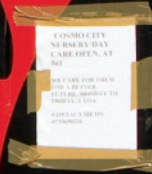


ENABLING

OPEN
GOVERNMENT
BY ANUPAMA DOKENIYA



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Globally, increasingly vigilant and vocal civil society groups—important actors in the new multilateralism—are demanding that companies publish what they pay in revenues, aid agencies publish what they fund, and governments publish what they spend. In middle-income and poorer countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, less well resourced, but equally passionate, local advocacy groups are demanding that governments formally enshrine their right to access government information in law. In the United States, technology visionaries are emphasizing a new paradigm of collaborative governance, and “civic groups are taking advantage of new technologies to shine the light of greater transparency on government from afar.”¹

THESE, and many similar initiatives around the world, reflect a renewed and heightened focus on openness, transparency, and citizen participation in the discourse and practice of governance. This idea of *open government* stresses information sharing and participation, rather than discretion and secrecy, as foundations of good and effective governance. Development aid agencies are also increasingly responsive to these trends. For instance, the World Bank Group’s Governance and Anti-corruption Strategy, launched in 2007 and now being updated, provides that the Bank will “...scale up its work with interested governments to strengthen transparency in public policy making and service provision.”²

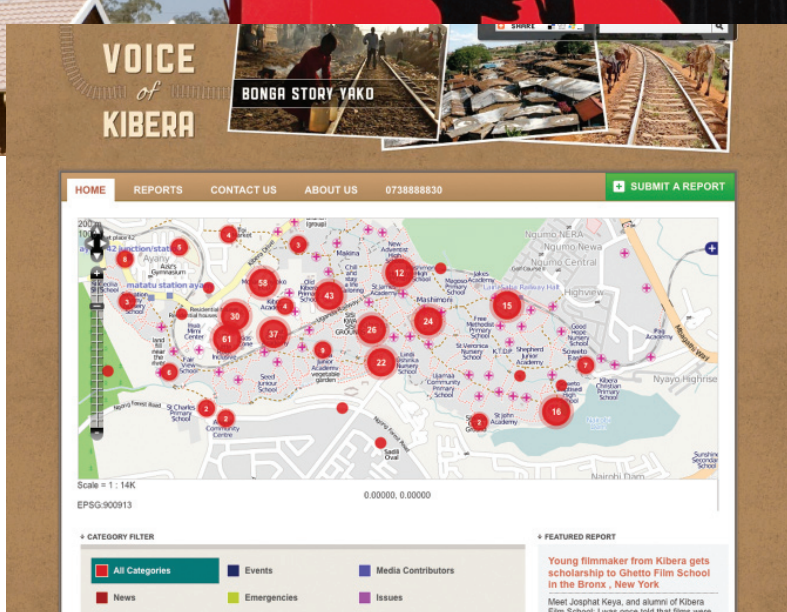
For work on international development, a few key issues stand out:

- One, the momentum of technology, and shifting boundaries of power between states and citizens creates new demands on governments, on all governments, not only in rich countries, to be inclusive and open.
- Two, mirroring an earlier generation of social monitoring tools, innovative technology-enabled tools for openness are emerging in developing countries, highlighting the need to catalyze innovations in local settings, rather than transplanting ready-made solutions.
- Three, the push for open government is coming from civil society advocacy, but is fundamentally about the way the government functions, and will require government systems to integrate principles of transparency and voice.

PARADIGM SHIFT

INNOVATIONS in technologies for managing, communicating, and sharing information have been powerful drivers of social change. Print and broadcast media made democracy possible at the scale and size of modern nation states. And the new wave of computing innovations—unprecedented in their speed and global reach—are enabling citizens to take on a much more active role by connecting globally, accessing new ideas, and harnessing the power of networking. Some commentators had characterized these trends as a “power shift” as early as the 1990s—well before Facebook and Twitter.³ While the magnitude and contours of this shift can be debated and researched, it is clear that monopoly and control over information by governments is increasingly under threat.

Two contemporary events, different in scope and form, illustrate this dynamic. The first, the Wikileaks controversy, highlights the global reach of even small, relatively modestly resourced virtual organizations in this technology-empowered era. Thomas Friedman calls this phenomenon the “rising collection of superempowered individuals: What globalization, technological integration, and the general flattening of the world have done is to superempower individuals to such a degree that they can actually challenge any hierarchy—from a global bank to a nation state—as individuals.”⁴ The second illustration is, of course, the pace and rapid spread of revolutionary movements in the Middle East. Widely labeled as a “social media revolution,” it reflects again the potential that tech-



Voice of Kibera is a citizen reporting project based in Kibera, Nairobi. It is an initiative of Map Kibera and uses the Ushahidi platform to aggregate and map reports.

nology creates to shift the balance of power toward individuals and social movements, however amorphous, chaotic, and spontaneous.

The momentum of technology and the rising influence of citizen groups create new demands for all governments, and not only in rich countries, to institute policy and regulatory mechanisms that are inclusive and responsive, and create legitimate spaces and mechanisms for citizen participation in policy- and decision-making processes. The very logic of technology suggests that responses premised on further strengthening of controls, or clamping barriers of secrecy might not work.

DEVELOPING COUNTRY INNOVATIONS

TECHNOLOGY also provides innovative tools for enabling greater disclosure and participation. Many of the earlier generation of social monitoring tools such as citizen scorecards, social audits, and expenditure tracking that enhanced the role of citizens in the governance process, emerged in developing countries, and became important platforms for social action. A new generation of technology-enabled applications and in-

novations for open government is also being developed in the South. Numerous examples are emerging including the use of mobile phones, SMS (short message service) technologies and web-based platforms for providing feedback on services, reporting on corruption, and accessing services.⁵

Global Voices,⁶ a virtual organization of bloggers, tracks and shares many of the more innovative applications, emerging in both middle-income and poorer countries, such as:

■ Ushahidi

(<http://www.ushahidi.com>), which was developed in 2008 to map reports of violence in Kenya after the post-election fallout, and has now grown to become an important resource for citizen journalists and advocates in a number of countries,

■ Databases

focusing on corruption in the executive, legislative and judiciary, developed by Mars Group Kenya (www.marsgroupkenya.org),

■ Ishki.com

(<http://ishki.com>), a complaint brokerage in Jordan, that collects and organizes complaints from local citizens about the public and private sectors,

■ The Ujima Project in Rwanda

(<http://ujima-project.org>) that makes budgetary data on governmental and NGO expenditures available online, and

■ Democinator

(<http://www.democinator.ru>), an online initiative that enables citizens to send petitions and inquiries to government bodies in Russia.

In some cases, various branches of government have also been proactive in deploying technology for greater openness and participation. The Indian government, for instance, has set up a special advisory body to leverage innovations for better governance,⁷ and annually conducts competitions for e-government initiatives.⁸ In Brazil, the House of Representatives launched the e-Democracia Project, which is enabling citizens to contribute to the drafting of laws.⁹ In Peru, the Constitutional Court is making its judgments available through its website.¹⁰

As technology helps diversify and expand the sources and locations of innovation, development aid agencies can play a vital role as catalysts for domestic systems of innovations and development, rather than carriers of canned solutions from the North to the South.

CHALLENGES

ALTHOUGH the impetus for openness comes from civil society, open government is, at its core, an enterprise of government transformation. Eventually, citizens will be able to participate actively in the governance ecosystem, if governments create the right enabling

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continued on page 33