

Workshop report

Mobile phones: the new talking drums of everyday Africa?

Workshop 9-10 December, 2010

The phone is indispensable, yet it is not available for everybody.

The telephone is very good apparatus, letter writing has gone ... I have not written a letter for three or four years...

There was a time that I could spend my money on the phone, I could spend 5,000 francs a day on the phone...

The phone has brought a lot of evil, because stealing is very rampant, you can come out of the bank and pocket money there and somebody sees you and sees how well dressed you are and phones a thief to pull out that man and pull the devil out of him, and collect all the money.

In the film *Connecting dreams* a retired teacher from Babungo, Western Cameroon commented on the mobile phone with mixed feelings. Positive about the possibilities for contact, he also stressed the potentially disruptive uses of the mobile phone.

The film was made in the framework of the WOTRO program: 'Mobile Africa revisited' by the African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands and it was presented during the workshop entitled 'Mobile phone: the new talking drums of every Africa' as part of the same program. In the workshop people from various sectors met to discuss the relationship between ICT and African societies. We especially focused on the mobile phone in relation to issues of 'development'. The workshop was attended by representatives from academia (Social Sciences, Humanities, Applied Technology), development organizations, the business sector and the media.

The aim was to exchange experiences and to present the various ways in which these sectors are involved in new ICT and development.

Several questions helped us to focus our exchange:

- Whose development is involved?
- By who are new ICT appropriated?
- In what ways are local hierarchies reinforced through new ICTs or new hierarchies created?
- Are new ICTs used in politically repressive systems?
- Do new ICTs function in unequal global socio-economic relations?
- How does access to ICT interfere with societies that are increasingly spread over the world (migrant communities, etc)?

It soon turned out however, that, before anything else, we needed to discuss the terms of debate. In the various sectors, the ideas about how to 'deal with development' are different: in the Social Sciences an attempt is made to study matters, in the Applied Sciences researchers are geared toward problem-solving, in development organisations 'intervention' is a key concept, while in business oftentimes a *laissez-faire* approach in which 'people vote with their wallets' is taken. These conflicting approaches led to intensive, but fruitful debate. On the

first day the programme was rather tight, but fortunately there was more room for debate on the second day.

A striking issue was the extreme diversity with which the mobile phone is put to use in Africa. Apart from personal conversations, we heard of mobile banking, journalist reports, activist messaging campaigns, applications related to peace and reconciliation, etc. Obviously these uses go way beyond designers' intentions when the mobile phone was invented. This points not only to creative processes of appropriation by African end-users, but also to the fact that companies, organisations and institutes – local as well international – are exploring the potentials of the mobile phone.

It was clear that most workshop participants viewed the mobile phone ICT in relation with a range of other ICT - old and new. Often Internet was mentioned, but also other means of transport and communication: television, radio, etc. In most presentations there was a concern with politics: obviously the state and politics at a more local level play a huge role in patterns of access and usage. Taxation regimes, state regulatory bodies can be thought of, but also ICT being used by resistance movements, for opposition campaigns, for critical media reports, for political commentary in the form of rumours, jokes and stories.

All people present at the workshop agreed that in the end people, not technologies, are the agents of social change. Technologies can facilitate events and may be used by people who seek to change matters. Yet, technologies can also reinforce existing hierarchies and lead to sharper gaps in political and economic sense. During the workshop we heard examples of both instances, related to social status, gender and generation. As indicated it became clear that some of the participating organisations aimed at facilitating – or even steering – social change, while others did not view this as their task.

Not all were equally optimistic about the possibilities to arrive at a more equal and more democratic society through new ICT. Yet, most of the participants did not view ICT as intrinsically bad: most of those present viewed the increased means to communicate because of the introduction of the mobile phone as something valuable. This coincides with the views of many African end-users; most of them stress that the mobile phone has given more opportunities to exchange family news, to organise trade, to arrange meetings, to get important information in the realm of politics and economy, etc. Reference is also made to disadvantages – such as the lack of privacy, the financial aspects, the risks of addiction, moral issues, etc. It is perhaps noteworthy that 'politics' in the broadest sense of the word, did not feature strongly in end-users' evaluations, while during the workshop much emphasis was placed on political issues.

During the workshop, we discussed the relations between journalism, political activism, business concerns and NGO activities, and academic research. A crucial achievement of the workshop was the exchange in itself: the participants viewed the workshop as a step in a process, pointing in a direction of more intensive cooperation.