Adding a mobile component to the E-Society pilot in Kasese?

Draft field report, Fort Portal / Kasese 20-21 of September 2009, Johan Hellström (johan@upgraid.org)

Background

HIVOS and its partners in the Rwenzori Region, namely KALI, IWDP, GHFRD and RIC-NET (working together under the name Rwenzori Consortium for Civic Competence, RWECO), are implementing a project titled “Enhancing Civic Competence to influence Local Government Planning and Feedback Processes in Rwenzori region”. The overall objective with the project is to realize the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) Pillar Four (Good governance), especially in “Making government structures affordable, transparent and efficient” (PEAP, 2004).

The specific objective is to improve civic participation in planning and accountability processes in local governments in 3 districts (20 sub-counties) in the Rwenzori region.

In relation to this bigger framework, IICD have decided to run an e-governance pilot in one of the three districts (Kasese District). The pilot, which goes under the project title e-society, will use ICT in innovative ways in order to achieve the overall objective. The purpose of the field trip to Fort Portal and Kasese was to learn more about the e-society pilot and to find out if the project would benefit from adding a mobile component.

Methods used

Desk research (secondary data, see references) and field work (collection of raw data during a trip to Fort Portal and Kasese) with in-depth interviews (unstructured, see list below) and focus group discussions (collective brainstorming sessions).
m-governance in general

m-governance (n) is not readily defined but can be described as the delivery of governance related services via mobile communication devices, i.e a tool/method that facilitates citizen to citizen, citizen to government and government to citizen interactions that can be leveraged to strengthen democracy and good governance.

The potential of using mobile phones for service delivery and participation is huge. We have witnessed that mobile phones help to create an informative (Question Box), connected (#iranelection on Twitter), innovative (Text to Change), participative (BungeSMS) and converging (Google SMS) society all over the world. Also, looking at Uganda it does make sense to use mobile phones for good governance. Why?

- Access and penetration rate is ever increasing and even more have access through shared usage and ownership
- Reach – mobiles can reach areas where there is no other ICT infrastructure (radio being an exception)
- Adoption and ease of use
- Interaction and possibility for a two-way dialogue as opposed to radio, television, written media, public speeches etc
- Costs – relatively low total cost of ownership compared to PC/internet technology and often a cheaper option than to travel. Affordability is still a concern though, see challenges identified below.

There is a very wide range of potential governance related services which can be delivered and communicated via mobile phones, including services relating to:

- government news / information updates
- law enforcement / safety
- disaster and crises management
- education and awareness
- data collection
- monitoring
- mobilisation
- employment
- agriculture
- health
- education

Mobile payment systems like MTN's Mobile Money and Zain's ZAP, opens up for even greater opportunities and possibilities for transactions and bill/loan/fine payments for a variety of public services like transport and school fees.

Communication and mobile phone usage in Kasese

A quick glance at the ICT infrastructure shows that public access to internet is only to be found in Kasese town and Bwera. The district website (http://kasese.go.ug/) has been very static but it seems like RIC-NET are about to do some updates. Very few of the civil society organisations have their own website. Mr Bwambale from KADDE-NET estimates that approximately 10 out of their 800

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1 This piece is an improved version of the m-governance section in the Apac-report
2 KADDE-NET, funded in 1997, is an umbrella organisation of civil society organisation operating in Kasese District. It is hosted by the District HQ.
member organisations have access to internet in their offices, which means that the majority rely on the internet cafés in town. There are only two licensed radio stations in the district according to the Media Council (2007): Messiah Radio 97.5 FM and Grace Radio 94.2 FM. However, there are more stations that are operating in the district: Voice of Toro, Life FM and Guide Radio. Call in radio shows are popular and some NGOs in the region have weekly discussion programmes (which they pay for). DSTV is available and so is the traditional television signal but only if boosted.

Civil society organisations in Kasese are mainly reaching out through conducting seminars, workshops, meetings, and by publishing newsletters and through noticeboards. Those methods are considered fairly cheap except newsletters that are expensive to print. When organising workshops, sitting allowance and compensation for fuel, airtime etc is often required by the participants (usually 20'000Ushs for civil society representatives and up to 60'000 for civil servants and elected) resulting in that some organisations have fewer meetings. Mobile communications is considered expensive and when it is used it is mostly for internal (i.e. within the organisation and between partner organisations) organisation and mobilisation.

All five national mobile operators are present in Kasese District: MTN, Zain, UTL, Warid and Orange. I was informed that MTN have the best reach and coverage and therefore the biggest number of customers in the region. However, many switch to Warid when to make calls (using the PAKALAST service where you for 1,000Ushs get 24 hours unlimited Warid to Warid calls). Speaking about tariffs, Mr Bwambale from KADDE-NET said that “these days we are relaying on discounts”, referring to the MTN Zone tariff that offers discounted calls depending on network load at any particular time, sometimes, but rarely, up to 99% discount. In other words, KADDE-NET communicate only when the discount is high enough.

Among the population in Kasese, voice and beeping are the two technologies used the most and according to both IWDP and RIC-NET, “few know how to send a SMS”. People might know how to receive and read a message but is then illiterate in the local language and can not reply back. It often happens that SMS and calls do not go through or reach the one intended in time. IWDP explains that since many people live outside the national grid, or simply can not afford electricity at home, they have to charge their phones at charging stations (paying 500 Ushs per charging) or at a friends place. This means that people often leave their phone unattended for a few hours per week while it is charging. Also, people with no good access to electricity often “switch it off to save batteries”. And farmers usually leave their phones at home when going out in the field to dig. Therefore, IWDP concludes, urgent and time sensitive information might be a problem.

IWDP also highlighted that the “man has some control of the phone even though it's mine” and that calls and SMS coming late evenings or at night might cause suspicion.

**Identified challenges in Kasese**

As noted above, there are a number of identified challenges in using mobile phones to communicate and to access and disseminate information in Kasese. The most profound seems to be:

- funding and affordability (total cost of ownership for users, innovative business models and billing plans for service delivery)
- infrastructure (limited network coverage, network quality, electricity issues)
- gender issues (men/women ownership and control)

Also, these challenges where mentioned:

- privacy issues
- different networks, different tariffs
- surrounding supporting systems (trouble shooting, capacity building, user uptake, language
and literacy issues, customer care)

- content (creation, management and relevance)
- mistrust between citizens and the local governments, especially those at higher levels
- other challenges (segmentation, market strategies, lack of documentation and collaboration)

A real challenge will be how to make the mobile component sustainable. Who should pay for the service and traffic? The end user, the Local Government or a third party?

Many respondents pointed out that finance is the main problem, not technology. Owning a phone, buying airtime and using it is expensive. Ugandans spend 49% of their disposable income on communications (Stork, 2008) but they also do everything in order to lower that cost. Flashing/beeping constitutes a good example of how one can communicate without spending a single coin. Many Ugandans are more loyal to promotions and the cheapest tariff around than to a specific operator (see the PAKALAST example above). Another recent case is that of Google SMS. Launched the 29th of June 2009, it was at first a free service. However, when Google SMS started to charge 130Ushs per enquiry sent to 6006, usage dropped substantially. Interesting though is that many users switched from 6006 and started to use 6001 instead (agricultural advice, weather forecasts, health information, clinic finder). Two lessons can be learned from this: 1) people are not so keen to pay for information but, 2) people do like to play around with the mobile phone.

In the past few years, Local Governments have seen a decline in local revenue collections. This has lead to that local governments are very dependent on central government transfers and donor funds to finance the decentralised services. This donor dependant decentralised system is often very complex to tamper with for all involved players.

A third party option is probably the way to go. Not necessarily a public private partnerships solution but at least an innovative business model that will 1) take away the cost for the end-user, 2) clearly save costs for local government, and 3) not depend on donor funding. To develop an innovative business model of this kind will require more research and is outside the scope of this report.

Another issue is that of privacy. How can privacy be secured in situations where data needs to be verified or when sensitive opinion polls are conducted? For example, if a whistle blowing application is developed, privacy and user protection is key otherwise no one will use the system. Internet is different; it is fairly easy to hide your identity. With mobile phone networks it “is much harder to accomplish [...], which record a phone's hardware signature and SIM. As governments begin registering SIM cards as a way of tracking criminal and terrorist activity, anonymous publishing or reporting via mobile phones grows far more difficult” (Zuckerman 2009). In Uganda, phones are being tapped and networks are centrally monitored and to some extend controlled. Workarounds must therefore be figured out for sensitive communication: some sort of encryption tool or a service like StealthText that allows you to send a SMS that will delete itself from the recipient’s mobile phone as soon as the person has read it.

What a mobile component could mean for e-society in Kasese

Despite the challenges, there are many possible interventions and possibilities in using mobile phones to improve service delivery and community participation – “if well handled” (as someone said during the meeting with RIC-NET). People must see and understand the value in using the mobile phone for communication and information and that correct usage can lead to a response and action. Often the alternatives in not using the mobile phone is more expensive, i.e. to travel or to conduct meetings every now and then.

3 See www.stealthtext.net/
Here are some concrete examples on how mobile phones could add an extra value in the e-society:

- Bulk SMS seems to be a key solution in e-society and can be used for sending out local news, alerts, announcements and reminders about upcoming meetings, events, radio shows, training etc. It could also be used for sending out results from meetings, studies etc. Interactive bulk SMS programs is preferred so that users can react on the content, for example challenge the agenda and come with suggestions, ideas and concerns. It will be a challenge to capture everything that needs to be communicated in 160 characters but it is better than no communication at all. Some informants said it is important that the public is made aware that the message is not from the service provider but from the e-society.

- Dedicated hotline (voice, SMS) for whistle blowing where people anonymously can alert (not report) on corrupt practices among civil servants and companies etc (see BungeSMS)

- SMS quiz for civic education and awareness on good governance issues (see Text to Change). Voters education through quiz is another idea.

- SMS polls to collect citizen opinions and priorities and forward them to local government, parliamentarians, media etc.

- Mobile surveys and data collection for evaluation and monitoring purposes (see Episurveyor and Text to Change).

There are other possible mobile phone usages worth thinking of too, including:

- Participation in local revenue processes using a m-commerce platform.

- Kasese is surrounded by national parks and nature reserves and there are many conflicts between animals and farmers (animals are eating the farmers crop). A warning system like one developed to track elephant movements in Amboseli, Kenya, could be used.

- Public access solutions, for example using MTN's Village Phone Operators as a way improve service delivery and increase participation. It might be cost-effective to use smart phones and printers and notice boards as a way to reach out in areas where phone ownership is small.

**A small word on scalability**

In order to avoid the “forever pilot syndrome” that most ICT4D projects battle, it is important to design with scale in mind. Analysing mobile applications in East Africa, a number of success factors have been identified (see Hellström, 2009:1). Having scale in mind is of extra importance in the governance field because we need to get away from pilots and projects and rather promote a service delivery approach.

So, generally:

- do the homework (and avoid re-inventing the wheel)
- end-user driven (and look at needs)
- fit into already existing patterns (learn from M-PESA)
- consider open standards/content (and build a user community)
- involve right stakeholders from the start and use local capacity
In the implementation phase:
- have a viable business model and/or predictable funding flows
- involve end-users in content creation where applicable
- implement a decentralised solution rather than centralised (cross network instead of working only with one operator when possible)
- educate the end-user
- proper marketing (to get a critical mass of users)
- time (as a reference, the M-PESA pilot was not successful at all)

Throughout the project a key element is documentation and to share lessons learned (both success as well as failures).

**Recommendations**

Considering the strong local support (“we encourage the innovation and pledge to give all necessary support that is within our reach”, RIC-NET), that everything is in its initial phase and that mobiles are ready available, it really makes sense to add a mobile component to this project.

Four things to highlight (again):
1. The mobile component should not be the only communication strategy but rather add extra value. Face to face meetings are still needed and are an effective way to put pressure.
2. People tend to find entertainment more fun than information. To make the project successful, parts of the intervention should have the characteristics of infotainment (i.e. media which provides a combination of information and entertainment).
3. A toll free line and zero charged SMS seems to be the best way to go.
4. Mobile phones are important because unpredictable things happen. The mobile component should therefore be flexible in it's design and allow for bottom-up innovation.

So, what is needed? First, a bulk SMS service should be implemented. There are different solutions: programs like FrontlineSMS, RapidSMS or Star Programme. They are all easy to implement and use and the communication will be controlled by the project. The main problem with those programs are that every SMS sent and received will be charged as a normal SMS, i.e no discounts. A platform like that of Text to Change might therefore come in handy because it comes with a short code that is cross network and “zero charged”, i.e. no cost for the end user. You might loose some of the control but on the other hand get support and aggregated reports. Regardless of solution, the sending and receiving of SMS should be controlled at the information desk (a key function in the framework of which e-society is part of) and privacy should be guaranteed. Key questions when implementing a bulk SMS service, in short, is where it should be located and who should be able to send out messages and what kind of messages (content) should be sent?

Secondly, an IVR product would really make sense in a society where word of mouth is the main source of information. A toll free line that connects to pre-recorded or dynamically generated audio. The system should have simple menu choices like press 1. for news, press 2. for upcoming meetings, press 3. to report corruption etc. IVR systems are relatively easy to handle and scale.

Thirdly, data collection, collecting opinions and monitoring seems to be some main activities that the stakeholders in the project are interested in. Different mobile solutions exist and are used, mostly in the health field.

Lastly, empowerment comes with right, innovative usage of the technology. Far from everyone in Kasese know how to send a SMS. There is a need of capacity building and training in mobile phone usage (not only SMS, but also functions in the phone such as the address book, calculator, calendar,
activating the GPRS etc) should be a priority in this project so that people will learn how to best utilise their phones. Also, in reference to content creation it makes sense to prioritise training in order to identify what kind of content is needed and how disseminate and make it available.

Those four initial interventions might lead to the set-up of a local mobile platform that can be used by all NGO's (and local government) in Kasese. A kind of mix between a notice board, a question box, a suggestion box, a whistle blower, a village horn etc. A community mobile application (that builds on and merge existing solutions) for information sharing and communication in all directions. This product could be hosted by the e-society but if so it must be very independent and have its own structures.

Abbreviations

DSTV = Digital Satellite Television (MultiChoice's digital multi-channel service in Africa)
FGI = focus group interviews
GHFRD = Good Hope Foundation for Rural Development
GPRS = general packet radio service (mobile data service)
ICT = information and communication technologies
ICT4D = information and communication technologies for development
IVR = Interactive Voice Response
IWDP = Integrated Women Development Programme
KADDE-NET = Kasese District Development Network
KALI = Karambi Action for Life Improvement
NGO = Non-governmental organisation
PEAP = Poverty Eradication Action Plan
RIC-NET = Rwenzori Information Centers Network
RWECO = Rwenzori Consortium for Civic Competence
SMS = Short Message Service or Silent Messaging Service

References


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