

WHERE DO BROKEN RIGHTS GO?

A View from the Global South
on Techno-Solutionism

Defining Techno-Solutionism

- Techno-Solutionism refers to the belief that every problem has a solution based in technology
- Rooted in primarily in the financial and perceived material success of using the Internet to solve communications challenges
- Narrative driven primarily by the developers of the technology and connected to the profit motive
- An approach that often ignores society and politics to focus on the technical aspects of the new technology. Underlying principle: more tech is always good.

The Curious Case of Kenya

- Early adoption and rapid uptake of Internet driven technology
- Highly educated and outward facing society – well connected to latest developments
- For better or worse, easily accessible to outsiders for piloting new initiatives and approaches
- In the first 5 years of tech, government policy was an enabler of tech uptake. In the last 10 years government has been an obstacle
- Result: The society becomes a petri dish for almost unchecked experimentation, often of the worst kind

Why Kenya: A Digital Profile

USER GROUPS	NUMBER OF USERS
Kenya Population	48,460,000
People who access the internet	25,683,800
People who access the internet daily	18,899,400
People who use a smartphone	20,837,800
People who use a computer	10,176,600
People who use a tablet	3,392,200
People who use one screen - a computer, smartphone or tablet	16,476,400
People who use two screens - two of computer, smartphone or tablet	5,815,200
People who use three screens - computer, smartphone and tablet	1,938,400
People who access the internet at least as often via smartphone as computer	31,014,400
Average number of connected devices per person	533,060

- 25,683,800 million people who access the internet
- 20,837,800 who use a smartphone
- 18,899,400 million people who access the internet daily

What the Internet Promised, What it Actually Gave

- High Internet Penetration
- High Mobile Money Penetration
- Connection between tech and politics is stark
- Great example of everything that can go right, and everything that can go wrong

SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORK	PLATFORM MONTHLY USERS
Whatsapp	12 million
Facebook	7.1 million
YouTube	8 million
Instagram	4 million
LinkedIn	1 million
Twitter	1 million
Snapchat	0.25 million

1. Identity Systems

- Complete embrace of digital governance in 2013 with the incoming administration making the Internet a pillar of their development strategy
- Digitisation of tax collection (iTax), government procurement (IFMIS), licensing and registration of vehicles (TIMS), identity systems generally (e-Citizen)
- Promotion of digital identities with financing and support from international organisations under the rubric of “good ID”

The Huduma Namba

- Nationwide digital identity initiative launched in February 2019. Everyone residing in Kenya and over the age of 6 in 2019 obligated to register. Many registered at embassies abroad
- The promise: streamlining identity systems would enhance government service provision
- The reality: poorly thought out, irregularly rolled out, does not address the underlying politics of discrimination that shape previously existing systems
- Characterised by threats, intimidation and unconstitutional proclamations, and widespread resistance
- Poorly implemented, lack of public awareness.

2. Electoral Systems

- 2007-08 post election violence – worst outbreak of citizen driven violence since independence. 1500 killed, over 100K displaced
- Peacemaking settlement included commissions of inquiry, one of which identified low trust in elections as a reason why people resorted to violence. Proposed technology as a solution to trust deficit
- 2013 – first, partial digital election. 2017 – first fully digital election

The Farce of 2017

- 2017 election – BVR, EVID, RTS and other internet based systems implemented.
- The promise: introducing technology to the electoral system would address the trust deficit that people have in elections and reduce prospect of violence
- The reality: technology only made the processes more opaque and when they were challenged in court it was clear that even those who had an oversight role did not fully implement them
- The death of Chris Msando

3. Money

- Early adoption of mobile money – Kenya is the world leader in use of mobile money (Bangladesh has more accounts, but Kenya conducts more transactions. 2017 transactions amounted to 1/3 of GDP)
- Digitisation of procurement and government transactions through the USAID funded IFMIS system
- Rapid uptake of mobile phone based gambling, borrowing, lending and purchasing

Money, money, money!

- “The IFMIS system is neither integrated nor does it help me manage anything” former Auditor General on the way IFMIS made his work more difficult. Kenya cannot account for up to 1/3 of its GDP every year since the system was rolled out.
- Lack of transparency and accountability because failures are repeatedly blamed on the system
- MPESA - predatory lending rates ensure high profitability of the platforms. APR as high as 34%. High transaction costs mean its more expensive for poor people to access money than rich people
- Safaricom is owned in part by the government – ethics of ownership ad profiteering

What Tech Breaks

- The Internet is an amplifier – it will amplify both the good and the bad if not used intentionally. Identity systems and discrimination
- The opacity of Internet based systems can break chains of accountability between citizens and the state
- The Internet can introduce new vulnerabilities for marginalised communities – refugees and ID systems in Kenya

What This Means

- Build with intention – the world looks very different when your central referent object is not a white man. What does your Internet based tech look like when you shift your central referent object?
- Build with perspective – learn from history, learn from others. The Internet is not the only tech that has fundamentally altered human behaviour. Learn from what went before and what might come after.
- Built for inclusion – understand politics and society. Any internet technology that fundamentally alters the balance of power between citizens and their states must be interrogated with the future of the citizen in mind

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