More accountability through mobile citizen participation

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Global expansion of mobile telephony

Today, three quarters of the world's population use a mobile phone.[1] Even in the remote villages of Darfur, refugees receive money from their relatives in Khartoum via SMS. Mobile telephony is leading to dramatic economic and societal changes, especially in developing countries. Thus, the Kenyan farmer can obtain price and weather information in her local language and transfer money to her savings account via SMS. This mobile revolution, which leapfrogs the conventional development steps, has also increased citizens' expectations of their governments for more information, transparency, accountability and cooperation in all areas of public life. At the same time, mobile telephony and social media have considerably improved the opportunities for civil society to process information, to organise itself and to participate in political processes. This has been demonstrated by what is known as the Facebook revolutions of the Arab Spring, and the disaster relief organised remotely by NGOs and the local population of Haiti.

Citizens as co-providers of public services

Government initiatives respond to these developments by increasingly involving citizens in their activities.[2] This often occurs in the form of so-called crowdsourcing (outsourcing to a large number of strangers). Thus, volunteers in Nairobi mapped the infrastructures of the Kibera slum by mobile phone and not only generated transparent urban planning data, but also laid the foundation for public consultations between the slum inhabitants and the municipality.
U-REPORT[3] releases SMS surveys from NGOs and the government to a network of over 100,000 young Ugandans on topics such as climate change and AIDS via the radio and press. In Kenya, the Huduma website publishes geocoded citizens' SMS messages and the corresponding follow-up actions from the competent authorities on an interactive map (see figure below). In South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo, citizens can vote on the municipal budget by mobile phone.[4]

Promote eAccountability through Financial Cooperation

Mobile telephony-supported pilot approaches are currently being prepared in the context of the decentralisation projects in Togo and Rwanda, which allow citizens, local officials and NGOs to communicate directly with each other and inform the public of their experiences. The local actors, for example, send proposals for improving waste management, damage to schools, streets, water pumps or cases of corruption via geocoded SMS and voice messages to a web platform. These messages are collected in a database and published after validation. The authorities respond to the messages via SMS, website, interactive radio broadcasts and other media. Essentially, it involves reporting needs, planning and the visible progress on site of the development of communal infrastructure projects, as well as satisfaction with the availability and the quality of public services. Thus, the platform can contribute to forming public opinion in advance of projects, tracking planning discussions and decisions, checking public implementation and allocation of resources, as well as combating corruption. Since the response of the authorities can be directly observed by the public, the system creates public pressure for better governance at all levels. The Financial Cooperation can include the response of the administration to the citizens'

Togo: Citizens participate in performance measurement of communities

Above all, participating municipalities see this approach as an opportunity to bring their work closer to the citizens and to enter into a constructive dialogue with young people and civil society. The Ministry of Finance wants to rein in corruption at the local level. The Financial Cooperation wants to tie in the organisation of future phases with the results of citizen feedback. This will improve the monitoring and provide additional performance incentives.
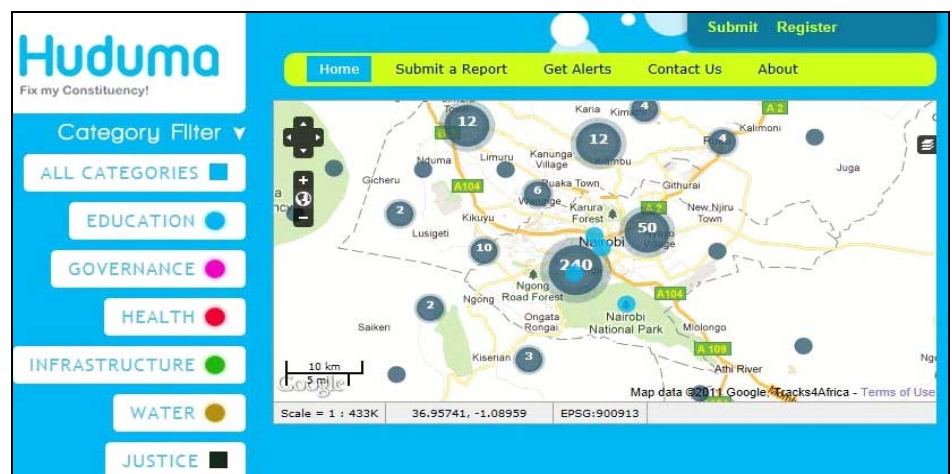

Fig.: Huduma website by Ushahidi

1 World Bank, IC4D 2012: Maximizing Mobile.

2 UN E-Government Survey 2012.

3 http://ureport.ug.   4 WBI News, Feb 2012

messages in their project performance monitoring and thereby give additional weight to citizen participation with regard to governmental project management.

Opportunities and risks

The approach makes it possible to better integrate target groups into project planning and monitoring, thereby not only improving visibility, but also the quality, sustainability and governance of projects, and simultaneously strengthening civil society. The so-called "digital divide", which has not yet been completely overcome, IT security and data protection, and any restrictions on freedom of expression in partner countries, are not without risk. The requirements of multi-channel communication, the presentation of issues, the validation and processing of citizens' messages, and the effective interaction of the administration, civil society and local media place high demands on project design and local capacity development. However, the fact that the use of crowdsourcing has been developed for public accountability and development cooperation in Kenya, together with the growing number of successful solutions and examples from all development cooperation sectors demonstrates that these challenges are surmountable.

Further Information

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