How digital pathways can work for inclusive local governance
Insights from the Women-gov project of IT for Change

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Women-gov - ICTs for local governance

The promise of the network society for deepening democracy has not been adequately harnessed in the global South. On the one hand, the online public sphere has enabled the emergence of a new grammar of political action – one that is diffuse, decentralised and fluid[1]. On the other, there has been a proliferation of e-governance initiatives adopting technology for governance reform that are top-down and technocratic. The assumption in these efforts is that the very introduction of technology can, by disintermediation of human idiosyncrasies, enhance transparency, efficiency and inclusiveness in existing administrative systems[2].

But ICT-enabled political activism and 'ICTs in governance' initiatives have fallen short of sustainable institutional change that can work for the most marginalised. They have not explored the potential of digital technologies in transforming the building blocks of local democracy: the institutional cultures of information, association and communication within formal and informal governance structures. The possible pathways to inclusive and accountable local governance ensue from affordances of digital technologies for greater decentralisation, horizontalisation and participation. This would however require that technology design and policies are navigated in contextual and creative ways.

Through the Women-gov project (2012-2014)[3], IT for Change, undertook a systematic inquiry into the conditions under which local governance in the network society can deliver on the goals of equity and social justice. Using a feminist research approach, we attempted an analysis of how 'ICTs in local governance' can work to include women from socially marginalised groups. This required us to be aware of the paradoxical propensities of digital technologies to reproduce existing, unequal power relations even whilst enabling a break from them[4]. Our research was also based on the assumption well recognised in scholarship – that women's experience of citizenship is multi-layered[5]. Women's membership across social groups - community, clan and nation – is also mediated by social norms that prevent them from realising formal equality.

The study sought to test out the affordances of digital technologies for building local institutional cultures that can further women's substantive participation and

1   Harcourt, W. 2012. The Challenge of Civic Engagement for Development, Development, 55(2), p.151-153.

2   Madon, S. 2009. E-governance for development: A focus on Rural India, London: Palgrave McMillan

3   The Women-gov project was a research collaboration between IT for Change (India), Instituto Nupef (Brazil) and University of the Western Cape (South Africa). It was supported by the Governance, Security and Justice programme of the International Development Research Centre, Canada.

4   Wajcman, J. 2000. Reflections on Gender Technology Studies: In What State is the Art, http://tinyurl.com/l6gqts8

5   Roy, A. 2013. Gendered Citizenship: Historical and Conceptual Explorations, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan

transformative public-political action. It also aimed at identifying the policy priorities for an inclusive ICT-enabled governance paradigm.

Research Design and Methodology

Women-gov adopted a Participatory Action Research methodology (PAR) to examine its hypothesis. PAR acknowledges the power imbalances between the researchers and the researched, and focuses on connecting research to larger social change efforts[6]. PAR is also very well suited to inductive theory building efforts[7] that seek to investigate hitherto uncharted terrain, such as testing out models, in this case, for creating new techno-social ecologies. At the 3 sites of inquiry, the cycle of 'planning-acting-observing-reflecting-modified planning', which is at the core of action-research endeavours, was followed systematically, over the project period.

Box 1. A comparative assessment of the 3 sites

India, Brazil and South Africa, all have a history of initiating formal institutional reforms, including for decentralised participatory governance, in the past two decades. Yet, they continue to grapple with the exclusions of citizenship, especially for women from marginalised groups. When it comes to digital capabilities, Brazil leads the way, according to the Alliance for the Affordable Internet's 2013 global ranking of countries. The ranking was based on country efforts in promoting the affordability of the broadband and mobile Internet. South Africa launched its National Integrated ICT Policy Green Paper that aims at democratising its highly unequal telecommunications environment, and promoting a rights-based approach to ICT access, more recently, in 2014. Although India's vision for broadband connectivity is more than a decade old, rural connectivity is still poor, and is sought to be given a fillip through the Digital India initiative 2014. Brazil also has a more mature e-government system, when compared to India and South Africa. According to the United Nations E-government Index 2014, Brazil is ranked 56, South Africa, 75, and India, 118. Out of the 3 countries, only Brazil has a civil rights law on the Internet, enacted in April 2014, and ushered in by active civil society engagement advocating an open and inclusive Internet architecture.

The research framework was operationalised through a study of women's 'active citizenship'. The project defined active citizenship as a composite measure of women's informational, associational and communicative power. Informational power refers to women's capacities to access information channels;

associational power to the extent to which membership in a collective enables women to negotiate their rights in the sphere of formal and informal politics; and communicative power to the extent to which women can challenge mainstream discourses, in the local public sphere. As a multi-country study across India, Brazil and South Africa (See Box 1), the insights generated by the project can be effectively leveraged by public policy actors across most developing country contexts.

Site-specific Strategies

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Instituto Nupef used the telecentre run by the NGO Criola, to reach out to 30 Afro-Brazilian women community leaders from the marginalised neighbourhoods of the city. The telecentre was set up under the 'Points of Culture'[8] programme of the Brazilian government, and served as the venue for a series of workshops, that aimed at equipping the women leaders with photography, video and blogging skills, and the capacity to analyse budgetary information published by the government. The women used these skills to raise their voice against the poor quality of public service delivery in their neighbourhoods, and even undertook community audits of health services, verifying online governmental records. Local authorities were invited to community based forums where women shared their blogs and videos.

In India, IT for Change worked with *dalit* women's collectives in rural Mysore, through a multi-pronged strategy, at the core of which was the creation of a network of community information centres managed by women's collectives. Each centre was operated by a young woman from the village who routinely used ICT-enabled and traditional information channels - phone calls and meetings with officials, scanning governmental websites and newspapers - to widen women's access to public information. The centres used Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS) for information updates and convened meetings between women's collectives and elected women representatives to evolve shared 'gender and governance' priorities. They anchored GIS-enabled social audits in partnership with local government to ensure fair and effective targeting of local budgets. Further, the information centres were also the nodes

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6   Langan, D. and Morton M. 2009. Reflecting on community/academic collaboration': The challenge of `doing' feminist participatory action research", Action Research, Vol 7(2): 165 –184

7   Taccchi, J., Slater, D., and Hearn, G. 2003. Ethnographic action research, New Delhi: UNESCO.

8   The Points of Culture initiative is a programme of Brazil's Ministry of Culture, which supports civil society efforts at creating public access points in order to promote meaningful cultures of use – as a pathway for digital inclusion

of community radio and community video processes enhancing the civic solidarity of women's collectives.

In South Africa, the University of the Western Cape, focused on the political education of women students and young women from marginalised neighbourhoods of Cape Town, helping them break away from their present state of political apathy as members of the post-apartheid generation. A range of strategies were used, including, digital story telling and text messages for awareness-generation, along with creative campaigns using film, social media, visual and performing arts, around the issues of public employment, safe transport, and freedom from violence.

Research Insights

So, what does the research reveal in terms of the use of ICTs for inclusive local governance? What are the conditions under which marginalised women's active citizenship can be enhanced at the local level? Insights on these questions, from Women-gov, are summarised below:

1. A decentralised information architecture that effectively utilises the opportunities opened up by ICTs and the Internet, can enable marginalised women to access their entitlements from the state. Informational capabilities may not automatically lead to elimination of vested interests and entrenched corruption nor guarantee sufficient deepening of local democracy. But digital capabilities are potentially game-changing; they can make local governance architectures more democratic and bring power to marginalised women, if the latter have the digital wherewithal and the capacities to engage with data and information. As one of the research participants from India said, *"after we got our information centre, we no longer go to the government...the government comes to us"*.

2. Associational power to build the collective, and to continuously nurture its democratic character, is vital in democracies. The research found that women need both offline and online spaces, to negotiate and bargain as a collective, with local power structures. It was observed that in all the countries studied, civic spaces are increasingly shrinking. They are being elbowed out by populist politics and economic policies that instrumentalise collectives to further partisan and individual interests. Under the circumstances, the project was able to show how specific uses of digital technologies help women expand their local and trans-local networks, and revitalise their collective identity as

citizens. As one of the women leaders from Brazil, while reflecting on her experiences of blogging, observed: *"By posting our thoughts and opinions, we are reaching out to a wide number of women in our community, including those who may not attend physical meetings, and we are encouraging them to take forward the agenda, one step at a time...like the way ants work!"*

3. As connectivity through mobile telephony becomes ubiquitous, the marginalised have new opportunities for public engagement. However, mere access to connectivity does not translate into greater visibility for alternative perspectives. Women's communicative power in a connected world requires digital spaces that are carved out and explicitly signified as forums for citizen engagement and deliberative democracy. As a young woman participant from South Africa observed, *"The project gave me the space to realise that I could participate in civil matters more than I thought I could...(Now) I represent my views instead of having other people misrepresent them"*.

Box 2 : ICTs for local governance: Insights from Women-gov

- Community information centres can serve as spaces for local government to interact with marginalised groups, and work actively with them on surveys and social audits using mapping. Such community-based digital infrastructure enables online consultations and effective implementation of schemes.

- ICTs offer local governments the opportunity to extend information outreach through online publishing of information, including representation of data in non-textual formats; SMS and IVRS for public announcements; video to document and publish proceedings of citizen forums.

- Civil society initiatives have successfully demonstrated how blogging, social media, digital story-telling, community radio, and SMS can be effectively leveraged to enable individuals and groups, to hone their political voice. They offer valuable insights on how to use the communicative possibilities of ICTs using the local idiom, not only to inform, but also for deliberation.

Policy Recommendations

Women-gov has provided a number of insights on harnessing the potential of digital technologies for building inclusive and accountable local governance systems (See Box 2). Policy recommendations from the research project are discussed below:

1. A clear road-map to make local governance 'familiar' to citizens.

The project has demonstrated that digital technologies can be used in multiple ways for transforming local governance processes and institutional cultures such that women and other marginalised groups matter. From local information portals; community-run public information centres that curate and disseminate information, also assisting in entitlements processing; community data bases and GIS-based social audit for claims-making; to civic education through tablets and SMS; diverse applications of digital technologies can be explored, and effectively deployed. Digital practices and digitally-enabled interactions go a long way in making local government 'familiar' to marginalised groups. They allow local governance to be discernible and accessible, and they en-skill and empower communities to be active citizens.

Familiarising citizens to emerging governance structures and processes calls for policies and investments in e-governance and connectivity, which may be the task of specialised agencies such as the Department of e-Governance, Department of Information Technology and the Department of Telecommunications. From the standpoint of inclusion however, a clearly-laid out roadmap on the 'role of ICTs in local governance systems' is needed. Such a road map must clearly spell out how digitisation can transform the highly fragmented experience of interaction with government, into one that is responsive to the citizen.

2. E-governance for a new topology of local relationships promoting accountability and citizen participation.

E-governance can redefine the power relations between public authorities and people. This requires a range of interventions, as employed by the project:
– Utilising the power of digital data architectures to *de-centralise* rather than *re-centralise* planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring of service delivery,
– Developing a clear framework on Open Government Data, that addresses the obligations of the state in terms of citizens' right to information and data in the public domain, and
– Building the capacities of marginalised groups to engage in digitally-enabled social audit processes to strengthen their claims-making processes.

3. A policy framework for making connectivity meaningful to marginalised groups.

The research points to how connectivity and access, in and of itself, cannot lead to the empowerment of marginalised groups. Digitally enabled spaces that become the 'boundary posts' for communities to engage public authorities on their terms, have an important role to play. Even if mobile connectivity can revolutionise citizen experience in the near-future, flourishing local democracies need spaces for creating and nurturing civic intelligence and resilience. This requires investment in community digital capabilities, which must be addressed by the following laws and policies:
– Net neutrality legislation that covers the broadband and mobile Internet.
– Subsidised access to bandwidth, for community media efforts.
– Open and free software, and open standards, for all aspects of governance.
– Positive discrimination for the production of local content in digital spaces.

4. Using digital technologies as an impetus to women's citizenship.

Existing inequalities are often reproduced by and through digital technologies. What the research indicates is that to privilege women's citizenship, digital technologies must be deployed in creative and contextual ways. Community-based public access spaces can converge with women's empowerment programmes, giving women jobs as trainers and infomediaries. New cultures of civic education should be introduced so that young women in particular, find for themselves new roles and trajectories in civic-public engagement. From a security and justice point of view, access and connectivity must be made meaningful to women's overall well-being – responding to women's needs and rights.