

Mobile phones in Tanzania: tools for social change?

by ADELA RODRIGO

As you drive into Dar Es Salaam from the international airport, the number of billboards advertising mobile phones and mobile phone contracts is overwhelming. Tanzania is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranked 148 out of 168 on the 2010 UN Human Development Index (UN Human Development Report, 2010). However, it is clear that the mobile phone industry in the country is booming. Mobile phone companies such as Tigi, Zain, Zantel and Vodacom are fighting over the Tanzanian consumers. By offering affordable handsets and cheaper rates, those companies are making mobile phones accessible and affordable to many Tanzanians, for whom the technology represents their only and in most cases first experience of an Information and Communication Technology (ICT). According to a study carried out by the Centre for Economic Policy Research and Vodafone (Waverman et al, 2005), 97 per cent of people in Tanzania could access a mobile phone in 2005, while only 28 per cent said they could access a landline.

The growing number of people using mobile phones in Africa has led to optimism and speculation regarding its effect on economic and social development. Expectations on mobile phones are high, and in Africa they are considered more than a communication device: they are supposed to save lives by reducing poverty.

Mobile phone access and use in Tanzania

In Tanzania the telecommunications industry was a monopoly until 1993, owned by Tanzania Telecommunications Company Limited (TTCL), a state company managed by the Tanzania Posts and Telecommunications Corporation. Since the liberalization of the sector, the number of mobile phone companies has risen and there are now seven major businesses active in the country.

The speedy uptake of mobile phones by people in Tanzania can be attributed to the limited penetration of fixed phone lines and the introduction of low cost handsets and the prepaid system to overcome the income barrier to mobile ownership and use. Moreover, the installation cost of mobile phone infrastructure is cheap and relatively easy to set up compared to fixed phone lines.

Tanzania's National ICT Policy (2003) set out to mitigate the dangers posed by the digital divide, "and the risk of being excluded further from the knowledge economy and social development". The digital divide is defined, in the policy, as the gap between those able and those unable to participate in the knowledge economy. In the policy, the ICT situation of Tanzania in 2003 was described as requiring "urgent steps to enable Tanzanians to participate meaningfully in the knowledge economy, recognizing that Tanzania has low levels of human capital development, local content creation, ICT infrastructure and access, which together lead to high costs of participation". One of the strategies laid out by the Tanzanian government is that the relationship between the ICT industry and the government needs to be a "partnership for national development instead of being focused on taxes and tenders". A recent example of a partnership between the Tanzanian government and a mobile phone company is the cooperation between the state and the company Zain in the roll out of infrastructure to support the Seacom underwater fiber-optic cable introduced in 2009 to increase bandwidth in Eastern Africa[1]. Since the Tanzanian government had not made the appropriate provisions for the introduction of Seacom, Zain is supporting the government in the rollout of infrastructure and providing administrative support.

Mobile phones and development

Since the 1990s, ICTs have been considered by the UN, bilateral donors and NGOs to be powerful tools that can strengthen the impact of development processes. The African leaders that took

part in the African Union summit in Addis Abeba early in 2010 vowed to step up ICT efforts in order to become part of the knowledge society, firmly positioning technology as a driver of development and social change [1].

Technology is expected to play a substantial role in social change in Africa. Mobile phone services that support sustainable agriculture, channel health initiatives and provide people with financial services are frequently used and improving the everyday life of Tanzanians. However, traditional power structures in terms of ownership and use go unchallenged, as findings from my Master's thesis in Communication for Development (Malmö University, Sweden) regarding the underrepresentation of ownership of mobile phones among rural young women will show.

Some scholars are skeptical towards Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4Ds) and worry that the transfer of new media technology will force developing countries to adapt to the socioeconomic model of the industrialized nations, which will reinforce existing power structures and intensify political and economic dependency. Diane Perrons, Director of the Gender Institute at the London School of Economics, argues that ICTs have led to increasing integration between countries, but since these new technologies have been developed within capitalist social relations of production and unequal gender relations, they therefore build upon, and reinforce existing spatial and social divisions (Perrons, 2004). The adoption of new technologies by developing countries can lead them to a new form of dependency as they become more vulnerable to the increasing complexity of the hardware and software used by the providers of key ICT services (Lovink and Zehle in Pieterse 2005). ICTs can be viewed as a hegemonic force and a new form of imperialism. Skeptics caution that new media technologies can give way to a continuing phase of dependency on Western forms

of technology and ways of organizing social and political life (Mudhai, Tettey and Banda 2009).

The M4D discourse

There are two stories that dominate the M4D narrative. The first one is about the farmer or fisherman who can negotiate better prices for a crop/catch thanks to access to up-to-date market information via SMS. The other one is about the women in Bangladesh who took part in the Village Phone project, set up by the micro-credit provider Grameen Bank in 1997 to provide loans to women in rural areas so that they could afford to buy a mobile phone. The loan covered the subscription and training. The women were supposed to sell airtime to fellow villagers as a way to earn an income. The impact of the project was measured according to its empowerment potential, and is said to have created an army of micro-entrepreneurs and contributed to the empowerment of the so called “phone ladies”.

The project was intended to empower individuals so that they would be able to affect their own situation. The source of income is interpreted as financial independence and is considered to be one of the empowering aspects of this project. The project is said to have led women to speak and negotiate with males outside their family circle -another empowering effect. The entrepreneurialism of the project is said to have instilled pride and confidence amongst the women, who have expressed that they have gained respect from their community and spouses and thus authority.

Mohammed Yunus, the founder of the Grameen Bank (and winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize) considers personal economic growth as inherently empowering, and believes that participating in the market will lead to people having more control over their lives, hence become empowered. The empowerment that is said to emanate from the Village Phone project is founded on a commercial imperative instead of being established from a rights perspective. For me, the Village Phone

project illustrates how incorporated the concept of empowerment has become in development theory, to the point that it has become depoliticized, a buzzword that often goes undefined in literature. In the Village Phone project, the concept of empowerment is understood as women's ability to carry out cash transactions, and fails to address issues of power and the social and political structures that are the root of women's oppression.

Women's oppression is not remedied only by financial independence. In fact, women have little ownership over the Village Phone program. A man founded the program, and since most loan agents are in fact men, one can question to which extent women are effectively able to negotiate the lending terms. As regards the social realities of women, are they able to dispose of their income as they wish, or do they have to hand it over to their spouse or man of the house?

The empowerment narrative in the Grameen Bank's Village Phone project resonates both with the modernization view of development and with the view of alternative development proponents. Debates in the 1970s established that poverty is not merely about lack of income, but a complex and multidimensional phenomenon (Friedman, 1992), and that the poor should take part in the provisioning of their own needs instead of relying on the state to solve their problems. This line of reasoning fits well with the Village Phone project, as it positions poor people as no longer under the guardianship of the state and proposes that they have to take ownership and have a responsibility to participate and engage in the production of their own lives and livelihoods (Friedman, 1992). Microfinance projects such as the Village Phone project equal economic growth with development. However, this is a neo-liberal understanding of development, where capitalism is seen as the natural way to development and the responsibility for development rests upon the individual -in this case, women, a marginalized group in many developing societies. The Village

Phone project links women's empowerment with access to credit and to participation in small-scale productive activities, simplifying not only the concept of empowerment but also the understandings of poverty and gender inequalities. One could say that the Grameen initiative is co-opting women's struggles in rural areas of Bangladesh.

In the M4D discourse, the state is represented as a static entity that is inherently unable to provide basic services to its citizens, and individuals are either entrepreneurs or consumers who should be left to operate within the market. The example of the farmer who is able to increase profit margin by receiving market information via SMS and thus negotiating better prices for a crop is frequently used in M4D discourse to describe the positive aspects of mobile phones in regards to economic growth and poverty alleviation. This simplifies what poverty is. Poverty is not merely about access to money, but has multiple and complex causes which are not necessarily linked to the lack of income. Therefore, poverty reduction strategies cannot focus only on creating economic growth. Mobile phones may indeed help farmers achieve a better price for their crop. However, one cannot assume that this will change their lives as regards e.g. social inclusion, access to health facilities, political visibility or voice.

Empowerment

The concept of empowerment is usually associated with a bottom-up or grass roots approach to development and became prominent in the 1970s and 1980s within the alternative development paradigm. Alternative development is a people-centered approach that emphasizes agency, in the sense of peoples' capacity to effect social change. People should become aware of their situation, start to think critically about their social and political condition, and recognize that they are oppressed due to political authorities and structures. In order to become empowered, a person has to become reflective and realize that deprivation and misery are not natural, but exist due to

structures of exploitation and oppression. Hence, the key to overcoming mass poverty is the social and political empowerment of the poor, which should be prioritized over e.g. access to resources via redistributive mechanisms and subsidies.

For poor people, empowerment is expected to contribute to immediate improvements in their material living standards and expand assets and capabilities to participate, negotiate and influence control, and hold accountable the institutions that affect their lives. In addition, empowerment is supposed to add positively to people's psychological-social well-being, promoting e.g. stronger self-respect, by uncovering internalized norms and feelings of inferiority that have contributed to their oppression. This includes consciousness-raising on e.g. rights and the possibilities for action.

A participatory approach in development communication

Participatory communication sees the involvement of the community as a catalyst for individual and community empowerment (Morris in Hemer and Tufte, 2005), aiming to give voice to those who are most affected by development issues. In communication for development, empowerment is understood to be the outcome of participation, especially in the production of messages. Participatory communication sees the involvement of the community as a catalyst for individual and community empowerment aiming to give voice to those who are most affected by development issues.

Participatory development is conventionally represented as emerging out of the recognition that top-down development approaches (associated with modernization) have failed (Cooke and Uthari, 2001). The participatory model emphasizes local knowledge and participation in development processes, from setting the agenda to the execution and evaluation of projects. It also stresses that needs should be formulated by the community

instead of being imposed by outside agencies. It is supposed to increase local people's influence and decision-making power, and to lead to empowerment and social change. However, according to Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009), there are different levels and degrees to participation: passive participation (one-way dissemination of information); participation by consultation (where stakeholders provide answers to questions posed by researchers); and participation by collaboration (a method that makes use of focus groups of primary stakeholders in the discussion and analysis of predetermined objectives set by a project). The fact that many projects do not define what level of participation they employ can lead to the concept becoming a watered-down buzzword.

The pitfalls of participation

The mainstreaming of the participatory approach in development projects works under the assumption that access to local perspectives leads to a “truer” knowledge. However, local knowledge also reflects and reproduces local power, and there is a danger in participatory approaches conceptualizing communities in homogenous terms (Brohman, 1996) and hence neglecting the inequalities and discrimination that exist within local communities.

In their article “Participatory Development and Empowerment: the Dangers of Localism”, Giles Mohan and Kristian Stokke (2000) write that there is a tendency to essentialize and romanticize ‘the local’, downplaying local social inequalities and power relations. There is also a tendency to view ‘the local’ in isolation from broader economic and political structures. Mohan and Stokke argue that the contextuality of place, and of national and transnational economic and political forces, is underestimated. The focus on the micro-level and on people who are considered powerless and marginal in the participatory approach has reproduced the simplistic notion that the sites of social power and control are to be found only at the macro and central levels (Kothari in Cooke and Uthari, 2001), pitching the

‘poor’ against some unspecified elite whose only defining feature is their non-poorness (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). Power hierarchies do not only reside with far away elites, but also within communities. Kothari warns that participatory discourse produces dichotomies of power -macro/micro, central/local, powerful/powerless- and can encourage a reassertion of control and power by dominant individuals and groups that can lead to the reification of social norms through self-surveillance and consensus building. Knowledge should therefore be looked at relationally, i.e. as a product of social relationships and not as fixed commodity (Cooke and Uthari, 2001).

Mobile phones among Tanzanian youth: the study

In February 2010, at a youth conference held in Dar es Salaam, I conducted three in-depth group interviews, and one quantitative survey, which was completed by 97 young people: female and male interviewees, from urban and rural areas. My findings show a snapshot of the access and use of mobile phones amongst Tanzanian youth.

As a result of the survey and group discussions, I have come to understand that young people in Tanzania mainly use their mobile phones to make voice calls and to send and receive text messages. Hardly anyone uses the mobile phone to go online. Two main purposes for having a mobile phone crystallized from the group interviews. The first purpose was entertainment or pleasure in the social sense, enabling youths to chat to- and arrange meetings with friends. The second was to be reachable, for example to potential employers. Being reachable was emphasized during the group discussions as very important in order to get a job.

Amongst those who participated in the youth conference - organized by Femina HIP, a multimedia-oriented Civil Society Organization based in Tanzania-, 72 young people out of 97

answered the first question on access and ownership of mobile phones. 64% answered that they had their own mobile phone. More males than females had their own phone, 74% compared to 49%. The group that had the lowest percentage of ownership was young women living in rural areas. Amongst them, only 32% had their own mobile phone compared to the young women in urban areas, where ownership was 87%. Even though these results do not tell us why the ownership amongst rural females is lower, they are of interest for anyone wishing to communicate with young women in rural areas via mobile phone technology. When designing a communication strategy that involves SMS and mobile phone technology, there is a risk that most young women that live in rural areas in Tanzania will be left out of the conversation.

For many of the respondents the mobile phone played a significant function in their life. Most of the respondents had not had access to a telephone prior to having a mobile phone. The mobile phone has made it easier to coordinate daily life, maintain social relationships and extend social networks. “Cold calling” is an example of a way for Tanzanian youth to get in touch with new people. The majority of the people in the group discussions had come into contact with cold callers, i.e. a person who dials a random number in order to chat, flirt or make new friends. One interviewee had even met up with a cold caller - however, this form of extending one’s personal network seemed to be frowned upon as being untrustworthy and time-consuming.

The design of the phone was given as much importance as functional aspects, such as e.g. battery time. Personalization of the phone, e.g. retrieving accessories such as screen savers and ring tones, did not seem popular. While in many countries mobile phone accessories have become a lucrative business and a way for young people to express their identity, this did not seem to be very popular in Tanzania. But the mobile phone was seen as a highly personal device, and for many, as an extension of the self. One person said to “feel naked without my phone”,

and everybody in the group discussions said that they never leave their homes without it. Turning it off only happens occasionally, e.g. during an exam. Otherwise, it is constantly switched on, even during class and when sleeping. The most used features are the calendar, texting and listening to music.

In the future, the respondents foresee that mobile phones will become more integrated into Tanzanian society, even in rural areas. They predict that the mobile phone will make life easier for people, as it will simplify communication. Some said that that they would like to see mobile technology enhance or even replace some government services. One example discussed was that the government information currently sent via post could be sent via SMS.

In regards to Internet use, no one uses their phone to go online. Instead, they use computers at school, university or Internet cafés. However, all respondents thought that this would change in the future, as prices for surfing the web on the mobile decrease. The issue of having adequate handsets and the knowledge of what to do once online was raised for discussion. As technologies become more advanced, a person will need more skills in order to learn how to make use of technology. One person played with the idea that in the future there might be courses at school on how to manage one's mobile phone.

The majority had more than one SIM card, which makes it cheaper to communicate with people who are on different networks, and possible to receive information from different networks. Many of the people I talked to had multiple handsets in order to enable them to operate more than one SIM card at the time. All respondents were on pre-pay; no one was on a contract.

As the first ICT in Tanzania to which they have access, the mobile phone is presenting young people with new and exciting ways in which they can communicate. The social impact of

mobile phones is expected to grow in the years to come, as mobile phone penetration is predicted to increase. Social relationships are easier to maintain and personal networks can be extended.

The stories that are buzzing around in the development community are of a mobile phone revolution sweeping across the African continent. Classifying the changes brought about by the use of mobile phones as a mobile phone *revolution* connotes a radical change that will fundamentally alter the existing social, political and economic system and put in place a new social order. Expectations are fuelled and reproduced by sensationalist headlines in the media, such as *The mobile revolution sweeps across Africa* (BBC World Service, 2007-08-22), *Cell phones the latest tool in Africa's fight against HIV* (Mail & Guradian, 2010-03-08) or *Preparing for a mobile phone uprising in Africa* (The Guardian 07-02-2010) which are shaping the discourse on mobile phones for development (M4D).

Can mobile phones be used to promote social change?

Since the 1990s, ICTs have been considered powerful tools that can strengthen the impact of development processes. As mentioned above, African leaders recently vowed to step up ICT efforts in order to become part of the knowledge society, reaffirming the perspective that technology drives social change.

Technology has historically played a substantial role in social change, and it is now expected to do so in Africa. The M4D discourse is to a certain extent ascribing mobile phones with causal power. In Africa, mobile phones are said to be combating poverty whilst fighting HIV/AIDS. However, technology in itself does not lead to social change; it is the persons who use it that determine how it can be used in order to promote social change. For activists and citizen journalists, the mobile phone

has provided new opportunities to access and spread information quickly. However, traditional power structures still manifest themselves in terms of use and ownership, as seen in the underrepresentation of rural young women in mobile phone ownership and use found in my study.

The mobile phone is the most accessible and affordable ICT to Tanzanians today. In some places, it is the first modern telecommunication infrastructure, and it is undeniably putting communicative power into the hands of individuals. However, the buzz around mobile phones in the development context is extremely one-sided. Recycling, or the exploitive and hazardous working conditions for those who extract the cobalt that is used in mobile phone batteries, are rarely mentioned. According to the SOMO (Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations) coordinated European project MakeITfair, which focuses on the electronics industry, around 50.000 children work in one of the cobalt mines in Katanga, in the Democratic Republic of Congo a dangerous job with many fatal accidents. According to the 2007 MakeITFair Report “Powering the Mobile World”, the children that work in the mines often do so without protective gear, inhaling mineral dust that might damage their lungs and irritate their eyes.

ICTs can be powerful tools for sharing information, expressing opinions and giving voice. However, they cannot solve development problems that are caused by underlying social, economic and political issues. Popular democratic structures are needed that can translate decisions from below into needed changes in macro-policy.

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[1] See <http://www.africa-union.org/root/AU/Conferences/2010/january/summit/14thsummit.html>