



NEPAD and the Digital Divide: The Case of Botswana and the Silent Marginalised Minorities

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of whether the New Partnership for Africa development (NEPAD) through its e-Africa Commission and its Science and Technology agenda for ICT provides for new possibilities for Africa's marginalised indigenous minorities to engage meaningfully with development processes. It questions whether NEPAD recognises the power of ICT beyond providing access to information, particularly its potential as a resource for the oppressed to wage their battles for self-determination, and willing to go beyond questions of access, and address the politics of power and the Internet and other ICT. Is there likelihood in Africa, for ICTs to become new sites of resistance and oppression? The paper suggests that there is already evidence that for marginalised ethnic minorities such as the Basarwa, the San peoples of Botswana, this new forum and the Internet in particular will be yet another tool to mute their voices.

Résumé

Cette contribution pose la question de savoir si le Nouveau partenariat pour le développement de l'Afrique (NEPAD), à travers sa Commission e-Afrique et son programme de sciences et technologies pour les TIC, pourrait offrir de nouvelles possibilités aux minorités indigènes africaines marginalisées, qui leur permettraient de s'impliquer activement dans le processus de développement. L'auteur y pose la question de savoir si le NEPAD reconnaît le pouvoir des TIC au-delà du simple accès à l'information, particulièrement leur potentiel à servir de ressources aux opprimés, en leur permettant de mener un combat pour l'autodétermination; la question consiste également à savoir si le NEPAD est prêt à aller au-delà de la question de l'accès, et à aborder la question du pouvoir et de l'Internet, ainsi que l'accès à d'autres TIC. Est-il possible qu'en Afrique les TIC deviennent de nouveaux centres de résistance et d'oppression? Cette présentation laisse penser qu'il est bien évident que pour les minorités ethniques marginalisées, telles que les Basarwa et les San du Botswana, ce nouveau forum et l'Internet en particulier, ne seront qu'un nouvel outil de plus destiné à taire les voix des masses.

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Introduction

Using the example of an on-going land use dispute between the Botswana government and the indigenous minorities group, Survival International (SI), largely fought through the Internet, I explore challenges facing the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) on its agenda to improve access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Using Internet, the London-based Survival International for Indigenous Minorities was able to stage a powerful campaign and solicit international support to force the Botswana government to slow down and justify the relocation of the Basarwa, the San peoples in the country from a nature reserve to 'development facilities', outside the reserve. SI turned the hitherto unknown and weak resistance of some Basarwa to prevent the government of Botswana taking over the Central Kgalagadi Game Reserve (CKGR) into by far Botswana's most sensitive issue. With the help of communities beyond Botswana's borders, Basarwa, have been able to take the government to court with very good legal representation in a case in which the Botswana government is dispossessing them of special land use rights in the CKGR they have enjoyed since 1961. The digital divide makes it easier for Western activists to use the Internet to pressurise African governments to rethink development policies while the oppressed themselves are unable to participate in their own struggles. Is the situation in Botswana, in which ICT allowed Survival International and the Botswana government to speak over the heads of Basarwa, a signal that African ethnic minorities will become further marginalised in the flow of information, the policies of their own states being challenged more by citizens beyond their borders than themselves?

Furthermore, Information and Communication Technology presents new opportunities to link Africa's oppressed to more powerful Western citizens that can better challenge oppressive policies made by African governments in the name of development. At the same time this creates new strains on autonomous African development that NEPAD seeks to promote, especially given the already weak nature of African states against Western capital's other forms of control.

NEPAD, empowerment and ICT

'How we ensure that ICT is engaged to reduce poverty and prevent technical know-how from becoming a tool of oppression and further colonization of the improved people of Africa is of paramount importance to the development community'.

Dr. Nii Narku Quaynor,
e-Africa Programme Commissioner, Internet and Software Development, 2003

'perhaps the most important aspect of the Internet [is] eliminating space and time giv[ing] us an unprecedented means of overcoming two of the root causes of extreme poverty-ignorance and isolation'.

Mark Malloch Brown,
Administrator, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2000

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is one of the latest buzzwords in the development jargon. It has fast become a key area for development actors such as the UNDP. It is quickly catching up with, and cross-pollinating with other topical development concerns such as 'Democratic Governance', 'Poverty Reduction', 'Crisis Prevention and Recovery', 'Energy and Environment', 'HIV/AIDS', 'Capacity Development', and 'Gender in Development'. ICT is expected to contribute towards faster delivery in a variety of sectors and strengthen participatory approaches to development. It is expected to allow for the involvement of more people, accomplish a deeper geographic penetration for hitherto unreached or underserved especially to rural areas, than is the case with traditional means and modalities. ICT's power is perceived as lying in its ability to transcend borders, languages and cultures, foster empowerment of communities, women, youth and socially disadvantaged groups. In this regard, ICT is indispensable to realise the global information society and the global knowledge society (UNDP Information Technologies (IT) for Development Programme, 2000).

The New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) too has jumped into the bandwagon about ICT. It has set up an e-Africa Commission task team responsible for 'developing policies and strategies and projects at the continental level as well as managing the structured development of the ICT sector in the context of NEPAD'. It is chaired by Alpha Oumar Konare, former president of Mali. Through the e-Africa Commission, NEPAD endeavours to 'Promote the e-Africa initiative to citizens, civil society, corporations and government of Africa and create avenues for their participation' (Chetty 2003).

The May 2002 NEPAD draft Executive Summary Short Term Plan counts infrastructural development of ICT, along with energy, water and transport as priority in the short term. ICT is expected to strengthen and be the foundation of all other integration programmes for the African Union. With regard to ICT, NEPAD intends to speed up the process of sub-regional and regional connectivity and interconnectivity (2002:8). This will be spearheaded by the e-Africa Commission, whose core objectives are 'accelerating the development of African inter-country, intra-country and global connectivity, and; promoting conditions for Africa to be an equal and active participant in the

Global Information Society'. NEPAD envisages a new area where Africans can aggressively make their mark and become leaders in the ICT industry.

Among its proponents, NEPAD is by far one of the most important mission statements Africa has ever committed itself to. It envisions an Africa free of wars, malnutrition, political instability, negative imaging and respect for human rights. To this end, NEPAD will strengthen, not only the continent as a whole to face global capital as a united front, but each of the member states of the African Union which have been characterised as weak. For marginalised indigenous minorities within many nation-states, the 'weak' state that NEPAD and even its critics lament and seek to strengthen, weak as it may be against global capital is, however, too powerful for them to carve out their own perceptions about development and rights. Is enough care being taken to ensure that empowering the admittedly weak African state for competition in the global economic arena does not happen to enable oppressive and autocratic governments to use ICT to further oppress their weak?

To its critics, including some African academics, it is worse than the Lagos Plan of Action. A gender analysis of NEPAD reflects that its macro-economic framework serves the interests of the market at the expense of the dispossessed, especially women and children (Randrianomaro 2002). There has also been scepticism regarding the endogenous-ness of NEPAD, with critics arguing that it is a baby of the West. Its Neo-Liberal stance at best champions the needs of a burgeoning African capitalist at the expense of many poor Africans in the same way as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) champions the needs of global capital at the expense of the Third World. At the 2002 Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) Third World Network conference on the NEPAD entitled 'Africa and the Development Challenges of the Millennium', held in Accra, Ghana, it came out clearly that NEPAD is not for the poorest of the African continent.

NEPAD, ICT and representation of indigenous minorities

Francis Nyamnjoh (2004) notes the tendency that is growing not only in Botswana but a major characteristic of Africa's second liberation struggles since the 1980s, of a growing obsession with belonging and the questioning of traditional assumptions about nationality and citizenship almost everywhere. Identity politics and more exclusionary ideas of nationality and citizenship are becoming more important, as minority claims for greater cultural recognition and plurality are countered by majoritarian efforts to maintain the status quo of an inherited colonial hierarchy of ethnic groupings. As minorities intensify their struggle for recognition and representation, this is countered by greater and sometimes aggressive reaffirmation of age-old exclusions informed by colonial registers of inequalities amongst the subjected.

This was the case in the matter where the government of Botswana has discontinued provision of services inside a reserve that was gazetted for the use of Basarwa in 1961, with recognition of their unique relationship to land and other natural resources. Basarwa have been provided with what the government is convinced are better development facilities outside the nature reserve. However, as they follow 'development' outside the reserve, Basarwa in exchange are being asked to give up for good, their group rights to the reserve, which they have enjoyed until 1991, although the constitution does not recognise such land ownership.

Although Botswana ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) convention no. 169, at the March 2004 CIVICUS Summit, President Mogae totally rejected the concept of indigenous minorities, saying, 'Like our brothers and sisters elsewhere in this region, we shall also continue to reject the old colonial apartheid myth that insists that some black communities are more indigenous than others'. The ILO Convention recognises the Basarwa as members of the category of communities variously known as 'tribal peoples', 'first peoples', 'indigenous peoples', or 'marginalised minorities'. It recognises their aspiration towards self-control, control over the maintenance and development of their identities, language and religion, and the responsibility of governments to work together with the peoples to protect and guarantee their rights, especially with regard to land (Saugestad 2001:44). Advocacy groups such as Survival International have battled with little success with the government to acknowledge groups rights as one of the distinguishing features of land use practices among indigenous minorities.

In one of his boldest statements speaking at the opening of a biennial world assembly of CIVICUS, an umbrella body of civic organisations, in the capital Gaborone in March 2004, Botswana President, Festus Mogae, stated that 'rural poverty, no matter how romanticised, is a condition, not a culture' (IRINnews.org, 2004). By so saying, Mogae reduced the cultural expression of the Basarwa as merely an expression of poverty. Unfortunately, the government's campaign to blur the distinction between Basarwa's undeniable poverty and their ways of expressing their unique identity has almost been successful. Their land claim in the CKGR receives very little support within the country, with not a single civil society organisation fully supporting their cause.

With specific reference to the interface between citizens and ICT, the Commission aims to 'promote the e-Africa initiative to citizens, civil society, corporations and governments of Africa and create avenues for their participation (2003)'. Dr. Nii Narku Quaynor, the e-Africa Programme Commissioner for Internet and Software Development's powerful remarks

that ICT should be prevented from becoming another tool of colonisation of the oppressed people, are an important starting point. These remarks are premised on the fact that most poor Africans enjoy access to ICT that is far below what ordinary citizens in the West enjoy. NEPAD addresses the economic gap between Africa and the West. While this is an important undertaking, there is also need to acknowledge that the digital divide is more than a West vs. South condition. ICT must also protect the oppressed people from their own governments, not only from external oppression such as global capital. Information technologies must enable the oppressed to reverse not only gender discrimination, but also differential access to resources based on ethnic hierarchies crafted during colonialism and legitimised by post-independence constitutions.

Basarwa are the most prominently featured tribal group in Botswana on the Internet. They are probably the most researched, especially in terms of their cultural diversity and human right abuses, and are probably, together with HIV/AIDS, the most currently heard about entities in Botswana across the world. Can Basarwa, under the NEPAD, tap into the power of technology to fight their struggles? Are they condemned to at the very best, read what is on the net, without ever confronting development and its actors using this resource? Lack of access to ICT among Basarwa prevented many of them from being a part of the cyberspace battle over their rights.

A major challenge to the Basarwa becoming soul brothers with other tribal groups and advocates from outside the indigenous minority is the unequal access to ICT. While their advocates, Survival International have better access to information regarding the Basarwa and political struggles of other tribal peoples around the world, the Basarwa themselves are limited by their illiteracy and thus cannot fully exploit this resource. Between oppressive governments, domineering insider and outsider activists, and tugs of war between those with power, the voices of Basarwa in the new spaces created by ICT remain muted. Merely increasing access to ICT and extending it to all is not likely to be the only challenge. ICT is a power tool and therefore cannot escape the politics of power and access that characterise the nations that seek to acquire it. ICT is likely to be co-opted into the realities of differential access to resources in Africa, outside the obvious North - South imbalances.

The new solidarities that ICT brings Basarwa into, with others outside the national borders has in itself brought challenges about the legitimacy of such alliances. Within the borders of Botswana, the government has succeeded in using the outside intervention to bring to disrepute, the local Basarwa involved such as Roy Sesana. Roy Sesana, a veteran activist on the matter has come to be perceived in many quarters in the country as a sell out who

while enjoying the fruits of modernity, is being bribed by outsiders to prevent development reaching his people so they remain tourist attractions. Both the state and its 'citizens' label this 'beyond borders' support as 'undue external influence' by outsider activists. The 'patriotic' citizens of Botswana are therefore called at this particular moment, by the government to disassociate themselves with the Basarwa that are taking the government to task and the 'nosey' and 'misguided' foreigners from the West that want to deny the poorest of our peoples 'development'.

As the power of ICT, such as Internet, as a cheap but effective weapon becomes increasingly recognised by those with power such as governments, and non-governmental organisations, there are real chances that the weak may become subjected to not only lack of access, but even restricted education on where its power lies. Basarwa need more than access to information technology; ICT must represent, especially for the hitherto subjugated groups, new and more effective platforms for fighting their battles and to access spatially distance resources beyond their immediate borders.

NEPAD, in the same way that the Botswana government does, emphasises the poverty of indigenous minorities over the politics of power and patronage that defines the link between access to resources and ethnic membership in Africa. The Botswana government, like NEPAD, does not address the question of why some ethnic groups are more vulnerable to poverty than others. Their poverty becomes their identity, its alleviation their trap. The reality that Basarwa are a subjugated ethnic minority, discriminated against and politically, economically and culturally dominated by the majority (Saugestad 2001) is trivialised by government as simply a question of poverty. Under the pretext of 'alleviating them from poverty', the government uses 'development policies' to disarm marginalised minorities from making their claims for equality. That their poverty is as a result of being robbed of cultural expression is conveniently forgotten.

NEPAD is silent on the new politics of power that ICT will present. With far reaching implications, NEPAD seems oblivious to the citizen - subject relations within nation states. It does not problematize the dynamics of inequality that characterise the categories of civil society and citizens as is the legacy of late colonialism in Africa. In what may be characterised as both a post-colonial and post-independence condition, ethnicity has become a major aspect in the negotiation of 'development', subjecthood and citizenship in contemporary Africa.

NEPAD, ICT and 'autonomous African alternatives'

The e-Africa Commission endeavours to turn around the condition where Africans are relegated to always being followers of the West, so they exploit

their strong heritage of cultural diversity to unleash local information technology inventions and solutions. 'Cultural diversity' is presented in the language similar to that used for strategic plans that are currently in fashion, as an opportunity rather than a challenge as strategic plans often do. The fact that such cultural diversity in Africa is often a site of ethnic tensions is glossed over. Some cultural forms in this diversity are often denied expression by others, indigenous minorities in particular.

ICT brings new dimensions on the notion of accountability. When the Basarwa against the relocation exercise could not on their own bring the government to take them seriously, Internet enabled 'others' in solidarity with their cause to launch a more powerful campaign against the government, without the constraints of borders. ICT has 'reduced the cost of and increased the speed of communications across the globe, abolishing pre-existing barriers of time and space, and affecting all areas of social and economic life'. For minority groups all over the world, this has created unprecedented possibilities of forging brotherhoods with others at distances hitherto unimaginable. Internet brings together previously disparate communities together, which they can mobilise for resistance 'against a broader society which attempted to homogenize their unique difference'. The government of Botswana's position is that the Basarwa should not be treated any differently from other citizens who have been resettled before.

There is no strong challenge locally against Botswana government policy to relocate Basarwa from the Central Kgalagadi Game Reserve (CKGR), as the reserve became restricted to game by the Wildlife Conservation and National Parks Act No. 28 of 1992. Communities of activists, mainly from the West, are the main combatants in the Basarwa land struggle on Internet. They send out sometimes factually incorrect communiqués around the world to challenge the Botswana government's position that development has everything to do with the relocation exercise. Survival International, in particular published quite extensively mainly on the Internet, to very wide audiences about the relocation exercise. Some of the very powerful headlines include 'The Bushmen peoples: The hidden face of racism today', 'Last Kalahari Bushmen tortured and facing starvation', 'Botswana Ignores Kalahari "Bushman" land ownership', 'Botswana squeezes Kalahari peoples out', and 'Botswana: Bushmen persecuted to drive them off their land' (<http://www.survival-international.org/about.htm>). ICT has opened up otherwise 'private' matters to 'outside' audiences, thus increasing the checks and balances on domestic policies. Being a marginalised ethnic group, the government of Botswana almost succeeded in resettling the Basarwa without much resistance even as some of them were protesting. ICT enabled this information

to reach hitherto cut-off audiences, who in turn put up the fight, taking on the role of advocacy for Basarwa.

The Botswana government has quickly come to appreciate this power of Internet as not just a gimmick for the 'techno enthusiasts'. Even as it has proceeded to effect the relocation with increased vigour, the government has not been able to ignore Survival International's Internet campaign. It has in fact now taken to using the Internet to lodge its counter attack, setting up a hyperlink from its official website entitled 'The Relocation of Basarwa', in which it provides the 'facts' about the relocation to defend itself from attacks from the likes of Survival International.

Interestingly, while at once challenging Survival International's involvement into an 'internal' or domestic issue, the Botswana government felt the pressure to justify its actions to the same 'outsiders'. It utilised the most compelling feature of Internet, its disrespect for borders, to its own advantage, seeking to persuade other global citizens that Survival International's allegations were wrong. The Government was not so naïve as to ignore the power of the 'outsider' citizen who at times actually enjoys greater civic rights than the 'local' citizen. Locally it used the media it owns to reaffirm its 'autonomy', and its 'sovereignty', to its peoples, and to prove that it does not succumb to 'undue external interference', and proceeded with the relocation with even greater determination.

The continuing power of Survival International, a Western agency, to bring the Botswana government to justify at ever increasing forums, its decision to relocate Basarwa shows the strain on the concept of autonomy in the age of ICT. NEPAD has to address how African states can balance the imperatives of autonomous African alternatives as well as accommodate the fluid nature of identities and solidarities within globalising contexts.

Conclusion

It is not yet clear what the potential for ICT is at the moment, considering the high levels of illiteracy in information technology. Yet we are given the impression that it is one of the important highways to the future. There is concern even as we celebrate and embrace its promises. As Steve Cisler (1997) has warned:

When technologies are introduced into a culture, the changes can be abrupt, profound, jarring, subtle. The effects can be felt even if the culture is not making use of the technology itself, as with the railroad and the airplane which lessened the isolation of some cultures without their having any

control over the consequences. Rarely can we predict how a technology will be used, how it will spread, and what the long term effects will be.

The interactive capacity of ICT and its distributed character change the contours of social and political discourse. The ability of grassroots voices to impact in a collected and cumulative fashion on the key policy agencies is not dependent on the consent of the policy agencies: sites which shadow the performance of the policy agencies are easily constructed and local messages are readily transformed into global impulses. The development agencies can of course enhance grassroots' abilities to communicate by resourcing such communication but the ability to close down local and authentic messages of criticism by a rich and powerful agency has been severely curtailed (Grieco and Holmes 1999).

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