Chapter 11
Exploring the ICT Capabilities of Civil Society in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Zambian Case

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ABSTRACT
Civil society is argued to have been the most significant force of many forces that eradicated entrenched authoritarianism in Africa, in the early 1990s, ushering most of these countries to multi-party democracies. And yet after such accomplishment, many of these new democracies have receded to undemocratic practices. With weak economies, civil society faces many challenges in resource mobilization and in mobilizing the masses for national causes. Information communication technologies, or ICTs, are increasingly being seen as an aid to the mobilization and organization challenges of civil society. However, advanced ICT capabilities are mostly in developed countries where civil society is already strong. Using e-governance as a proxy measure for ICT capabilities for civil society, this chapter conducts an exploratory study using secondary baseline data collected by international institutions on Sub-Saharan Countries. The relationship between ICT capabilities and the several civil society development indicators (press freedom, civil liberties, and various other variables) is investigated. Later, the Nation of Zambia (a country with moderate ICT capabilities in the region) is used for a qualitative case study to explore how ICT capabilities and various contextual issues influence ICT applications by civil society organizations to enhance operational capabilities such as collaboration and mobilization efforts.

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INTRODUCTION

Civil society is argued to have been the most significant force of many forces that eradicated entrenched authoritarianism in Africa, in the early 1990s, ushering most of these countries to multi-party democracies. While other additional factors on the international scene, e.g. the demise of communism and pressure from foreign donors also deserve credit, the resourcefulness and tenacity of civil society is credited for beginning and carrying on the transition process (Gyimah-Boadi, 1996). Africa’s civil society is a collage of several institutions and organizations, namely the church and ecumenical bodies, trade-unions, student union bodies, and non-governmental bodies among others. Gyima-Boyadi argues that having accomplished the pivotal role of democratization, civil society is facing the problem of consolidation, with its ability to strengthen democratic governance remarkably weak.

Some of the challenges that civil society faces are found in the governance practices of incumbent governments, where control over police forces for instance, enables them to crush dissenting views, while the control over the media and lack of press freedom controls the information that the masses get. Sub Saharan Africa is plagued by both the challenges of poor quality of political institutions and poorly performing economies. Most remarkable is that most of these nations are emerging democracies with immature institutions that are vulnerable to political manipulation and corruption. What is particularly intriguing is the re-emergence and persistence of undemocratic and authoritarian practices in some of Africa’s nascent democracies, after the democratic wave of the 1990s, which have gradually weakened civil society’s influence and autonomy as the fourth arm of government. This has often made civil society susceptible to cooptation traps by the state. Such susceptibility to corrupt government is more a reality given that most civil society organizations face contextual bottlenecks, such as lack of resources due to poor economies. As a result civil society’s ability to collaborate and mobilize support for social causes and action is seriously compromised under such circumstances. ICTs and internet based mobilization and social networking technology are increasingly being viewed as a potential shot in the arm of civil society, since challenges arising from authoritarian undemocratic tendencies (such as low democratic participation, a curtailing of the freedom of expression and the crushing political dissent), can be tackled by exploiting the benefits of ICTs in the public space. This is mainly because governments are generally perceived to have significantly limited control over ICTs. Hence civil society is able to circumvent reclusive regimes and their repressive information control, and is able to mobilize support for societal causes and sensitize the citizens on various issues and mobilize the masses for social action against undemocratic state practices. In this regard, ICTs present hope for these struggling democracies, which are characterized in part by low political participation and voter apathy, to increase participation and transparency by engaging citizens via cyber space and communication technology.

The objective of this chapter is to explore how ICT capabilities impact indicators of civil society development in Sub Saharan Africa. To measure ICT capabilities, the UN eGovernance readiness index is used because it captures both infrastructural and participation components, both of which are crucial elements for civil society development indicators. A statistical analysis of the relationship between measurement of eGovernance Readiness, press freedom, political freedom, good governance, and various other indicators for the development of civil society are conducted at the regional level. Using the case study of Zambia the study proceeds to investigate using a qualitative study how context and ICT capabilities lead civil society organizations in the region to apply ICTs to enhance inter-organizational collaboration, achieve intra organizational efficiency and
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