

Summary of a two year (2012-2014) proposal submitted by IT for Change to the Governance, Security, Justice Programme, IDRC

'Making Local Governance Work for Women -Exploring New Institutional Possibilities'

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1. Introduction

The proposed project, adopting a feminist inquiry, attempts to understand the promise of digital technologies for local democracy, building on two assumptions – that local governance systems, as potent sites of power, have historically excluded women; and, that there is a unique historical occasion in the pervasive and rapid changes set in motion by digital technologies and the Internet, that can trouble the status quo, opening up the possibility for more vibrant and viable democracies where marginalised women can find voice, visibility and centrality in local governance.

Building on these assumptions, this proposal raises the question: how can digital technologies be suitably employed to create participatory models in governance such that they enable socially and economically marginalised women in local contexts gain centre stage and push for institutional accountability? This question is sought to be addressed through an action research project that spans across three different contexts: India, Brazil and South Africa.

Across the three sites, the project will attempt to build a strong political constituency of women, and develop horizontal peer to peer networks among women, a gap often acknowledged by feminists today. In particular, the projects will approach the nexus between governance and digital technologies through a focus on the rights and entitlements vis-a-vis information, communication and association – constituents of local democracy. To this end, the projects will adopt various strategies for enabling marginalised, poor women's organisations and collectives to make use of digital technologies towards political mobilisation, active engagement with governance structures, and collective articulation and negotiation of interests, including through new forms of peer to peer networks.

From a policy perspective, how can digital technologies be appropriated for engendering local governance emerges in the current conjuncture as a critical question for development. Governance innovations using digital technologies and techno-social processes are being tried out in very tentative ways in many countries of the developing world. We see possibilities that can potentially give older generation governance reforms a new direction. From community involvement in the creation of local data (especially in crisis management), digital platforms for social audits, and locally made inexpensive videos, to ICT(Information and Communication Technologies) based local networking, these new processes hold much promise for inclusion at the local level. Under what conditions would they also open up the spaces for re-negotiating gender at the local level, providing levers for marginalised women's empowerment, becomes a pertinent and urgent question to explore.

2. Research objectives

- a. To test out contextual models in the field of participatory governance that use digital technologies in a guided manner to deepen local democracy and make local institutions accountable, especially from the standpoint of marginalised women.
- b. To contribute to grounded theory and field building by exploring the conditions under which digital technologies can enable marginalised women to gain active citizenship in terms of informational, communicative and associational power, vis-a-vis local governance processes.

3. Research questions

The core question that the project will address is:

- ◆ What are the conditions under which digital technologies can enable marginalised women gain active citizenship in local governance?

Sub questions that will be addressed:

- ◆ How and under what conditions can the democratisation of local communicative spaces /public sphere enable marginalised women to articulate their interests and shape the agenda of local governance?
- ◆ How can local information centres managed by marginalised women's groups / collectives impact the local information ecology and culture? How are processes of governance shaped in this emerging techno-social ecology? What social and institutional factors influence these outcomes? Does democratisation of information democratise power in local contexts towards gender equality?
- ◆ How do new possibilities for marginalised women to link horizontally, including across geographies, help develop new associational forms that are rooted in local needs and interests? How do these associations relate to current forms of political mobilization and organization?
- ◆ How does the relationship of marginalised women with public institutions change with enhanced informational, communicative and associational power?
- ◆ How do new spaces and relationships mediated by digital technologies impact women's status in relation to informal structures of social and political power in the local context?
- ◆ What kind of policies in governance reform, development, and new media and digital technologies will provide the enabling conditions for making possible institutional

innovations which can make local governance work for women?

- ◆ What insights about gendering technology may be gleaned through the specific technological platforms and tools deployed in local contexts?

4. Research methodology

Our aim is to demonstrate appropriate models for women's engagement with local governance in a manner that promotes gender justice, harnessing the affordances of digital technologies. While topics like e-governance and digital activism have been researched, the scope of this research falls beyond, into the overlapping discourses of governance and citizenship, community informatics, gender and development, social movements, and media and public sphere. It is a new area with little or no knowledge base. Hence it would be appropriate to adopt an experimental and emergent approach with the goal of building grounded theory. Therefore, the project will use action research methodologies and inductive methods through inter-disciplinary frameworks.

5. Research framework and strategy

The theoretical framework of the research, as discussed, will be based on network society and governance theories, using a critical feminist lens to study shifts in marginalised women's citizenship vis-a-vis local governance processes through their appropriation of digital technologies.

Women's active citizenship, defined operationally as the extent to which women are able to exercise communicative, informational and associational power in the local participatory sphere, will constitute the basic category of inquiry. Network society theory will provide the overarching conceptual tools that can enable analysis through a comprehensive lens accounting for governance, ICT and feminist frameworks.

The field intervention strategies, which will form the basis of the action research in the 3 countries, will build from local priorities. They will however build from the conceptual framework of the project, with some common, core methodologies and shared indicators, thus allowing for the hypotheses to be tested under different conditions for grounded theory building.

6. Justification for choice of sites

An important point in relation to the sites is connected to how this proposal seeks to address the notion of fragile and conflict/ post conflict states. Fragility of the state needs to be thought of as a

continuum and not an either-or issue. For instance, the Brazilian and Indian state may look less fragile than the context we are looking at in Africa, but it is important to remember that just over two decades back Brazil was a dictatorship and even today, the Indian state with all its outward semblance of stability suffers huge internal unrest with acute poverty (also, increasing income disparities) and people's uprisings among vast segments of the population. One very important point in this context is that though it is the weakest and most fragile states that may need a remedy urgently, and it is possible to hypothetically envisage the role of ICTs in this, we are still in early and somewhat experimental stages of looking at ICT enabled options for enhancing bottom-up or participatory democracies and improving the accountability of the state. Any idea in this direction – given its relative nascence - requires incubating in somewhat favourable conditions. However, once the basic possibilities and their impact is demonstrated, modelling in more difficult situations is possible. This rationale underlies the choice of project sites. Brazil now has a path-breaking record in participatory processes (coming from their participatory budgeting and local health council initiatives), and it will be useful to test how ICTs can take such processes along, making them more effective, scalable, sustainable, and also, more participatory. India also has a burgeoning movement for decentralization and community participation, while also being a hotbed for numerous ICTD (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) experiments. At the same time, both these countries, as discussed above, have very acute problems about people's trust in the state apparatus, and state accountability. This makes for an ideal situation to check the relevance of ICT based processes for improving participation and accountability. Our project site in Africa will also look into these requirements – how ICT possibilities for democratic governance can be explored in places where challenges to the accountability and legitimacy of the state are important issues.