

People Speaking Back?

Media, Empowerment and Democracy in East Africa (MEDIEA)

A 2009-2012 collaborative research program between Denmark, Kenya and Tanzania

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1. Introduction

Democratic development in Africa has evolved with intensity over the past 10-15 years, as seen most clearly in the moves away from one-party to multi-party systems, the emerging civil society and the increasingly free and independent media. Many African countries have furthermore undergone not just an economic de-regulation and liberalization, but a strong economic growth. Kenya and Tanzania have experienced yearly growth rate around 6% in recent years (udviklingstal.dk/World Bank 2007).

However, one of the major challenges in the process of democratic development and economic growth is *to secure inclusive development processes*, where all groups of society are participants, feel included, have a say in decisions influencing them and see a way forward in their individual and collective development. One vulnerable group is *youth, particularly young women*, often excluded from public debate, economic development and decision-making processes. Another growing concern has been the ways and means whereby governments maintain *transparency in the policy development and –implementation*, and issues of how such governments are held accountable to their constituencies. The *role of civil society and the media* in improving processes of good governance has been recognised throughout Africa (Jones and Mhando 2006).

Poverty alleviation, social inclusion and good governance are fundamental development challenges in Africa today and central in the poverty-reduction strategy papers that Tanzania and Kenya have recently reviewed and improved, noting good governance, accountability, and the improvement of quality of life and social well-being as explicit development objectives (IMF 2005, PRSP/Country Reports Kenya and Tanzania). The key questions for this research program emerge in the context of this development process in East Africa and in response to national development concerns in Kenya and Tanzania.

MEDIEA's analytical challenge is to understand the ways and means in which youth as ordinary citizens engage with such civil society driven media and communication platforms, and what socio-cultural and political outcomes this may have. The focus will be primarily on the role of youth – understood both as engaged and high frequency media users (consumers and producers) and as key players in the development processes in countries with youth-oriented demographic characteristics, as is the case in Tanzania and Kenya.

MEDIEA will unfold into six qualitative research project components, two of which will be complemented with quantitative data. The project components will examine a number of development initiatives involving youth. Three of them will be empirically grounded in Kenya, and three in Tanzania.

2. Overall and intermediate objectives

MEDIEA's overall objective is to explore the role that civil society driven media and communication technologies can potentially have in enhancing participatory governance processes in East Africa, particularly in Kenya and Tanzania.

Six intermediate objectives will guide the research:

1. What is the current situation of young people, particularly marginalized female youth, vis-à-vis the development challenge of the country, and how does government, media and civil society act in response to the youth situation?
2. How do young people experience, make use of and engage in civil society driven media and communication platforms (be they analogue or digital)?
3. What do these media and communication platforms do/produce, and how socially inclusive are the production processes?
4. What mechanisms are developed to hold governments accountable and transparent? (What advocacy strategies do the involved civil society organisations have, if any)?
5. How do the civil society organisations ensure their own legitimacy and accountability to the groups of citizens on whose behalf they advocate?
6. How is the legitimacy and accountability of the selected NGOs/CSOs experienced at community level?

3. Background

Media and civil society

Africa is confronted with the challenge to integrate the continent into the information society, as reflected both in Kenya's and Tanzania's Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and in the Danish Africa policy (Danida 2006). Africa's isolation must be overcome by reducing the digital divide and facilitating the continent's absorption into the global information society. A 'broker' in facilitating this process in East Africa is civil society. Over the past years, it has acquired experience in using the media and communication technologies in the fight against HIV/AIDS, and big, sustainable and visible media platforms have been developed. NGOs have created a platform that has given them political clout, visibility in the population and gradually a stronger role as change agents that can mobilize, advocate and influence. Civil society-driven platforms have become central for the work of enhancing participatory governance – a process that MEDIEA wishes to assess critically.

A growing number of African communication initiatives have evolved into strong NGO-driven media platforms constituting very visible parts of the public sphere. Thematically, they continue to play key roles in engaging public debate around health and gender-related issues. But because they have grown to such a magnitude and hold such a strong position within the public sphere, they are being approached by others that wish to use them as carriers of local, national and global messages and as vehicles to articulate public debate around a variety of development issues (e.g. electoral education, environment and climate change and sexual and reproductive health and rights).

These civil society-driven media platforms have developed into key actors in promoting public debate. Their ability to set agendas in the mediated public sphere and thereby holding government accountable has grown. Some of the NGOs are increasingly powerful players in influencing both upwards (policy development, policy dialogues, mediated conversation with opinion leaders) and

downwards, in sharing knowledge and information, changing social norms and values, enhancing social mobilization, providing space for citizens to voice their concerns, and in facilitating social networking.

The potential of information and communication technologies to create multi-directional and interactive forms of communication has given cause to great expectations regarding the potential role of the Internet, mobile phone applications and other networked digital media to further civil society-state interactions for the purpose of democratisation and good governance in East Africa.

With MEDIEA we want to contribute to the production of an essentially African body of knowledge on the role of these civil society-driven media and ICTs initiative and their role in the economic and social development process.

Two social processes are of particular interest to MEDIEA:

1. *The actual access for young (primarily female) citizens to these media and communication technologies.* Why and how do they engage with these media? What processes of empowerment, what feelings of ownership, leadership and commitment may arouse when young people with no tradition of public representation and participation suddenly see themselves in a magazine, hear themselves on the radio or sense public interest in their blog?
2. *The societal outcomes and impact such processes may entail* – primarily on governance issues. What are the interconnections between the popular participation in civil society driven media and communication platforms on one side, and the demand for accountability and good governance on the other? What strategic roles are civil society organisations playing? What are the democratic strengths and weaknesses in the mechanisms currently under development?

MEDIEA will highlight the opportunities and challenges that the younger generation of Sub-Saharan Africans face as they attempt to adopt mass media, community media and ICTs as a means to improve the prospects of their present and future lives. These processes of media adoption and content creation will be analysed in terms of the conditions, processes, methods, and strategies that shape and determine young people's engagement and appropriation of a broad variety of media and communication technologies. MEDIEA will also explore the role existing media/ICTs platforms have played so far in the communicative empowerment of young citizens from Kenya and Tanzania and their potential for future pro-youth development.

MEDIEA aims at contributing to a better understanding of the questions how best to engage young people who face specific conditions and challenges of living; how to organise these attempts in terms of institutional organisation and strategies of dialogical, participatory communication, and in terms of their aesthetic, technological and discursive materializations of networked media/online 'content' realized.

Media matters in good governance

In 2006, the 3rd Global Monitoring Report (GMR) of the World Bank – which tracks the progress on the MDG targets for 2015 – cited media as a 'crucial pillar of good governance and the critical link in the accountability chain between the government and the governed' (Harvey 2007). DFID, in its latest White Paper 'Eliminating World Poverty: Making Governance Work for the Poor', points to the necessity to 'strengthen civil society and the media to help citizens hold their governments to account'.

In October 2005, the first ‘Global Forum for Media Development’ (GFMD) gathering the media assistance sector took place in Amman, Jordan: gathered 425 representatives of media assistance organisations from 97 countries and a long range of agencies and foundations supported the initiative and were present. Five key messages addressed to policy makers were formulated:

1. *The New Governance Agenda*. Independent media are integral to good governance. Media and Press Freedom indicators are being included in governance monitoring frameworks. But development agency engagement in media and communication assistance remains fragmented and marginal.
2. *Media Governance and the Millennium Development Goals*. Independent media systems have a positive impact on governance, democratic transitions and the 2015 MDG targets. A growing body of empirical evidence demonstrates this. New communication technologies are reframing relationships between media, citizens and the state. Community media empowers those poorest communities who will benefit most from achieving the MDGs. However, research on the impact of media and communications on the poor needs to be strengthened.
3. *Counterbalance to Extremism*. Independent media systems that are inclusive and responsive to diversity play a key role in preventing the exclusion of voices that breed extremism. Healthy public spheres can host a wide range of views, which can dilute intolerance. Policy makers should increase support for media assistance programmes to widen access for moderate voices and balanced discourse. Donors should engage systematically in media development in countries affected by extremism, as this threatens progress on the MDGs.
4. *Media and Global Issues*. The lack of local media coverage of the external driving forces of change on poor countries – international trade, climate change and global health, for instance – is generating deficits in governance through continued public disengagement in these issues. These deficits can be tackled through concerted media and communications strategies such as e.g. assisting developing country journalists to cover processes such as the next phase of the Kyoto Protocol.
5. *Strategies for Healthy Media Systems*. A global media assistance community exists that has its own history, experience base, metrics and research agenda. Development agencies need to engage with this sector with urgency in order to harness the proven contribution that media development can make to the MDGs through established strategies such as support to media policy and legislation, the development of journalism associations, the provision of affordable capital, professional training and the capacity-building of indigenous media assistance organisations.

These issues raise a series of questions as to the role of the media in processes of governance to be explored by MEDIeA:

- What media indicators exist and how are they integrated into governance monitoring frameworks in Kenya and Tanzania?
- In which way are independent media systems impacting governance and democratic development in Kenya and Tanzania? And more specifically: how are media and communications impacting upon the poor and most marginalized in Kenya and Tanzania?
- In which way are the new communication technologies reframing relationships between media, citizens and the state?
- What do we understand by a ‘healthy public sphere’? What are the underlying principles for its function?
- In which way do the civil society organisations MEDIeA focuses on enhance and support the on-going development and existence of a broad, critical and accessible public sphere?

4. Theoretical framework

Theoretically, MEDIeA situates itself within the framework of communication for social change (Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte 2006). The consolidation of communication for development as a core tool in development cooperation is partially due to recent technological developments that allow for the production of high-standard print and electronic media by non-professionals, and partially due to the convergence of old and new media within digital channels of distribution and networking. An increasingly mediatised society requires insights and critical investigations into the potential multiple uses of all forms of communication. Alternative communication and ‘citizen media’ are central elements in this object of study (Downing 2001, Rodriguez 2001).

The relevance of MEDIeA emerges from the growing international focus on people-centred communication as a tool in processes of development and social change (Servaes 2007, Hemer & Tufte 2005). MEDIeA has its roots in a series of parallel developments that speak to the relevance of a research agenda that can contribute to qualify and improve the use of people-centred communication as a tool to articulate development, social innovation and change processes at all levels.

Most scholars and practitioners agree intuitively on the positive role that media and ICTs can play in respective processes of development, but the links between the aims and the use of media/ICTs-for-development are yet to be clearly established and rigorously supported by empirical results from Africa. The rapid growth and development of media and ICTs may be impressive, but their fast growing presence cannot determine the changes expected from their uses. The social context in which they have been introduced and are implemented determines their uses and impacts. The digital revolution is relevant for Africa only if it takes into consideration the daily realities and aspirations of individuals (Uimonen 1997).

Decentralisation, voice and social inclusion

A major constraint for poor people and citizens of low-income regions or countries is the lack of an effective voice in public life, particularly concerning decisions on policies and laws that directly affect their livelihood. Governance, delivery of social services and the interaction between the state and its citizens are key areas for using media and ICTs to promote social inclusion, improve information flows and empower people. Quick and efficient access to information increases transparency and accountability of the government. Mediated forms of people-centred communication can facilitate decentralisation: local media are able to adapt information to the local context. Owing to suitable information, the community is better able to monitor service delivery. Access to information on rights, facilities and services empowers citizens. Moreover, community media and the Internet provide a tool for effective sharing of knowledge and views. ICTs-supported networks are effective tools for building alliances and interest groups. (Weigel and Waldburger 2004).

Participation and good governance

MEDIeA has its roots in two parallel developments. On one hand, the field of communication for development has a tremendous growth over the past years experienced – a field in which *participatory communication* has come to play a significant role (Servaes et al, 2007; Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte 2006). On the other hand, growing attention to *good governance* has come to be one of the most significant innovations in recent development thinking (Gaventa 2006, Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Kabeer 2005). Noteworthy, however, is the rather limited focus on the role that people-centred communication can potentially play in enhancing processes of governance.

Meanwhile, a process of convergence that articulates an emerging paradigm of communication for social change with issues of accountability, transparency and citizen's rights in governance processes (Wilkins 2000) seems to be gradually underway. Institutions working for good governance are grappling with how to incorporate the media and communication into their projects beyond the traditional support of freedom of expression and free and independent media (UNDP/OGC 2006; Panos 2006; Servaes et al, 2007). Some of the 'people-centred communication' initiatives that constitute MEDIEA's case studies are witness to this trend.

5. Research methodology

Methodologically, the six project components in MEDIEA are organized along two parallel tracks, guided by geography: a Kenyan track and a Tanzanian track, each with three project components. The foci of these project components are guided by the program's six intermediate objectives, which have crystallized into three different foci:

1. *An organisational, rather top-down focus* on how civil society organisations work in the sphere of good governance and holding government accountable. Focus will be on qualitative methodologies to immerse into the logic and practice of CSOs.
2. *A community focus, rather bottom-up in perspective*, focused on the use of ethnographic tools to generate the required insights as outlined above.
3. *A focus on both national policy developments as well as on securing a breadth in community data.*

6. Input and activities

MEDIEA proposes a three-pronged strategy of action for its six project components, consisting of research, capacity building and dissemination.

Research: project components

Three project components will be developed in Tanzania. Thomas Tufte (Denmark, principal investigator) will focus on the organisational study of one Tanzanian NGO and critically assess the development and role of civil society in Tanzania in ensuring accountability and good governance. Datus Rweyemamu (Tanzania, Lecturer and MEDIEA's senior researcher) will focus on a multi-pronged, primarily quantitative study of youth groups, their media and communication patterns and their reception of primarily health communication messages. The Tanzanian PhD student will focus on an ethnographic study amongst young groups in two different communities, one rural and one urban.

Three project components will be developed in Kenya. Norbert Wildermuth (Denmark, Associate Professor and MEDIEA's senior researcher) will focus his fieldwork on 3 Kenyan NGOs, using primarily qualitative data collection instruments. Winnie Mitullah, (Kenya, Associate Research Professor and MEDIEA's senior researcher) will be his collaborating senior researcher at IDS, University of Nairobi, while Grace Githaiga's (Kenya, PhD student) study will be based on an ethnographic study of two multimedia-facilitated communication initiatives, located in two different communities, one rural and one urban.

Capacity building

Capacity building will include:

- The organization of capacity building workshops to be held in Kenya and Denmark. Focusing on key methodological and theoretical research challenges, the workshops will further develop the potential of MEDIEA's researchers and their research assistants.
- Hosting an international research conference in compliance with international norms and standards.
- Participation with paper presentations in international research conferences.
- Visiting scholars. MEDIEA's Kenyan and Tanzanian senior researchers, Winnie Mitullah and Datus Rweyemamu, will spend time in RUC and SDU as visiting scholars.
- PhD studies in Denmark. Two PhD-students, a Kenyan and a Tanzanian, will spend time in RUC and SDU to work in active collaboration with their Danish co-supervisors.

Dissemination

Besides the above mentioned capacity building activities, MEDIEA's dissemination strategy will include: International Reference Group meetings, policy dialogue workshops, books, articles and working papers. Publications anticipated will comprise one International Anthology reporting key findings, a series of MEDIEA Working Papers, two PhD theses to be published as books, a series of articles in peer reviewed journals, and international conference papers.

7. Outputs

There will be outputs of two types: research-oriented outputs, as outlined above in referring to publications foreseen and policy-oriented outputs.

Policy-oriented outputs will include:

- International Policy Dialogues (meetings with our International Advisory Board consisting of influential players in key international organisations);
- Regional East Africa Policy Dialogues (dialogue workshops to debrief key policy makers, opinions leaders, high-level civil servants, representatives of civil society and the donor community in Kenya and Tanzania, in which MEDIEA will present key policy recommendations); and
- Danish Policy Dialogue (a dialogue will be sought with relevant players amongst the Danish resource base, NGO-community, academic community and the donor community).

8. Time frame

MEDIEA runs from mid 2009 to mid 2013, totalling four years. The period will be organised in four core work phases, providing the six project components a framework to coordinate with each other.

1. *Building the scientific platform.* Reviewing theories, policies and methodologies, and holding inaugural conference and internal capacity building workshops.
2. *Data collection and production.* Conducting fieldwork, producing data, coordinating and exchanging experiences on workshop.
3. *Analysis.* Writing up analyses and producing publications and dissertations.

4. *Dissemination, policy dialogue and capacity building*. Presenting research findings regionally and internationally, disseminating them and promoting policy dialogue with all relevant stakeholders.

9. Organisation and management

The program is coordinated and managed by the principal investigator, Thomas Tufte, and institutionally hosted by ØRECOMM – Consortium for Communication and Glocal Change. ØRECOMM is a bi-national research platform established in 2008 between RUC in Denmark, and Malmö University in Sweden, aimed at strengthening research on communication for development in Scandinavia and in collaborating partner countries. Thomas Tufte is the Danish director of the consortium, institutionally rooted in the Department of Communication, Business and Information Technologies at RUC.

Cooperation agreements have been signed between RUC and the three participating partner institutions. The steering committee of MEDIEA consists of the program's six researchers, each of them responsible for the planning and implementation of their respective project components, including recruitment and training of fieldwork and project assistants.

A common platform to present the MEDIEA program to the public to include core information about it will be developed on ØRECOMM's web portal, www.orecomm.net.

The International Advisory Board will secure MEDIEA's connection to the 'practitioner world' as well as to the international academic debate, ensuring that research findings connect to the cutting edge international debate and to the work of practitioners centrally placed in development cooperation. The Board will meet with the MEDIEA research team for reviews where all aspects - research design, methodology, thematic focus, findings and recommendations- will be thoroughly discussed. Another aim of the Board is to 'open doors' to relevant influential institutions working with similar issues and articulate a continuous debate between researchers and practitioners.