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Assessing Civic Tech That Works to Build #TheAfricaWeWant*

Citizen-led tech for impact that can help African governments deliver better services

Aisha Dabo and Raphael Pouyé

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Across Africa, different civic tech initiatives have developed in recent years with similarities and differences to other continents. Governments in Africa tend to be less cooperative with these initiatives than elsewhere. Operating in a more difficult context, African civic tech is often more technologically flexible and pushes its public accountability agenda with more vigour than in Western countries.

Since 2007, when Kenyan start-up Ushahidi invented a software program for the live crowdmapping of electoral violence, African technologists have become a prominent voice in the global ecosystem of innovation for social impact and democracy. During the crisis in Côte d'Ivoire with #CIVSocial in 2010 and the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia a few months later, a continental community of young hacktivists consolidated, united by a shared purpose of bridging the information gap and demanding that governments better respond to the demands and needs of their citizens.[1]

These citizen-led initiatives involve digital activists, data scientists, bloggers, and influencers – among others – who are using technologies to bring the masses to the centre of democratic governance. Seeking to interact with interlocutors in government – on the executive, legislative, and judicial levels – they raise awareness, generate and organise engagements, demand better governance and try to strengthen the participation of citizens in public life. The local level is often where they find the most willing partners in elected councils and decentralised authorities, open to experimenting with new forms of citizen participation and deliberative democracy.

However, for all the social media celebration that greets every new social impact startup or non-profit, civic tech is still, in most cases, very thin on the ground. Like elsewhere, many projects exist in name only or disappear after their initial funding runs out. The Civic Tech Field Guide – an online repository – features a giant graveyard of short-lived efforts.[2] In some cases, when civic technology is actually rolled out, its tech component is exaggerated and ill-suited to the needs of the vulnerable or disenfranchised people it claims to serve.

This kind of innovation which is disconnected from its intended beneficiaries and their needs was once coined as "Un-civic tech".[3] More recently, a founder of South Africa's respected civic tech outfit Grassroot, Luke Jordan, gave a resounding piece of advice to young impact innovators: "Don't build it!".[4] He explained that most civic tech projects waste time with tech when they should focus on their theory of change, while simply refitting existing code.

However, Grassroot itself is proof that Africa is also blessed with sustainable, soundly designed, and well-grounded impact projects, using a nimble, no-nonsense approach to technology.[5] This civic tech renaissance has thrived thanks to an ever-growing and youthful population (more than 60 percent of Africans are under 25 in 2022).[6] Some 46 percent of people use mobile phones, of which 64 percent were using smartphones in 2022.[7] In all, there were 570 million regular internet users in 2022. Despite imperfect network coverage, these fast-growing figures point to the importance of digital and new ICTs on the continent and are enough justification

* Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, Accessed April 25, 2023. https://au.int/en/agenda2063.

1 Jean Pehouman, "#CIVSocial: Using technology to assist people during a humanitarian crisis," Slideshare, slide 4, accessed April 25, 2023, https://www.slideshare.net/jpehouman/civsocial-using-technology-to-assist-people-during-humanitarian-crisis.

2 Matt Stempeck & Micah Sifry, "Civic Tech Field Guide: the Civic Tech Graveyard," accessed April 25, 2023, https://civictech.guide/graveyard/

3 Tiago Peixoto, "(Un)Civic Tech?" Presentation at TicTec Conference 2017, video, posted by "mySociety," June 13, 2017, accessed April 25, 2023, " https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyYovp8Uwig.

4 Luke Jordan, "Don't Build It, A Guide for Practitioners in Civic Tech," MIT GovLab, Cambridge (MA), US, accessed April 25, 2023, "https://mitgovlab.org/resources/dont-build-it-a-guide-for-practitioners-in-civic-tech/.

5 "More than half of the world's population growth will be in Africa by 2050," Quartz, June 29, 2017, https://qz.com/africa/1016790/more-than-half-of-the-worlds-population-growth-will-be-in-africa-by-2050.

6 "African countries with the highest number of mobile phones," Further Africa, July 19, 2022, https://furtherafrica.com/2022/07/19/african-countries-with-the-highest-number-of-mobile-phones/.

7 "Internet usage in Africa - statistics & facts," Statista, accessed April 25, 2023, https://www.statista.com/topics/9813/internet-usage-in-africa/.

for the growing number of civic tech initiatives. In fact, civic tech has been having an impact on the continent for over a decade ago – even when infrastructures were minimal and smartphones, as we know them today, did not exist.

Following in the footsteps of pioneers like Ushahidi, some technologies that are now used elsewhere were invented in Africa.[8] They have combed public data sets for irregular electoral results or sketchy public procurement. They have tailored low-tech online forums for citizens who cannot afford a smartphone. They have made apps that help commuters find the method behind the apparent madness of the informal transit systems in Nairobi or Dar es Salaam.[9] These examples – and many others — of the impact of civic tech on the continent, have invigorated efforts to support it. Civic Tech Fund Africa is one of them.[10]

Yet, even for those successful examples, the mechanisms that trigger lasting social change remain elusive. Additionally, with tools as new as civic tech, there is not always enough time to chart the social and cultural variables that can turn a clever initiative into a transformative one. In this deep dive, we look into the main categories of African civic tech, their challenges and pitfalls, but also their successes, and we give some recommendations on the way forward.

Defining and supporting 'Civic tech that works'

Civic tech is not easy to pin down. It can be defined as "technology that positively impacts society...creating tools that help make more democratic, transparent and people-centred public services".[11] This definition speaks to a multiplicity of initiatives, from city-based efforts at smart governance through open code, to more aggressive anti-corruption watchdog initiatives. Using online platforms and portable reporting software, civic technologists gauge public opinion and collect signatures for petitions that can make governments shape and deliver better public policies, i.e., those that improve the lives of citizens.

Simultaneously, while civic tech initiatives have been mushrooming across the continent, national governments have been making increasing use of digital technologies beyond just surveillance purposes. In most cases, gov tech belongs with government innovation, a comprehensive approach to public sector modernisation that aims to deliver citizen-centric public services that are universally accessible through simple, efficient and transparent systems.[12] In some regards, it converges with civic tech's ambition to achieve social impact and improve public services.

Yet, civic tech should not be confused with gov tech. The former aims to collect the needs of the public on a given topic, to bring it to the policy making agenda and spur governments to design better policies, while the latter tests and implements solutions that can improve the services delivered to citizens. In most African countries, civic tech also equips the watchdog groups that monitor governments and publicly denounce their wrongdoings.

Civic tech is also defined by its ontological proposition: it posits that the citizens that will benefit from a (civic tech) tool must be involved in the creation of the said tool.[13] This resonates with a popular mantra of democratic innovation: "what you do for me without me, you do against me".[14] By creating online tools that facilitate the participatory design of public policies, through civic engagement, collective intelligence, and social inclusion, civic tech can bring democratic principles and popular legitimacy to public sector policies. The success of a civic tech initiative is often measured by how much "citizen uptake" it can achieve.

Another metric, however, is how much government response it can induce: when an online platform shows that local citizens choose the alternative to the government-sponsored new road, do public authorities usually take notice? When civic technologies identify patterns of police wrongdoings and people ask for a response, does the government usually cooperate?

The most accepted form of measurement of a civic tech's relevance – based on the work of Micah Sifri and Tiago Peixoto in 2016 – is to assess whether citizen uptake translates into concrete, positive government feedback. Getting a response from the government is never a foregone affair in any country. It is even less certain in Africa, due to the limited public resources available, which are sometimes compounded by fragile governance systems, and a tendency to not collaborate

8 "From M-Pesa to Ushahidi: How African tech is fighting the coronavirus," Friends of Europe, May 14, 2020, https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/from-m-pesa-to-ushahidi-how-african-tech-is-fighting-the-coronavirus/.
9 The Digital Matatus Project, accessed April 25, 2023, http://digitalmatatus.com/.
10 "About the Fund," Civic Tech Fund Africa, accessed May 25, 2023, https://civictechfund.africa/en/.
11 "About Civic Tech," Code for All, accessed April 25, 2023, https://codeforall.org/about-civic-tech/.
12 "GovTech: Putting People First with Simple, Efficient and Transparent Government," video, posted by World Bank Live," April 13, 2019, accessed May 25 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lz5KOhz6kC4&t=5s&ab_channel=WorldBankLive.
13 Ibid.
14 "Why Ireland's Citizens' Assembly is a Model for Europe," The Irish Times, November 29, 2016, accessed April 25, 2023, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/why-ireland-s-citizens-assembly-is-a-model-for-europe-1.2876808.

with civil society. Another problem is that, for several reasons, the first generation of civic technologists have often neglected – or downright disregarded – the role of the State. As Beth Noveck wrote in 2016, "we have been designing civic tech (that is) badly suited to producing impacts because we have been measuring citizen uptake without looking at institutional response", i.e., government responsiveness.[15]

Surely, many civic tech innovators can still be mistaken for the proverbial 'young entrepreneurs' that compete for a spot in a local "30 under 30" and seem to operate in an institutional vacuum, oblivious to the role of government. Yet, there are those who take their social impact mission seriously enough to understand that impact can only be achieved collectively, i.e., with governments. These are the ones who can "make government more effective, not to mention more legitimate".[16] We like to call this well-conceived category "civic tech that works".[17]

Mapping "Civic Tech that works" and its categories

We believe that in Africa, this kind of civic tech can be put into roughly four categories – described and discussed below – based on their general theory of change, i.e., how they envision the way they can impact the societies they operate within.[18] In Western countries, there is a fifth category, often the dominant one: it consists of online participatory platforms which are often sponsored by progressive local councils or regional governments, and are most often used for participatory budgeting. In Africa, this category is emerging – thanks to low-tech solutions pioneered in South Africa. However, it remains a rare occurrence elsewhere on the continent. In each and every one of the cases mentioned here, and in nearly all of African civic tech, the ICT component cannot be dissociated from a strong real-life civil society campaign, which is often a condition for success.

The other four categories have begun to emerge from several multi-country civic tech support initiatives that we were – or still are – involved with, such as CivicTech4Democracy in 2018, AfricTivistes Civic Engagement Tour since 2018, Connexions Citoyennes II

since 2019, Charter Project Africa since 2021, the Local Open GovLab since 2021, the AU Civic Tech Fund since 2021, and Sahel Insight in 2022.[19]

The first category in our classification can be called **crowdmapping and early warning.** It pools together the initiatives that aim to alert and raise awareness by collecting data through interactive maps. When one talks of crowdmapping in the African civic tech space, Ushahidi is the first one that comes to mind. This tool has been utilised for various purposes, such as mapping polling stations, tracking electoral violence, identifying hotspots, and facilitating civil society or citizen election observation. By doing so, it aids citizens, communities or authorities in making informed decisions while contributing to transparency, participation, and advocacy.[20] OpenStreetMap has also been used by a plethora of African civic innovators, in some cases to literally put citizens on the map and make them visible to their governments.[21] Another example can be found in Mali: to better document the complex human rights situation, Amnesty Mali came up with SIRA, a platform for investigators who collect evidence of human rights violations.[22] Amnesty Mali designed training courses for its primary users i.e., local organisations who map the violations. Amnesty Mali advocates for better response and an improved legal framework thanks to the evidence it can present to local and national authorities.

The second category in the classification is **awareness raising and civic mobilisation.** This type of civic tech builds curated data sets to generate collective engagement and community organising. For instance, in Nigeria, ElectHer has come up with a solution named DecideToRun (DTR) to build a community for women in and about politics, raise petitions, and create a safe space for discussion and cross-party exchanges between citizens and women politicians.[23] This civic tech innovation mainly targets urban and diaspora women given the challenges of literacy and the nationwide connectivity limitations. Another example is Africa Unplugged, which helps to raise awareness among young people in East Africa and beyond about their opportunities and institutional entry points to get involved in designing public policy.[24] This kind of civic tech refrains from developing new technology where unnecessary, focusing instead on effectively mobilising

15 Beth Noveck, foreword to Civic Tech in the Global South, ed. Tiago Peixoto and Micah L. Sifry (New York: The World Bank and Personal Democracy Press, 2017), 14.
16 Ibid.,14.
17 Citizen Kahina, "8 Civic Tech Initiatives That Make a Difference," CivicTech4Democracy, Medium, June 2018, accessed April 25, 2023, https://medium.com/civictech4democracy/8-civic-tech-initiatives-that-make-a-difference-98d0531e4c17.
18 Impact Assessment [link]
19 Citizen Kahina, "8 Civic Tech Initiatives"; "ACET-West Africa," Africtivistes, accessed April 25, 2023, https://www.africtivistes.com/en/programme/acet-west-africa/; "Connexions citoyennes 2," CFI, accessed April 25, 2023, https://cfi.fr/fr/projet/connexions-citoyennes-2; "Homepage," Charter Project Africa, accessed April 25, 2023, https://charter.africa/; "Homepage," Local Open GovLab, accessed April 25, 2023, https://log.africtivistes.org; "African Union Civic Tech Fund," Civic Tech Fund Africa, accessed April 25, 2023, https://civictechfund.africa/auctf/; "Home page," Sahel Insight, accessed April 25, 2023, https://sahelinsight.africtivistes.org/.
20 "Une Plate-Forme Web Au Service De La Démocratie," SID (Society for International Development), accessed April 25, 2023, https://www.sidint.net/content/sunu2012-une-plate-forme-web-au-service-de-la-démocratie.html.
21 An example is Code for Africa's "Mapping Makoko", i.e., the long-unregistered populations living in the Makoko slums in Lagos, Nigeria. https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/mapping-makoko-how-data-could-help-legitimize-nigerias-informal-settlements
22 "Dashboard," Sirasahel, accessed April 25, 2023, http://www.sirasahel.com/dashboard.
23 "Homepage," Elect Her, accessed April 25, 2023, https://elect-her.org/#.
24   "YouLead Africa," YouTube channel, accessed April 25, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/@youleadafrica/videos.

young people to collaborate with national youth councils, the East Africa Community's Youth Council, NGOs, and other institutional stakeholders in designing joint projects.

The third classification category, **citizen monitoring of public policies**, presents tools for organised groups of citizens to demand better public policies and social services. Mphamvu (Legal Wallet) in Malawi has adapted its platform into a national language, Chichewa, and allowed the use of text messaging to track local public expenses on infrastructure.[25] It trains communities to use the tool for participatory oversight and advocating for local transparency focusing on public sector corruption. Another similar example is IFollowTheMoney by Connected Development (CODE) in Nigeria. This initiative focuses on state-level transparency by using technology to collect and analyse public data. It does this to build repositories of legal and administrative data about public projects and cross-checks the information via citizens' testimonies and verifications (with their mobile phone cameras, etc.). The goal is to raise the awareness of the local population, create training materials, and educate citizens to become more active in their communities.[26] IFollowTheMoney facilitates public fora during which public stakeholders exchange openly with citizens on public policy and public procurement issues. This model has been replicated in The Gambia, Zimbabwe, Cape Verde, South Sudan, Kenya, Malawi, Cameroon, Liberia and Ethiopia.

Finally, the **open governance and political participation** category aims to establish two-way collaboration channels between citizen groups and their political institutions. Using Nouabook, SimSim in Morocco has connected citizens with their respective members of Parliament, creating at the same time a direct link between CSOs and the Parliament.[27] This platform works to make the legislative branch more responsive while assessing budget bills. Africa CitizenWatch, developed by the Zimbabwean think tank SIVIO, fills a very critical gap in many countries by building a dynamic knowledge base on governmental accountability.[28] This resource benefits CSOs and public sector agencies, as well as journalists through top-class dashboards. Its contribution to building an informed community of

advocates in Zimbabwe has been priceless, and it seems to be following through in Malawi and Zambia. Finally, in Kenya, Mzalendo Trust's civic tech initiative, ETAP Dokesa, is a crowdlaw platform that enables people to join their country's law-making process, by annotating draft legislative bills online.[29] Mzalendo has been actively engaging with both chambers of Parliament: it has been working on a memorandum of understanding with the Senate, thus increasing government responsiveness.

Challenges, pitfalls, limits

The digital revolution has brought in the possibility of using technologies for positive impacts on human lives. Although it has become commonplace to lament its adverse effects on democracy, technology also has the potential to positively impact democratic governance for more just and equitable societies. The examples mentioned above, as well as the myriad of initiatives that often associate themselves with open governance reforms in Africa and beyond, are here to prove it.

Using technologies for democratic governance naturally comes with challenges, limitations and pitfalls but more so in Africa where quality infrastructure coverage and access to technologies are still lacking. Here, a good knowledge of the context and the primary beneficiaries of a certain piece of civic tech are crucial in choosing a technology, building, reusing, or adapting one for an effective civic impact.

Choosing the right languages and training staff who will be the eyes, ears and voice of the civic tech initiative on the ground are essential. Thus, involving beneficiaries in the project cycle to improve the technology and the approach, are the foundations of success, especially in an African context.

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25 "Login page," Mphamvu, accessed April 25, 2023, https://www.mphamvu.org/.
26 "Homepage," Follow the Money, accessed April 25, 2023, http://followthemoneyng.org/.
27 "Homepage," Nouabook, accessed April 25, 2023, https://nouabook.ma/fr/.
28 "Homepage," African Citizens Watch, accessed April 25, 2023, https://www.africancitizenswatch.org/.
29 "Dokeza," Mzalendo, accessed April 25, 2023, https://dokeza.mzalendo.com/.

Civic tech vs Gov tech: "Be a co-designer when you can, be a whistleblower when you must"

Another aspect that cannot be overlooked in Africa is how much – or rather how little – civic tech innovators in Africa can interact with governments, whether they are local or national. The "fifth category" mentioned above, i.e., local government-sponsored participatory platforms, is still an unusual occurrence on the continent. While we have seen that two-way cooperation between citizens and governments is the holy grail of most civic tech, it remains mostly elusive. It is also obvious that against authoritarian regimes, civic tech actors focus on monitoring and denouncing abuses while ensuring that their tech is not compromised by spy software.

In many cases, as we have discussed governments have also been 'going digital' to provide better services to their population. Some governments have also improved their legislation on citizens' access to information, opened access to their data, and set up online portals which have improved transparency and accountability and strengthened democratic governance. In countries like Morocco, Kenya, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire, some of these milestones were reached respectively in the context of their adherence to the Open Government Partnership.

However, governments' increased use of technologies does not preclude and cannot replace the essential role of civil society. This is because cooperation between public authorities and civil society should never be taken for granted. Even in the most collaborative environments, civic tech should never lose sight of its role as a watchdog. By collecting, analysing and computing the general public's views on policy matters and making this information   available to public authorities, civic tech initiatives can achieve two main objectives. Firstly, they can i) use the data to press the government to act upon issues such as, for example, improving water sanitation services in a given region. Secondly, they can also ii) put the spotlight on instances where the government is not

taking action and is misappropriating water sanitation funds – despite receiving unambiguous feedback about the negative impact on people's health and well-being. Tech by the government and tech by citizens are complementary, especially when the government provides services to citizens. Additionally, citizen tech can improve the effectiveness of government systems. Citizens and civil society continue to play their role in verifying the actions of governments. Is the collaborative co-design of public policy bringing together government representatives, local politicians and common citizens a rule or an exception? In Africa, it is still a very new way of governing.

This is why the second function of civic tech – the watchdog one – is especially vibrant in African contexts. In Western democracies, it is often conspicuously absent from the local civic tech ecosystem. This overview of the African civic innovation ecosystem has confirmed the hypothesis that civic tech from the continent is no import from abroad, nor is it a mirror image of what is done elsewhere. Instead, African civic tech has a lot to offer to countries where civic tech is mainly viewed as a tool for participatory democracy:

- Clearly, there is fair weather and foul weather civic tech. European democratic innovation focuses too much on providing online participatory platforms, where public authorities are actively opening governance, such as those found in Barcelona and Paris.[30] Meanwhile, Africa – but also Central America and Southeast Asia – has developed a strong ecosystem of watchdog civic tech.[31] These kinds of confrontational, anti-corruption civic tech actors who track embezzlement in public procurement data are conspicuously absent across Western Europe and North America. International exchanges with African and Latin American activists can help close this gap.

- African innovators have invented forms of community building through low-tech solutions that are nearly unheard of in Europe, even in public projects that are marred by a deep digital divide. Community building in Europe still relies too much on large platforms – be they open source or proprietary – while South African and Kenyan initiatives are launched from "dumbphones" using tailor-made USSD programming.[32]

30 "Decidim Barcelona," Barcelona Digital City, accessed April 25, 2023, https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/digital/en/digital-empowerment/democracy-and-digital-rights/decidim-barcelona; "Homepage," Décider Paris, accessed April 25, 2023, https://decider.paris.fr/decider/jsp/site/Portal.jsp.

31 "Homepage," Laberinto del Poder, accessed April 25, 2023, https://laberintodelpoder.com/; "Homepage," Sinar Project, accessed April 25, 2023, https://sinarproject.org/.

32 TechTarget, "Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD)," SearchNetworking, accessed May 10, 2023, https://www.techtarget.com/searchnetworking/definition/USSD.

The Next Era for Civic Technologies – in Africa and Beyond

The civic tech community has an opportunity to sharpen its tools. The abundance of initiatives deployed in Africa over the last decade-and-a-half provide ample evidence for analysis. What transpires are three main recommendations that should help civic tech initiatives succeed in the future:

1. **Provide an inbuilt mentoring facility – not only for the tech part but also for the civic dimension**. Too many supposedly "new" civic tech ideas have been tried in similar contexts and failed to achieve tangible results. Greater rates of success can be achieved if innovators in this space pay closer attention to the previous generation of civic tech. To facilitate this, grant making facilities should include provisions for mentoring by civic tech experts to guide the grantees in developing robust theories of change, effective indicators, and rigorous in-house assessments of progress.

2. **Fund existing civic tech initiatives or new initiatives that are designed to fill a gap in an existing ensemble of civic initiatives – tech or otherwise.** Civic technologies are too often the pet project of one individual, built on flimsy technology. The first few years of implementation are brutal for these projects. However, the relative few that have stood the test of time have demonstrated their impact. They deserve to be supported, not to compete for the limited funding available with flavour-of-the-month initiatives trying to reinvent the wheel. In most countries, a handful of solid initiatives were established in the last decade and are making a difference. Donors need to prioritise these. When the focus of funding is appropriately placed on "youth" and "innovation", donors should encourage young innovators with similar initiatives to collaborate, and where possible make a political economy analysis of the problem they wish to resolve and demonstrate a viable, useful niche. This is in their interest; it will improve their chances of having a lasting impact.

3. **Support civic tech initiatives that envision a future of cooperation with government authorities (local or national).** The Open Government Partnership provides a robust framework for collaboration between innovative civic initiatives and similarly innovative government agencies. Only through such interactions can lasting change be achieved. In many African countries, governments need support and skills, not just critical scrutiny and negative feedback. Governments should also open themselves up to collaboration facilitated by civic tech initiatives. Initiatives that champion honest and transparent public servants, such as Integrity Icon, can inspire civic tech that sees itself as part of a collective effort.[33] Advocacy can often be more effective – and culturally appropriate – through "naming and faming", than only naming and shaming.

Most civic tech projects do not succeed. In fact, very few do. But those that have survived and thrived have improved the lives of people wherever they were deployed and provided the sketches for useful roadmaps. If we draw the correct lessons from this era of civic technology, the next one promises to be transformational, by making better use of the resources available to empower citizens and strengthen communities across Africa – and the world.

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33 e.g., an example of this is the Integrity Icon, accessed April 25, 2023, https://integrityicon.org/.

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European Democracy Hub

About the project:

'Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations' is a research project supported by Robert Bosch Stiftung, which explores emerging innovations in democratic participation around the world and offering an overview of the lessons learned throughout the application of these innovations.The project highlights policy implications and gives a set of recommendations for European policymakers and practitioners working on the EU's internal democratic renewal. The project brings together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to exchange best practices in democratic political innovations.