Mobile Activism or Mobile Hype ?
By Firoze Manji

Abstract
Technology offers many opportunities, yet the push to bridging the digital divide and harnessing the power of information and communication technology often neglects the very resource that is most central to development – people. Experience demonstrates that while technology may provide tools that people can use, it should not be over-rated as the solution to every problem. Based on two experiences using mobile phones in Africa to address women's rights and social development, the key lesson learned is that mobile phones, like the pen or paper, are only as useful as one part of a strategy in which people must remain at the forefront.

Key words
technology, mobile phones, poverty

Mobile phones in context
Every time a new technology comes along, everyone swears this will bring about social progress. All kinds of amazing qualities are attributed to the technology. Those living in poverty - especially in Africa - are the justification for investment and spending huge amounts. We have seen this with the supposed values of the green revolution proposed by the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations (even though most of us suspect that Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) is but a Trojan horse for the entry for the use of genetically modified technologies). In addition, we have seen this with mobile phones. What would people do without the poor in Africa to justify their latest ventures!

Two experiences from Fahamu involving the use of mobile phones in Africa show that the principle lesson learned about using mobile, or any other kind of technology, is that it is people, not technology, that make history. People bring about development as social progress.

Case 1: Campaign for the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa.

In November 2003, the African Union (AU) adopted the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa at its summit in Maputo, Mozambique. This Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's rights was the outcome of some 10 years of patient work by the African women's movement to establish an indigenous, organically developed Protocol that would advance the position of

women and provide some level of protection of the rights of women in Africa. However, to come into force, at least 15 countries had to sign and ratify the Protocol.

By March 2004, only one country had ratified - The Comoros. A number of organisations met in Nairobi to plan the development of a campaign around the Protocol. To support this work, Fahamu offered to run a series of articles in Pambazuka News. We also planned to publish special issues of Pambazuka News for distribution at the AU Summit in Addis Ababa. A call was made to establish a coalition to push for the ratification of the Protocol and in September 2004, the "Solidarity for African Women's Rights" was established comprising some 15 organisations.

To promote the Protocol, the coalition initiated an online petition to enable people to show their support of the Protocol. In recognition of the fact that, at the time, an estimated 80 million mobile phones were in use in Africa, and SMS was a popular means of communication, the

Super connected?   Credit: GCIS

petition also included an option for people to sign by sending an SMS to a specified number. To promote the petition, the campaign included the production of leaflets, distribution of information via the internet and mailing lists, and through newspapers.

This campaign received a huge amount of publicity, mostly because of the innovation of the advocacy techniques. The campaign to get the petition signed included special issues and features in Pambazuka News, systematic articles in newspapers and patient lobbying at the AU Summit meetings, including the awarding of red, green and yellow cards to countries that had ratified, signed or failed to sign, respectively. So successful was the lobbying and advocacy work that by November 2005, two years after the initial adoption of the Protocol by the AU, the requisite 15 countries had ratified, and the Protocol came into force on 23 November 2005. This was widely hailed as the fastest ratification process of any international instrument in the history of Africa.

Technically, the creation of the system to log the calls was a relatively simple exercise. The SIM for the phone to which messages were sent was connected to a computer and the phone numbers and messages stored on the SIM were then transferred to a simple database. The originating country of the message was detectable from the country code of the sender's phone. Once the data was on a database, it was relatively easy to display the contents on a website.

The use of mobile technologies was not without its challenges. The number that people were required to call was not a simple number. There were no facilities for establishing a short-code number, and at the time, the only place possible to set up the system was by using a South Africa number.

This created a number of problems. The costs of SMS from some networks to this number were charged at a higher rate. In some cases, it was not possible to send a text message across a competitor's network. In addition, in other cases - for example, during the lobbying interventions in Addis Ababa at the AU Summit, it was not possible to send messages out of Ethiopia at the time as the Ethiopian government had not legalised SMS

transmissions out of the country! These acted as real impediments to the campaign to solicit signatures to the petition via mobile phones.

Any e-mail user is well aware of the problems of spam emails, yet this is nothing compared to the phenomena of spam SMS. Many people appeared to have nothing better to do than to send - presumably at vast expense - spam messages to the phone number. In addition, there were those who took the opportunity to send abusive messages. Inevitably, there were those who sought to pour out sexual attacks on women and the women's movement. Originally, an automated system displayed all messages on the website, but it was soon apparent that this was not going to work: every message needed vetting and approval.

A facility was also available for people to be able to opt in to an SMS update. Those who subscribed to this service received regular updates via SMS about the latest achievements of the campaign.

The campaign got a huge amount of publicity because of the fact that many newspapers and magazines noticed the use of mobile phone technologies. There were newspaper articles, reports in magazines, interviews on radio and television. Fahamu got a great deal of publicity and recognition as a "pioneer."

When it came to evaluating the impact of this initiative, the question arose – had the campaign been a success. Yes, decidedly.

The question was then posed - what criteria do you use to evaluate the success of a mobile phone campaign? Do you count the number of messages received? Have you developed particular criteria for this kind of initiative?

The answer to this was as follows: in any initiative, you need to evaluate success in relation to the outcome that you were seeking at the start. The campaign did not aim to get many text messages; its goal was to persuade 15 governments to ratify the Protocol, which it did successfully.

The use of mobile phones for this campaign was strictly

a means to an end not an end in itself. In all, the campaign collected 3391 signatures to the petition. Of these, at least 10 came from organisations with membership in the hundreds, and one from an organisation that had more than 1000 members. However, only 454 of these signatures came via SMS. Thus, the total number of text messages was small.

Cell phones, another communication tool
Credit: Colleen Lowe Morna

The impact of the campaign had nothing to do with the number of SMS messages, but by virtue of the "news value" of the initiative. It proved, as expected, a successful way of getting attention to the campaign.

The important lesson learned is that had everyone else been using mobile phones for advocacy campaigns, the strategy would not have had as much publicity. Consequently, the impact of the initiative would have been much smaller.

Case 2: The UmNyango Project

This project sought to explore the extent to which mobile phone technologies could promote and protect the rights

of rural women in the province of KwaZulu Natal (KZN), South Africa. It was carried out by a consortium of civil society organisations (CSOs) including Fahamu, Indiba Africa Alliance, Centre for Public Participation, Community Land and Rural Development Centre, Domestic Violence Assistance Project, Participatory Development Initiative, and Rural Women's Movement.

KwaZulu Natal is a province identified as having a widespread prevalence of domestic violence against women and a growing number of landlessness amongst women. Baseline surveys in five communities in the province showed that:
- more than 30% had witnessed domestic violence;
- 33% of respondents (all women) reported that they had been excluded from accessing and/or the control of land due to them;
- 54% had experienced conflict in their communities particularly around stock theft, land and politics; and
- interestingly, 83% of those living in these communities owned mobile phones, and 80% indicated that they know how to send and receive SMS.

The project established an SMS gateway through which messages could be distributed to all those enrolled in the project, and it enabled every individual to send messages to the organisers and to the local paralegal officers where they needed assistance with regard to any incidence of violence or threat to their access to land.

The aim was to examine the potential of mobile phone technologies to:
- enhance potential for participation in regional national, provincial and local government initiatives, which impact on rural livelihoods and development (including receiving, amongst other things, relevant headlines from Pambazuka News);
- contribute to overcoming the patrimonial challenges that make the reporting of violence against women virtually impossible;
- enable women greater access to information on unconstitutional preclusion to land as well as land evictions and to allow them to report on such unconstitutional conduct;
- enhance participation in the early reporting of political tensions and violence;
- enhance access to justice; and
- test the feasibility of using podcasting technology to disseminate relevant information from Pambazuka News in IsiZulu

Rural women at one of eighteen workshops organised during the campaign.   *Credit: Anil Naidoo*

While all participants received training to use SMS, the majority of them were not inclined to use SMS to request information nor to report incidences to anyone. Instead, women chose to make direct contact with the paralegal offices in their location. They all knew about the help that they would be able to get from such offices because of a series of face-to-face workshops held during the course of the project. In fact, some 418 women and 316 men attended 18 workshops held in the area. There was a doubling of the number of cases, especially of gender-based violence, reported during the project period as compared with the preceding period, an increase that was not observed in the non-project areas of KwaZulu Natal.

In practice, the project found SMS to be prohibitively expensive, despite the fact that some level of subsidy was provided by the project towards the cost of SMS. There was no evidence that SMS led to any enhanced participation in local, regional or national government initiatives, and any such activity was attributable only to the workshop-based initiatives organised by the project. SMS was not used to report gender-based violence, and there was no evidence that it was used to improve access to information or to actions against preclusion of women from land, or in relation to any kind of conflict resolution. There was significant evidence that the project had an impact on access to justice, but no evidence that this was a result of any aspect of mobile phone technology.

With the assistance of CMFD (Community Media for Development) Productions, the project was able to run a workshop on developing podcasting during which 8 women developed a podcast based on their own ideas, interviewing, editing and broadcasting. However, this development had no relationship at all to mobile phone technology. It was a valuable experience, and our hope is that the women involved will have gained the confidence to develop materials for their own ends.

We had planned to examine whether SMS technologies could be an effective tool to enhance political participation and to enable women to both report on and organise around domestic violence and land exclusions. However, our pilot project suggests that this is fraught with problems, especially in the context of the fact that this was not demand-driven by the communities that were involved, and because SMS technology as a tool is an expensive method of communicating.

Indeed, had the funds been allocated to supporting women in other ways to organise and seek redress, the outcome would have been more positive than if we had spent the effort and resources in setting up, administering and sending SMS messages.

Our recommendation would be that the use of SMS might at best be a complement to social organising rather than as the central part. This conclusion may not be very popular with those who want to promote the use of SMS, and that may be perceived in going against the current fashions about the "sexiness" of mobile phone technologies.

However, this pilot study does demonstrate that there is no substitute for human social and political organising, and technical tools are just that – tools. And to be effective in achieving social justice, the right tools need to be used for the right purpose. This pilot project has allowed us to learn these lessons empirically.

Why all this hype about mobile phones?

Why are we not holding conferences about the role of the pencil in development? Or the role of paper? There is more evidence of social progress made by these humble instruments than all the information and communication technologies (ICTs) over the last 20 years.

Pencils and paper can be used to write tracts such as the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, The Wretched of the Earth. However, they are also used to write Mein Kampf. There is nothing intrinsically progressive about the pencil or paper. It depends on who uses it and for what purpose.

Ayanda Ngwenya transcribes interviews during podcast workshop.   *Credit: Deborah Walter*

The problem lies in the very nature of the question that is regularly asked: do ICTs or mobile phones contribute to "development?" The term development implies social progress, liberation of humanity from oppression. However, in practice, development has come to mean what real estate businesses mean by development: an opportunity for profiteering, where the haves get the benefits while the have-nots are driven further from the possibility of eking out an existence.

In that sense, and only in that sense, mobile phones have played a significant role in development – enabling a minority to get rich quick and the expense of the poor.

Mobile phones, after all the hype, are like pencils, tools for communication (although perhaps the pencil allows deeper reflection than the irritating ring of the mobile). Like all technologies, tools do not themselves do anything.

They are inanimate objects. Like all technologies, what effect a tool has depends who has control and what purpose it is used for. Tools have potentials for social progress as well as social regression. We need to focus on the power of those who have control over the technologies and question their use of these technologies. Technologies are not neutral: they reflect the power of those who have control of them.

There is a real need to question the values and morals of those who are obsessed about the role of technologies. For example, just as Mwai Kibaki organised what was effectively a coup d'etat in Kenya, the Daily Nation's Andrew Limo wrote about "How electronic technology helped to boost election campaigns" (http://www.nationmedia.com/dailynation/nmgcontent entry.asp?category_id=25&newsid=113519). The article described in celebratory terms the amazing

contribution that technology had made - without any comment at all on whether the technology actually ensured proper monitoring of the electoral process. In practice, SMS was used widely to send out hate mail across the country. Here are examples of the kind of messages that were circulated at the time:

a) "We, as the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru communities, possess six million votes. You want us to be ruled by an uncircumcised people [Luo people] and go back to the jobless corner? Come out in large numbers to re-elect President Mwai Kibaki so that the country is not ruled by an uncircumcised man who will make the Kikuyus wear shorts. Circulate this message to five or more members of the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru communities. Your vote is the one that will prevent us from going back to Egypt."
(Received as an SMS, and written in Kikuyu)
b) "Under Kalonzo's government, sex will be legalized and free."
(Received as an SMS, and written in Kikuyu)
c) "Why you should be in ODM! ODM women scream YAWA, YAWA, YAWA, in praise of NYUNDO while men in PNU are busy telling their wives to PANUA ile kazi iendelee (spread your legs so that work may continue). Women in ODM-K are so wet that their men keep asking WAPI WHIPPER! (where is the Whipper)"
(Received through SMS, written as it is, minus translations, targeted both at women as a group and also at PNU and ODM-K political parties)
d) "May God protect you from all the harms of the devil, including diseases, thieves, fleas, ticks, weevils, lice, bedbugs, and especially, ODM."
(Received as an SMS, written in Kikuyu, and sent through cell-phones)
e) "We as Kalenjin Community would like to inform the Kikuyu who live here at Solai (in Rift Valley) to immediately leave the farms you occupy or else we warn you that we shall attack you forcefully anytime."
(Received at EMRC as a leaflet, written in Kiswahili, and signed as "Jamii ya WaKalenjin" (Kalenjin Community)
Source: Kenya Human Rights Commission: Violating the Vote: A Report on the 2007 General Elections

used mobile phone technologies for people who witness acts of violence in Kenya in post-election period. Individuals are able to report incidents that they have seen, and it appears on a map-based view for others to see. This has been a really valuable and successful initiative. However, its success has been a function not so much of the technology, but more importantly of the fact that the initiative came from those who have an intimate connection with the human rights and other social activists who trust Ushahidi and with whom they have a common agenda. In other words, this initiative has worked because of the underlying social relations ... or put it another way, the technology was essentially a manifestation of those underlying social relations.

The widespread availability of mobile phones in Africa epitomises the neo-liberal agenda of privatisation. From the 1980s, the international finance institutions, accompanied by the chorus of "donor" agencies, imposed upon African countries a set of economic and social polices that became known as structural adjustment programmes, the heart of which involved forcing the state to disinvest from public services, and selling of the commons to the private sector. From the early 1980s onwards, there was almost no state investment in health, education, agricultural development, housing, roads, infrastructure and communications. The developing telephone infrastructure was a major victim of this, with old and decrepit infrastructure that the state telecommunications industry had falling into further decline over the following 20 years. Having reduced the market value of such services, the structural adjustment programmes ensured that the private sector could buy these off at rock bottom prices. The way was then open for the private telecommunications sector, with the emergence of mobile phone technologies, to be the principal supplier of telecommunications.

There are those who would argue that mobile phone companies are progressive because they have enabled communications where there is none. These same people worship the market place as the ultimate tool for social progress. There is much hype about the number of mobile phones available in Africa – said to be currently in the region of 120 million. However, this figure is more

in need of an explanation than explaining anything itself. It says nothing of the gender distribution nor indeed about the class distribution. It is common amongst the middle classes of the both urban and rural populations to have two or more mobile phones each.

The reality is that what is developed and who gets access to what is determined not by social need but by the voracious appetite for profit. What all these debates side step is that there is no democratic control over the use or access to these technologies. In the neoliberal age, citizens are gelded to become only consumers. They influence the market only as consumers. The extent of their influence is determined primarily by their power to consume. And of course, the have-nots, by definition don't have the power to influence. All the basic gains of the centuries of struggles for democracy where decisions are made on the basis of one person one vote, not on the basis of how much wealth one owns, have

been reversed. Neoliberalism has returned us to rules of the old order where those with wealth get the vote, the rest of us become mere spectators of history.

In capitalist societies, all technologies have the potential for magnifying and amplifying social differentiation. It is only through the imposition of the democratic will of citizens can this inherent tendency of technologies be overcome. Mobile phone technologies are no exception. Our studies have shown that there is more hype than impact with respect to the role of mobile phone technologies and social progress for the most disenfranchised.

Writers Bio
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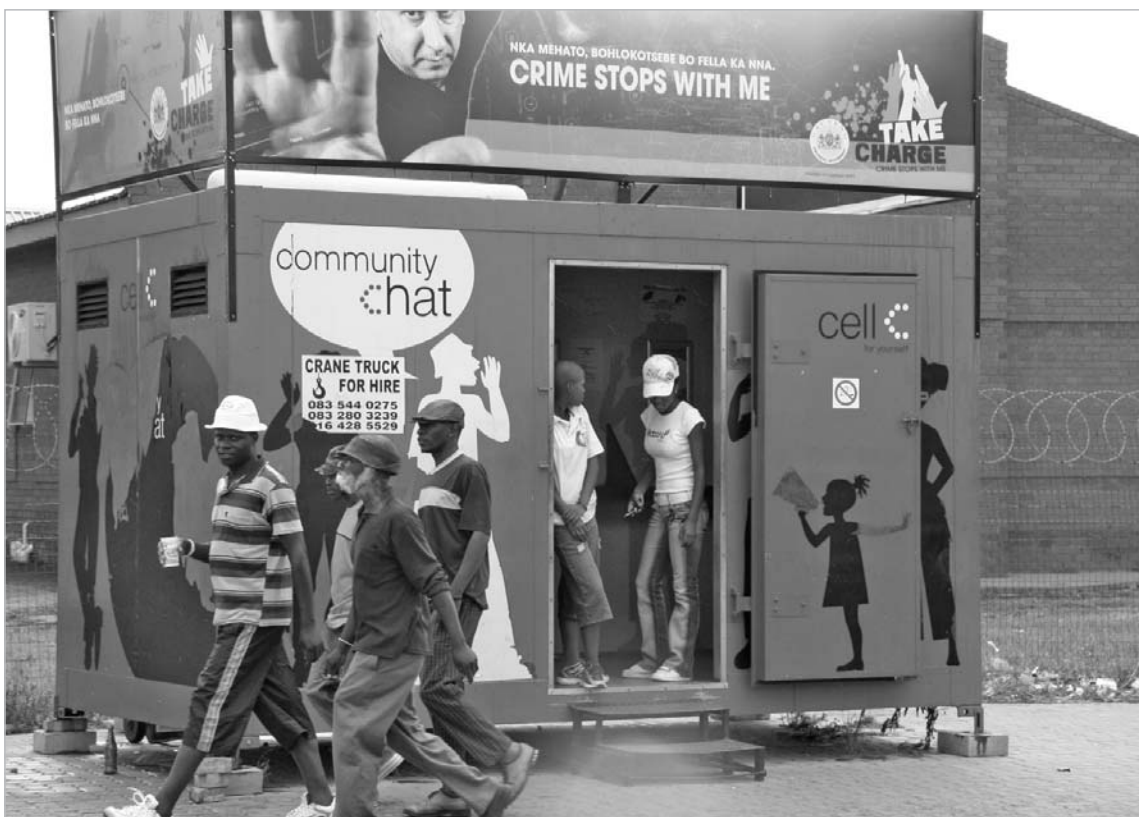
Community communication in Sharpeville, South Africa.

Credit: Trevor Davies