the digital opportunities

movement. It is important to point out the frequent disconnection between policy and advocacy often leading to incoherent advocacy strategies for promoting access. The shift from telecom sector reform to broad-based ICT policies by international cooperation and the growing interest of TCSOs in international issues like Intellectual Property Rights, Privacy, Communication Rights in Information Society to the detriment of local building blocks like universal service and ICT applications in eradicating poverty are some of the examples of such disconnection.

Arguably, the subject of global ICT governance is not fixed. Nonetheless, there is a need for the articulation of governance issues such as physical access to ICTs in Africa that are not likely to be addressed by the developed world.

There is no doubt that Africa-related TCSOs remain dynamic and transient in nature; but observation shows that part of the disconnection in advocacy is due to lack of awareness the dynamic link between national injustice and policies, international cooperation and governance, the digital divide and the work of civil society. Local CSOs often lack research capacity and systematic analysis social implication of ICTs, risks and benefits and effectiveness of various local policies and technologies. CSOs also face the challenges of sifting through voluminous information on global governance issues and make sense of it and align this with a problem at hand. Therefore, it is imperative for TCSOs to develop and implement information and knowledge management strategies with regard to their areas of competence. The realization of the Centres of Expertise for global ICT governance that generate information for activism and feed into domestic discourse as proposed by the Louder Voices (http://www.panos.org.uk/briefing/birth_rights_files/686_CTO_report.pdf) would also be useful.

Better still, success of TCSOs access to ICTs and networking is dependent on their relationship with local civil society organizations including grassroots social movements. Genuine representation of the society depends on the capacities of local civil society organizations. Global interventions could be meaningless if people at local level are not adequately informed and did not add their voice to ICT governance. Strengthening the capacity of civil society organization at national levels and articulating the needs from grassroots upwards would help TCSOs, communities and grassroots organizations to contribute to the global welfare and to influence international governance regimes.

The locus of future initiatives in ICTs governance should be at national levels where government should not simply expect fair deals from global actors but also need to create favourable conditions for growth of ICTs. This requires not only strengthening the capacities of local civil society actors to improve their policy knowledge, build their relationships with the media and enhance lobbying skills for engaging with governments but also domestic aggregation of voices without which participation in global ICT governance will be difficult.

More importantly, TCSOs need to work with private sector around the unique physical access gaps and social appropriation of ICTs issues by analysing different packages mixing tools and technologies such as print, radio and TV and facilitating links between traditional community media and new ones. TCSOs need to scrutinize the viability of various models such as telecentres, e-rate for schools and libraries,

open source software, low cost computers, etc. to different circumstances of their clientele. The introduction of different models of ICT access should be guided by the understanding of the role of ICTs for social and economic development and its impact on CSO work and networking. Promotion of access could also open up to other fundamental issues like content, language, cultural diversity and gender issues that CSOs need to address systematically.

It is too early to predict the pattern of trans-national civil society in Africa and the role ICTs play for its networking and the role TCSOs play in advancing universal access. However, it is clear that the seeds have already been sown over the last few years and African civil society organizations have had some degree of influence on local ICT policies. They are becoming involved in international policy and governance issues. However, influencing global governance of ICTs will not be a short-term and low-investment process. It requires building a sustained and cohesive coalition at global levels, local capacity for analysing ICTs issues in development and mobilizing the resources of local actors taking the contravening forces such as digital opportunities, local injustice and policies and international cooperation into account.

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