# Engineering civil society: information
# and
# communication technologies and NGOs in Tanzania

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## Abstract

The international development community has recently focused attention on the potential role Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs; taken here to refer to email and the Internet) can play in promoting democratic development. The '*Zapatista* effect' has prompted claims that access to ICTs will strengthen civil society by giving voice to the poor and marginalised, widening popular participation, and encouraging information-sharing and alliance-building. Drawing on research carried out in Dar es Salaam and Arusha, two of Tanzania's 'most connected' cities, the present paper critically analyses such claims in the light of the experiences of non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) use of ICTs. In the first instance, only a minority of well-resourced, urban and/or international NGOs have access to ICT facilities. Moreover, NGOs are not using ICTs in the ways imagined by donors, who ignore the social, cultural and political contexts within which they would wish to embed technological professionalism. Access to ICTs has facilitated limited networking among Tanzania's elite NGOs whose advocacy and lobbying activities have had some impact upon national policies. Overall however, the paper concludes that while donors may enjoy limited success in engineering an elite civil society, the political economy of the broader NGO sector, to which donors contribute in large measure, mitigates against the emergence of an electronically-networked civil society. Despite donors' ICT fetishism, email and the Internet are unlikely to prove 'technical fixes' through which civil society is engineered.

**ICTs, democracy and the '*Zapatista* effect'**

> *"Information and Communications Technology (IT) is one of the most potent forces in shaping the twenty-first century. Its revolutionary impact affects the way people live, learn and work and the way government interacts with civil society....The essence of the IT driven economic and social transformation is its power to help individuals and societies to use knowledge and ideas. Our vision of an information society is one that better enables people to fulfil their potential and realise their aspirations. To this end we must ensure that IT serves the mutually supportive goals of creating sustainable economic growth, enhancing the public welfare, and fostering social cohesion, and work to fully realise its potential to strengthen democracy, increase transparency and accountability in governance, promote human rights, enhance cultural diversity, and to foster international peace and stability"* G8 Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society, 2000 (http://www.dotforce.org/reports/it1.html)

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs, used here in reference to email and the Internet) have become symbolic of the millenial *Zeitgeist.* Access to them is considered a prerequisite for effective participation in the new 'informational economy' and 'informational politics' (Castells 1997; see also Castells 1996, 1998). These ideas have recently found currency in debates on development. That ICTs can be used to boost economic growth and strengthen democracy in developing countries has become a new lodestar of development thought and practice in some quarters, as the above quote from the G8's Okinawa Charter indicates (see also UNDP 2001, World Bank 1998). In terms of democracy, ICTs are envisaged as empowering 'tools for development' which can be utilised by a range of actors including trade unions, development organizations, the media, opposition parties, NGOs, human rights groups and marginalised groups (Coleman 1999, Coeur de Roy 1998, Escobar 1994, 1999, Ferdinand 2000, Jones 1994, Meier 2000, Obijiofor 1998, Ott and Rosser 2000, UNECA 1999). ICTs are considered a global phenomenon, able to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers, thus enabling the 'voices of the poor' to be heard (Digital Opportunity Initiative, 2001). They facilitate

unmediated and unrestricted flows and exchanges of information between independent groups in society, enabling them to build coalitions and networks in defence of their common interests.  The opportunity to access infinite sources of 'knowledge' and 'information' instantaneously is unprecedented.  Governments and media corporations, no longer able to exercise control over communication, information and knowledge, are instead subject to greater scrutiny themselves.  In short, ICTs are ideally suited to the task of spreading and deepening liberal democracy in developing countries.

Africa is singled out as a continent in dire need of better access to ICTs (see World Bank 1998, 2000).  Much of this attention focuses on the use of ICTs to promote economic growth and government efficiency and accountability[1].  While most of these projects aim to improve connectivity and training, increasing interest is also being shown in the potential for strengthening liberal democracy by extending ICT use to groups in civil society.  UNDP's Info21, for example, aims to;

> *"Empower communities and disadvantaged groups, reinforce participatory approaches and good governance and foster networking"*
> *(http://www.undp.org/info21/index5.htm)*

African civil societies are key to this vision.  Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), independent media organizations, women's groups, human rights groups, trade unions and others are all in the vanguard of the donor vision of 'civil society', and are thought to be the key actors who will utilise ICTs in the pursuit of good governance and democratic development.

While critical attention has begun to be paid to the relationship between ICT and democracy in western industrialised countries (Coleman 1999, Noveck 2000, Wheeler 1998), there is little empirical material which explores these issues in a developing country context.  In its absence, recent donor interest in ICTs' democratic qualities draws inspiration from the 1994 *Zapatista* uprising in Mexico.  The '*Zapatista* effect', which demonstrated the innovative uses to which ICTs could be put in the pursuit of democratic

governance by civil society in general, and NGOs in particular, appears to have made a big impression on western-based academics and donors (see Castells 1997, Cleaver 1998, Coeur de Roy 1998, Ott and Rosser 2000, UNDP 2001, World Bank 1998). Some have even claimed that;

> *"no catalyst for growth in electronic NGO networks has been more important than the 1994 indigenous Zapatista rebellion in the southern state of Chiapas, Mexico....it is not exaggerated to speak of a 'Zapatista Effect' reverberating through social movements around the world" (Cleaver 1998: 622).*

Unfortunately, the romantic image of Subcommandante Marcos posting missives to the World Wide Web from the depths of the Mexican jungle is a powerful, yet inaccurate one (Froehling 1999). The global Internet protest movement which emerged in the wake of the *Zapatista* uprising owed more to supporters outside of Mexico posting messages on behalf of the uprising than to the manipulation of the Internet by the indigenous people themselves. And yet the association of ICTs with democratic empowerment within developing countries continues unabated. In one of the very few studies which looks at ICT and democracy in the African context, Ott and Rosser (2000) argue that measures of Internet access correlate positively with (but do not necessarily give rise to) democratic political systems. NGOs, media organizations and citizens can influence the democratic process through the use of ICTs; in Zambia and Liberia, for example, newspapers which have been banned by the government continue to publish online, while journalists in Nigeria have accessed information via the Internet which the government actively sought to ban from the public realm (*ibid*). Much of the debate on ICTs and Africa, however, has concerned itself with finding solutions to the so-called 'digital divide'; in fact, most donor initiatives have been established for this very purpose. There can be little doubt that the divide between the connected and disconnected is a significant problem if a truly global information society is to come into being; nevertheless, the debate has been impoverished by the overarching assumption that access to ICTs is a 'good thing'. With the focus of debate resting squarely on the artefacts themselves, rather than on the social, political and cultural relations which shape their usage (and therefore their efficacy as

'tools for democracy'), the assumptions of technological determinism cloud the ability to scrutinise more closely the 'interpretative flexibility' (Kline and Pinch 1999) of ICTs. The aim here, then, is to provide an analysis of the relative role of ICTs within the wider context of the politics of liberalisation in Tanzania. The focus is on NGOs as ICT users[2]. The present paper looks at NGOs as targets of donor interventions into 'democratising development'. They are the largest constituency of donor-supported autonomous organisations in Tanzania making use of ICTs for democratic ends. The paper seeks to transcend a narrow focus on ICTs themselves, preferring to examine the ways in which ICT usage among NGOs is embedded in wider political and cultural relationships which are themselves undergoing negotiation in the current era of liberalisation. The paper proceeds in three sections. The first deals briefly with the issue of access to ICTs, which is shown to be limited to an elite urban NGO sector. The second section analyses NGOs' usage of ICTs. ICTs are seen as important new tools because they allow NGOs to participate in the global information superhighway. It is the physical presence in cyberspace, rather than the quality of engagement with it, which is valued. The third section focuses on NGO networks, and considers the wider social, cultural and political relationships bearing on donor attempts to engineer an 'online' civil society in Tanzania. Donors' own funding priorities and inconsistencies, social practices surrounding technology, and the new era of reform in Tanzania ushered in by the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, have all given rise to pressures on the NGO sector and its ability to mould itself in the donors' vision. It is clear from the Tanzanian case that there is considerable dissonance between the rhetoric of democracy and inclusivity which has characterised debates on ICTs, and the political economy of actual usage among NGOs, which have themselves been heralded in the recent past as the democratic saviours of development in practice. In Tanzania at least, the political economy of access to ICTs is simply serving to create an elite class of 'online NGOs' which threaten to leave the grassroots, unsophisticated and inprofessionalised mass of non-governmental activities across the country behind.

**ICTs in Tanzania**

ICTs in Africa are a growing industry. Internet access has recently been extended to every African country, although, in most cases, it is only available in the capital city. In Tanzania, liberalisation has ushered in a raft of reform initiatives[3], the most recent of which is being undertaken within the framework of the World Bank and IMF's new agenda of pro-poor growth associated with HIPC. Most significant in the context of the present paper is the reform of the telecommunications sector. Tanzania Telecommunications Company Limited (TTCL) underwent a $250m donor-financed restructuring programme between 1995 and 1999 and has been recently privatised. The resulting network is 95% digitalised, although network quality is geographically variable (SIDA 2001). Services are much better in urban areas. Dar es Salaam is the key 'informational hub' and internet cafes have become communication phenomenons. It is estimated that 250,000 Tanzanians, most of whom are urban residents, have taken up mobile phone subscriptia since 1998, while there are between 10,000 and 15,000 full-time Internet subscribers in Tanzania, 70% of whom are in Dar es Salaam (*Financial Times* 2001). The present paper focuses on email and Internet usage only.

**NGOs and ICTs**

In terms of access to ICTs, Tanzanian NGOs are woefully underresourced. According to official records of the Vice-President's Office, only 4% of NGOs have an email address (a total of 116 NGOs), although it is likely that more organisations have either been connected since the government's survey or have simply neglected to report their email address. Of these 4%, 41% are NGOs based in Dar es Salaam and 24% are international NGOs. Access to ICTs among NGOs is therefore highly skewed. This author has not encountered one international NGO which does not have access to email, if not the Internet[4]. Access to computers within offices varies. Most NGOs have only one or two networked computers. A small number of well-funded NGOs in Dar es Salaam have sufficient resources for almost every member of staff to have a networked computer at their desk with a personal email address. Most NGOs, however, have one email address for the whole organisation. One of the largest international NGOs in the country experimented with allowing all staff access to email and the Internet from their desktops,

but reversed the decision after a week as it was felt that productivity suffered. Consequently access is restricted to the top management tier, as is the case in several Tanzanian NGOs. In total, eight of the surveyed NGOs had their own websites, excluding all those international NGOs with 'corporate' websites where web-content is authored and managed by the head office (which is usually based in a western industrialised country).

*Table 1: Access to ICTs among sample of NGOs in Dar es Salaam and Arusha*

| NGO location | email office | Internet office | email/Internet access at cafe | NGO local website* | total surveyed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dar es Salaam | 11 | 11 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| Arusha | 12 | 11 | 4 | 4 | 16 |

* excluding local branches of international NGOs

Access to ICTs and membership of networks tends to follow established lines of cleavage within the NGO sector, for example, between some international and local NGOs, different umbrella organisations, and some regional and Dar-based NGOs (Mercer 1999). Most of these fissures arise from struggles over access to constituencies and donor funding (Igoe forthcoming, Kelsall 2002). Access to ICTs and electronic networking has tended to exacerbate such differences rather than to overcome them. For example, urban NGOs clearly have relatively good access to email and the Internet. They are therefore more 'plugged in' to the issues of the moment (and thus the ones that donors are more likely to fund). International NGOs also have much better access to ICTs than do most local NGOs, allowing them to maintain their own separate networks.

**NGOs online**

NGOs' use of email and the Internet reflects the external orientation of information access and exchange within the NGO sector. This is partly due to the limited amount of locally-generated content on the web (particularly in swahili) and the small number of NGOs 'online'. Consequently, those who are 'connected' find themselves in closer contact with regional and global actors than with their Tanzanian counterparts. Regional NGOs such as SAHRINGON, SANGONet and other NGO umbrella organisations such

as MWENGO[5] are the key NGOs with which Tanzanian NGOs network electronically and share information. Others receive information from specialist regional and global networks such as Legal-Net, pastoralist networks, religious organisations, African and international HIV/AIDS networks, international education networks, the New York-based debt relief campaign '*50 Years Is Enough'*, environmental organisations, and United Nations' agencies. The nature of this electronic interaction is passive rather than active, as very few Tanzanian NGOs have, for example, posted notices to these interactive forums, preferring to receive rather than contribute information. Exceptions include a handful of Tanzanian networks which have sprung up over the last five years and have gradually shifted towards using email. TENMET, for example, is a Tanzanian education NGO network with 200 members, 25% of whom are accessible via email. The Tanzania Coalition on Debt and Development (TCDD), which has around 40 members, has also increased its use of email to facilitate communication, with approximately 60% of its members online. Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) utilises email both to facilitate its Intermediary Gender Networks in the regions (currently in Arusha, Dar es Salaam, Dodoma, Kilimanjaro, Lindi, Mbeya, Mtwara, Songea, and Zanzibar), and FemAct, a loose coalition of 30 online gender-activist NGOs which TGNP has been instrumental in establishing. Finally, the IIG (International NGO Interest Group) has established an email network.

For the majority of NGOs, the bulk of their email contact is with established or prospective donors and overseas 'partners'. Email and discussion lists are seen as a means by which to advertise NGO services and to solicit funds. As one NGO put it;

> *"we got email in 1998 before other NGOs and so it was only for contacting donors. We thought; what's the use?" (Dar es Salaam, July 2001).*

Within organisations, email is used primarily in order to funnel information from the field to the head office where donor reports can be prepared. Requests for information were more forthcoming from overseas partners and donors than they were from any local constituency. For many smaller NGOs, writing reports for donors is their most time-

consuming activity.  These demands limit the amount of time NGOs have for broader research, programme development activity or networking.  Tanzanian NGOs spend very little time surfing the web for information because it is prohibitively expensive to be connected (for those NGOs using dial-up connections), connections are notoriously slow, and surfing itself is extremely time-consuming.  Staff have neither the time nor the inclination to spend hours on the Internet doing research.  Rather, well-known established sites based outside of Tanzania proved the most popular (e.g. oneworld.org, IMF, World Bank and UN sites).  Employees in the Tanzania offices of international NGOs opined that the Internet offered too many resources, and that they were similarly constrained by time and experience to surf for alternative sources of local information.  International NGO staff rely on the website and internal postings and mailing lists of their employer or parent NGO.  In this sense, international NGO headquarters (usually based in western countries) act as gatekeepers of information which, once 'corporatised', is then filtered down to country offices and client NGOs.  This is reflected in the enthusiasm among Tanzanian NGOs to align their agendas with the concerns of international donor development discourse, as evidenced in the recent swing towards human rights and good governance activities.  Information filters downwards from the global scale to the local.

From the Tanzanian NGOs' perspective however, the Internet is less a tool for imposing homogenising Western views of development, than it is a sophisticated accoutrement of the modern NGO offering a potentially unlimited source of advertising space.  One NGO in Arusha explained their enthusiasm for ICTs thus;

> *"ICTs can empower local organisations and marginalised peoples.  Because information is power.  You cannot be heard [if you don't have ICTs].  How can you exist if you have no information?" (local NGO, Arusha, August 2001).*

NGOs which have, or aspire to, a website, consider it important to be 'part of the world wide web' for the professional status and funding opportunities the Internet is thought to offer.  As one employee of a large well-funded Tanzanian NGO put it, "if you're not on the web, you don't exist" (Arusha, August 2001).  For aspirational NGOs then, the

Internet is viewed as an important strategy for generating material support while gaining a reputation as a respectable NGO embracing the modern world. Outlining the launch of the website for a new women's NGO network on Zanzibar, one NGO member explained that it was part of an effort to, "raise the profile of NGOs on Zanzibar, to enable them to be recognised" (local NGO, Zanzibar, September 2001).

However, not all NGOs are convinced of the need for their own website. One NGO in Dar es Salaam concerned with women's rights argued that there was very little point in their having a website as their 'target group', poor women, would not benefit. This is not an insignificant point. A brief perusal of the websites of NGOs interviewed for this study indicated that they are authored in English and aimed at a prospective donor audience; certainly, the average rural Tanzanian would find little information of any use to them, assuming they had the literacy skills required to use a computer. Most are updated sporadically, if at all. The expense associated with website maintainance is a limiting factor. Links to local independent sources of information on Tanzania are scarce, as are links to sites in swahili, other Tanzanian NGOs, or the Tanzanian umbrellas. Most websites tend to link the surfer to regional or global NGOs or professional organisations. Some websites do contain useful contemporary information on development policy and reform in Tanzania, although it is not possible, for example, to find out the current status of the government's NGO Policy. Two of the most comprehensive NGO websites, belonging to *Hakikazi*[6] and TGNP, have extensive coverage of the PRSP[7], gender budgeting, and links to papers on various development topics (mostly, but not all, in English). *Hakikazi* also hosts an English-language email discussion list (the only such list organised by an NGO in Tanzania) which describes itself as, '*Local-Tan*: network mailing list for exchanging ideas that strengthen participation to eradicate poverty'[8]. Since July 2001 (when this author joined the list), however, postings have been erratic and have not successfully generated sustained debate. Single postings are dominated by a research and consultancy firm based in Scotland which alerts the mailing list to sources of information on civil society, poverty reduction and debt. Very few postings are made by Tanzanian NGOs.

**NGO networks**

One of the most recent and potentially significant changes in Tanzania's NGO sector is the emergence of a handful of NGO networks which have been established with the express purpose of influencing government policy, such as FemAct and TCDD. These networks are pointed to by members of the donor community as evidence of the tentative emergence of a Tanzanian liberal democratic 'civil society'. This is further evident in the lexical shift away from the term 'NGO' to 'CSO' (Civil Society Organisation) which has recently permeated official development discourse in Dar es Salaam. These networks are considered significant because of their high-profile roles in recent national-level policy debates, such as those concerning the Sexual Offences Act, the Land Acts, and the PRSP.

TENMET is a country-wide education NGO network initiated in 1999 by Oxfam Tanzania and *Maarifa ni Ufunguo* ('Education is the key', a local NGO with strong links to Oxfam) in response to the Education Sector Development Programme appraisal undertaken by the government and donors. It links approximately 200 international NGOs, Tanzanian NGOs and CBOs across the country and has established itself as *the* stakeholder for civil society in national-level policy debates on education. TENMET has also been active in international fora on education and development, such as the World Education Forum held in Dakar, April 2000. Approximately 50 of TENMET's members are accessible online, which are mostly the larger, urban-based NGOs. They receive updates on education policy issues from *Maarifa*, circulated via email, which summarise larger documents distributed by international education advocacy organisations (which are produced, often in the USA or Europe, using sophisticated desktop publishing software and take 40 minutes to download in Tanzania). Hard paper versions covering key topics and developments are distributed more widely to the membership in the form of a quarterly newsletter.

FemAct (Feminist Activist Coalition) is a loose coalition of about 30 NGOs and gender activists established in 1996 by TGNP (Tanzania Gender Networking Programme), following the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. TGNP acts

as secretariat, while other member NGOs take on particular roles in specific campaigns which have focused on land reform, sexual violence, gender budgeting, and constitutional reform; all of which have enjoyed some measure of success in influencing national-level policies. The most recent campaign advocates for the recognition of human rights and the specific inclusion of womens' rights in the constitution. All FemAct members are accessible via email. For example, between 50-75% of the organisation of, and correspondence for, the FemAct/TGNP Gender Festival in September 2001 was achieved through email. FemAct is also one of the few Tanzanian NGOs that has posted collective statements on the Internet. Recent posts have protested about World Bank and IMF policy as showcased during the IFI 'new agenda for Africa' tour, and the lack of substantive civil society participation during the Consultative Group meetings in September 2001[9].

TCDD originated with local Christian organisations as the local chapter of the international debt cancellation campaign. There is still an implicit Christian base to its membership and TCDD is chaired by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania. The coalition reinvented itself in 1999 around the HIPC and PRSP processes. With some initial financial support from DFID and UNDP, and with Oxfam Tanzania and a local Christian NGO as their key 'movers', TCDD managed to mobilise around 40 NGOs to become involved in the PRSP process. Following the implementation of the PRSP and Tanzania's qualification for HIPC debt relief, TCDD has shifted its concern to developing an independent poverty monitoring system to track budgetary expenditures in health and education in one district. Approximately twenty NGOs are involved in this, including international NGOs, although not all have access to email. Indeed, email communication has been one of the sticking points in TCDD's organisational development.

Taken together these coalitions and their leaders represent an elite group of 'networked' NGOs, plugged in to regional and international networks, familiar with donors and government. They have common players – most of the members of FemAct are also members of TCDD, for example – and the majority are based in Dar es Salaam, the

capital of Tanzania's development industry. Of FemAct's 30 members, only four are located outside of the city. TCDD and TENMET have more diverse memberships, although members of the secretariat who remain most active are based in Dar es Salaam and Arusha. These urbane NGOs have become increasingly disconnected from their constituencies as they shift their gaze upwards and outwards, enveloping themselves in the concerns of international development discourse and donor-managed reforms. While engagement with domestic policy-making is important, NGO participation in the donor-managed reform process nevertheless reflects the interests of donors and the IFIs, who set the agendas, more than the concerns of poor Tanzanians. It does not necessarily follow that NGO staff are not genuinely concerned about the condition of Tanzania's poor majority; many of them are clearly committed to their work (see also Kelsall 2002). Nevertheless, there are distinct indications that the gap between Tanzania's urban NGO elite and the grassroots constituencies they claim to represent will continue to grow. A case in point is the *First National NGO Forum* organised by TANGO[10] and held in Dar es Salaam in July 2001. Following an introductory speech from the Executive Director focussing on the role of Tanzanian NGOs in capacity building and empowering civil society to work together for poverty reduction (i.e. to engage with the PRSP), the very first questions from the floor came from two somewhat perplexed rural NGOs;

> *"It's difficult for NGOs in Mbeya to deal with the government's policy on poverty eradication when we can't even get our hands on the documents".*

> *"We need to start with a definition of an NGO before we talk about poverty eradication. Please TANGO tell us what is the vision of an NGO, what is it for".*

**Engineering civil society**

The NGO networks considered here are a new phenomenon in Tanzania and have been formed in response to wider changes in Tanzania's political economy. The most significant factor has been the lengthy and complicated reform process being undertaken by government, under the supervision of the IFIs and international donor community. It has been suggested that an advantage of the reforms, and the PRSP in particular, has been

the providision of an incentive for NGOs to work together towards a common goal (Booth 2001, Wangwe 2001). TCDD, for example, was established to bring 'CSOs' together in order that they might have a collective input into the drafting of the PRSP document. Similarly, the education network, TENMET, was set up in response to an education sector review being undertaken by government and donors. FemAct is the only large NGO network which has emerged independently of any wider reform initiative. It has had some success in pursuing its own agenda, as with the campaign against sexual violence which culminated in the Sexual Offences Act. At issue here, however, are questions of sustainability and legitimacy. How sustainable is an NGO coalition if it has been initiated externally? How effective can it be in representing the interests of the disenfranchised if the agenda is being set elsewhere? The Tanzanian case suggests that NGOs are given only so much room for manoeuvre within parameters defined by donors and the state.

Donor agendas are of particular interest in the context of ICTs. Tanzania's donors are very keen to encourage networks within 'civil society'. The commonly-held view is that NGOs tend towards jealous isolation or open one-up-manship; therefore Tanzanian civil society is considered to be weak and in need of capacity building. NGOs need to be 'professionalised' in the image of western NGOs, and this requires a more sophisticated technological operation. Current development wisdom suggests that, if NGOs can be encouraged to work more closely together, alliances and coalitions will emerge which represent interest groups and hold government to account more effectively. NGOs can also learn examples of best practice from one another, avoid duplication of activities, utilise and account for funds more effectively, and thus maximise their impact. As this has not appeared to be forthcoming within the NGO sector itself, donors have stepped in to 'engineer' the formation of a viable civil society (Hearn 1999, Williams and Young 1994). A sobering case in point is found in the fortunes of PINGOs, a Maasai NGO network in northern Tanzania, the rise and fall of which is recounted by Cameron (2001) and Igoe (forthcoming). In their enthusiasm donors threw so much money into the network that it became more accountable to its donors than its constituents, and

eventually unravelled in a mire of internal in-fighting among member NGOs over funding.

The principal means by which donors have supported networking has been the funding of seminars and workshops. Anglophone newspapers are full of reports recounting the proceedings of numerous workshops on every conceivable development topic from HIV/AIDS and youth to gender and poverty eradication. A more direct approach being pioneered by DFID Tanzania signals the desire within the donor community to engineer a coherent civil society which is capable of engaging with the reform programme. DFID Tanzania's recently-launched Civil Society Programme (CSP), whose 35-page grant application form includes a section on 'project linkages', actively encourages applications from consortia and projects which make wider linkages within the NGO and public sectors;

> *"The whole CSP has emphasis on networking and linking to others. A high percentage of applications are rejected because they don't make any wider linkages. We tell them that we recommend strongly that they make these linkages. We have stopped funding NGOs in isolation, they must be seen to work with others and be aware of what else is going on now. Civil Society has to work together if we are going to fund them. They must make linkages with government and other organisations in civil society. We are encouraging civil society to hold government to account" (official, Dar es Salaam, September 2001).*

NGOs themselves have tended to take a more ambivalent approach to coaltion-building to date, favouring sporadic attendances at conferences, workshops and seminars[11] over sustained attempts to build networks. However, interest in ICTs has recently prompted several donors[12] working in Tanzania to support NGOs with access to information technology in an attempt to catalyse the new 'e-civil society'. The following excerpt from Hivos' website (which funds, among others, TGNP) is indicative of the donor approach;

> *"Access to information is access to power. Hivos' development efforts in this field focus on community building, strengthening civil society, networking and political lobbying. The use of ICT here is extremely effective, if not indispensable....ICT is inexpensive and democratic...The Internet forces leaders and rulers to be more open; it is a powerful weapon in the hands of democratisation movements, internationally operating NGOs and activists"*
> *([http://www.hivos.nl/english/themes/ict/policy/pag.htm](http://www.hivos.nl/english/themes/ict/policy/pag.htm), accessed on 26.03.02).*

Donors appear to be seduced by the potential of ICTs to reap democratic ends. As so often happens with ideas about technological 'fixes' conceived by the international donor community, however, local social, cultural and political nuances which have significant implications for the way in which such fixes are interpreted, appropriated and practiced at the local level, are overlooked in the midst of the hype and pressure to spend donor money. We now turn to a consideration of these factors.

### *Donor funding*

The first issue concerns the tensions between donors and NGOs over funding. Donors have fixed ideas about what appropriate networking entails, what they will fund, and who they will fund to do it. The present ICT fetish in development practice, coupled with pressure on donors to spend money on measurable outcomes from 'low-risk NGOs', means that they are far happier to fund the professionalisation of cherry-picked NGOs or one-off workshops on 'trendy' development issues, than they are willing to support the mundane daily administrative costs of a coalition. For 'high-risk' NGOs lacking a track record, it is therefore impossible to gain funds for overhead costs. Even for 'low-risk' NGOs, there is tension between what NGOs and donors consider to be appropriate funding to cover networking activities. Donors may well be willing to provide ICT hardware, but they are less willing to fund the administrative side of organising NGO networks; the meetings, the overheads, and administrative time. These are much more opaque activities with less tangible outcomes; they are diffuse and more risky as they are tied to a number of NGOs (not all of which will meet individual donors' criteria for

funding); and yet these are indispensable aspects of a well-functioning coalition.  As one NGO explained;

> *"most supporters [i.e. donors] don't feel comfortable supporting a network, they would rather go to an implementing agency, they want direct rather than indirect action.  They would rather support a conference with a fancy title like 'HIV/AIDS and poverty and the future of youth' or something"* (Dar es Salaam, July 2001).

Individual NGOs are unlikely to pick up the administrative costs of networking themselves as their funds are already tied to specific activities for which they are accountable to donors, and staff time is already strained without taking on what are seen as 'extra activities'.  Even TCDD, one of the most prominent, and in donor eyes, most promising of NGO networks in Tanzania, had problems securing on-going support for it's day-to-day functioning.  This created tension between local and international NGOs within the coalition.  The international NGOs were considered to have more resources at their disposal, yet they were reluctant to commit these to the coalition. As one TCDD member argued;

> *"Physical meetings are what is important.  We are really behind in ICT.  For many Tanzanians the computer is really terrifying.  There is inequitable access to ICTs in Tanzania....Dar....Arusha, and that's it.  The rest of the country you are talking about physical mail, or ringing, which is expensive.  So we meet at workshops. Once people have the knowledge they need to organise....but donors wont support this"* (Arusha, August 2001).

### Culture and technology

The second issue involves the implicit cultural norms and expectations bound up in donor visions of ICTs, in which the intrinsic universal utility of email and the Internet is assumed to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries.  In practice, however, local appropriations of technology can be diverse.  According to proponents of the social construction of technology school, technological artefacts are subject to 'interpretative

flexibility' (Kline and Pinch 1999) by different social groups. In the African context, a recent study of ICT use within African governments (Berman and Tettey 2001), suggests that accepted (i.e. western) social practices associated with ICTs are, in fact, culturally mediated and therefore context-dependent. They argue that the introduction of computer technology into African bureaucracies, in an attempt to make them more efficient and accountable, overlooks the myriad social, cultural and political manifestations of neo-patrimonial behaviour, which simply find new ways to circumnavigate the donors' technological fix. The point is that behaviour cannot be changed in pre-determined ways by the introduction of new technology. So it is with Tanzanian NGOs' appropriation of email and the Internet.

Tanzanian NGOs have not embraced email as a fast, effective and decentralised form of communication. There are two reasons for this. First, the technology has preceded the demand, such are the politics of the NGO sector. We return to this issue below. Second, email is anathema to local cultures of communication which place emphasis on orality, social relationships and social hierarchy. Email is generally eschewed in favour of telephone calls, letters or physical meetings. Some informants viewed their own reactions to email as a cultural deficit ("it's a problem of culture, we are very lazy, we are not reading", local NGO, Dar es Salaam, September 2001) while others were more sanguine, preferring to view the western cultural practices associated with email as simply being at variance with African practices. As one Tanzanian NGO explained at length;

> "Not everybody believes in email [i.e. uses it]. Telephone calls can be more costly but they are important. Email is not valued by others as there is no reply. Physical meeting is important in the African context. Email is not personal enough. It is good to promote IT but it should not replace personal contact. Africa has an oral tradition, this is the thing we know, for example, if I buy a map I would still rather ask people for directions than look at the map. The Western tradition is reading and email. In Africa there are two things to consider; oral culture, and intimidation of computers. Even at university most students don't see a computer.

*We need time to internalise these things. We are not used to seeing objects as a source of infomation. You ask someone [instead]. It's a way of interacting, interaction is valued" (Arusha, August 2001).*

The manipulation of electronic communication is therefore context-dependent. Email developed in western industrialised countries as a decentralised system of communication capable of bypassing social hierarchy. In Tanzania, the utility of information technology must be seen in the context of the local socio-cultural norms which shape social relations in the NGO office environment. Younger members of staff are often more conversant with ICTs than are their seniors, and yet they do not have the authority to read emails, let alone to act upon them. Many organisations have one centralised email address, which means, in practice, that the inbox of the executive director often becomes unmanageable. If the director is absent from the office, no-one else is mandated to represent or make decisions on behalf of the organisation. Similar social hierarchies can be observed during physical meetings and seminars, particularly those which involve government officials. Participants are expected to adhere to particular socio-cultural performative protocols; such as the order and length of welcomes and introductions, and the order in which speakers may take the floor (and for what duration). Senior (often male) officials dominate proceedings. Formality and social hierarchy are important factors which shape the way in which contributions are made or information is exchanged in public fora.

Email also lacks the immediacy often required to elicit an urgently-required response, or a sought-after government document. The response to email is problematic for informal coalitions which depend on their members putting in extra time, effort and resources over and above their own organisations' commitments. Coalition participation is not institutionalised in the member NGOs. One informant suggested, "we just look at it [the email] and say we will read it later". Resource constraints facing NGOs, even the well-funded ones, mitigate against the use of email as a major form of communication. Staff simply do not have the time nor the expertise to contribute to debates about macroeconomics and reform, or to read, annotate and return attachments, unless they are of immediate significance. The lack of appropriate computer training, and lack of

confidence in the English language, are two further barriers which discourage wider use of ICTs among some NGO staff.  For most NGOs then, the most significant exchanges of information take place in a physical context;

> *"we [NGOs] have been allowed to contribute a lot [to the policy process] at very senior levels, and this has mostly taken place around meetings.  The use of technology in this process has been very limited and of varying quality and efficiency.  Most of the information exchange is through meetings....you really need to be in the right place at the right time...you just have to chase the information"* (international NGO, Dar es Salaam, July 2001).

It is important to stress that it is not the author's aim here to compare Tanzanian NGOs against an implicit standard of 'appropriate' (i.e. western) email usage; nor is it to label Tanzanians as somehow technologically backward.  NGOs' particular use of ICTs has as much to do with the politics of the NGO sector and the relatively recent introduction of ICTs into NGOs' operations as it does with local cultural appropriations of technology. The point is that ICTs have simply been interpreted and incorporated into locally-based strategies in a manner not envisaged by those funding access to the technology itself.  As we have already seen, this is as evident with NGOs' appropriation of the Internet as it is with email.  The particular experience of NGOs is thrown into relief by a consideration of the usage of email among the Tanzanian middle classes more generally.  Internet cafes in urban areas have proliferated with startling speed, with estimates of the number of cafes across Tanzania as high as 1000 (SIDA 2001).  Email has become a major passtime of young educated city elites[13].  A further case in point is the *ethinktank Tanzania* email discussion list for Tanzania-based IT professionals and other interested parties to Tanzania's ICT policy.  In contrast to the *Hakikazi* NGO discussion list, postings and debate on this list is relatively lively, no doubt because ICTs are central to the working lives of the participants.  Local cultural interpretations of technology, then, can offer only a partial explanation for the lack of interest in electronic communication among NGOs.

*** The politics of reform and the commodification of information***

The third issue which requires consideration, then, is the political context in which information exchange among NGOs is embedded. In Tanzania, liberalisation and reform has fundamentally changed the way in which information circulates within and between institutions. In the new era of reform, donors have become extremely powerful and their agendas have shaped many of the changes in the public and NGO sectors over the last decade. For both government and NGOs, the satisfaction of donor reporting requirements is essential if continued support is to be sought. Information itself has become a commodity in a context in which the Tanzanian civil service produces some 2,400 documents a year to satisfy IFI and donor requirements (Kelsall forthcoming). The pace, and sheer volume, of information and knowledge generated by the reform process creates problems for those NGOs committed to monitoring government performance;

> *"The process is now so donor-driven, they [donors] require a fast response but government here is just not used to it....the speed required is not the traditional pace at which information usually circulates. People are always wary of what you say and where it goes and who sees it and what it means. People prefer to send it to only the top guy who is the only one who sees it and gets is approved before it is distributed. This is the problem of information and the government is legitimately struggling with it....donors are not helpful because they are pushing their own interests in government processes. Donors call the tune and are really directing the process" (International NGO, Dar es Salaam, July 2001).*

On the one hand then, there is some resistance within government to the wider circulation of knowledge and information via unsupervised media. This creates problems for NGOs as patchy access to information presents a major barrier to their effective participation in policy debates.

Moreover, the expectation that NGOs will work together given better communication facilities simply amounts to a technical fix which fails to take into account the politics of the NGO sector itself. In the context of limited donor funding, information, knowledge and experience accrued by an NGO over time becomes a commodity which NGOs are

reluctant to share.   Although an elite minority of NGOs collaborate in the context of the reform process, tensions between the interests of the network and the individual agendas of member NGOs create problems for the effectiveness of the coalition.  The fact that donor funding for the majority of NGOs is limited and difficult to access makes for competitive relationships between NGOs.  Tension exists, for example, between Tanzanian and international NGOs, the latter of whom are often subject to suspicion because of their 'outsider' status coupled with their well-resourced operations.  The NGO sector also cleaves along lines of ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations, with further differences arising between NGOs who join different umbrella organsiations, and between those seen as 'close to the state' and those who carve a more independent identity.  Donors are aware of the frictions between different groups of NGOs; indeed, this is generally seen as one of the weaknesses which donors can overcome by targeting funding to cherry picked NGOs.  However, they appear oblivious to the fact that their funding regimes are part of the problem.

**Conclusion**

This paper has sought to look beyond the ICT fetishism currently pervading discussions on development in order to consider the use of information technology by social actors who are themselves located within broader social, cultural and political relationships. Taking the case of the NGO sector in Tanzania, an exclusive focus on measuring the impact of ICTs has been eschewed in an attempt to understand the nuanced ways in which NGOs make use of ICTs in their everyday operations.

What has emerged clearly is the divergence of NGO appropriations of technological artefacts from donors' intentions to build an online civil society.  ICTs are valued by NGOs because they project the organisation onto the global stage, increasing their chances of securing a donor, and thereby, ensuring institutional survival.  ICTs also serve as a symbol of modernity, indicating the professional and sophisticated nature of an NGO's operation.  However, the deployment of ICTs as a status symbol is a limited strategy for NGOs.  To date, access to ICTs has simply served to futher widen the gap between Tanzania's elite urbane NGO sector which engages in the debates of

international development discourse, and the majority of small rural NGOs and CBOs, which do not. If the aim of Tanzania's donors is to create an elite civil society which speaks to their concerns but which is unable to engage the broad mass of Tanzania's population, then ICTs may serve their needs very well. This seems a somewhat ironic outcome, given the rhetoric of inclusivity and participation associated with ICTs.

The fragility of the exercise of engineering civil society has been illuminated here, and yet donors have yet to recognise their own complicity in creating problems as well as limited opportunities for NGOs. Given the relative youth of most Tanzanian NGOs, the demands placed upon them by donors, and the wider political economy of reform in which NGOs are embedded, it is hardly surprising that institutional survival becomes one of their key concerns. Once this context becomes clear, we are in a position to make more sober judgements about the role ICTs are likely to play in 'democratising development'. Donors may yet discover that their funding regimes ultimately serve to undermine their attempts to engineer an online civil society in Tanzania.

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[1] The following are just a handful of high-profile donor initiatives to increase the use of ICT in African countries; the African Information Society Initiative (UNECA), the Leland Initiative (USAID), Info21 (UNDP), the Digital Opportunity Taskforce (G8), the multilateral InfoDev project led by the World Bank, and the Bellanet initiative headed by the International Development Research Centre in Canada.

[2] While this author makes a conceptual distinction between 'NGOs', which are the empirical focus of this paper, and the broader idea of 'civil society' (Mercer 2002), it is nevertheless the case that many of the actors dealt with here (donors, government and NGOs themselves) conflate NGOs with civil society in Tanzania. Since the paper analyses donor and NGO visions of 'civil society' this conflation is reproduced here.

[3] For a review of recent reforms see Harrison (2001), Kelsall (forthcoming), Therkildsen (2000).

[4] In all, twenty-eight NGOs were interviewed for this study (twelve in Dar es Salaam and sixteen in Arusha; three of which were international NGOs). See table 1 for a summary of their ICT facilities.

[5] South African Human Rights NGO Network (SAHRINGON), South African NGO Network (SANGONet), *Mwelekeo wa NGO* (MWENGO [Swahili], 'Vision of NGOs') an NGO umbrella and development centre for NGOs based in Zimbabwe.

[6] [Swahili]: employment or work rights.

[7] Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, the government plan for achieving pro-poor economic growth; the implementation of which is a condition of qualification for HIPC funds from the World Bank and IMF.

[8] See: http://www.hakikazi.org/

[9] 'Statement from gender groups to chief executives of the World Bank and IMF at their meeting in Dar es Salaam' (21st Feb 2001), posted to Africa Policy Information Centre (APIC) (http://www.africaaction.org/docs01/tan0102.htm). This statement was followed by two more, from TGNP and TANGO, denouncing the Dar es Salaam police for arresting NGO staff during a demonstration outside the hotel where the IFIs' meetings were held. When challenged on the matter, President Mkapa claimed not to know anything of the arrests and ordered them to be freed, stating the right of civil society to peaceful protest. The second statement from FemAct, 'Donors and government marginalise civil society in the CG process' (6th September 2001) was also posted to APIC.

[10] Tanzania Association of Non-Governmental Organizations, one of the two main umbrella organisations on the mainland.

[11] See Kelsall (2002) for a critique of the 'workshopocracy' culture among NGOs and donors in Tanzania.

[12] These include CIDA, CORDAID, Ford Foundation, HIVOS, Oxfam GB and Ireland, NORAD, NOVIB, SIDA, and UNAIDS.

[13] A survey carried out by the author in three internet cafes in Dar es Salaam over a week in August 2001 revealed that 63% of users were male, 85% were aged under 30, and 85% of respondents had completed secondary school, with 16% holding degrees.