

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

Focus on freedom of expression and association online



This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.

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ETHIOPIA

BUILDING ACCESS AS A HUMAN RIGHT



Ethiopian Free and Open Source Software Network (EFOSSNET)

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Introduction

Ethiopia, the second fastest growing economy in sub-Saharan Africa,¹ is expanding access to information and communications technologies (ICTs), which are regarded as one of the engines of its ambitious economic growth plan, the Growth and Transformation Plan 2011-2015. Like many countries in Africa, the explosion of access to telecommunications services has been most prominent in the mobile market. The mobile penetration rate increased from less than 0.55% in 2005 to 4.89% in 2009. The expansion of the telecom sector has made record growth in the last two years or so since telecom provider ETC was renamed Ethio Telecom following the takeover of its management by the French telecom provider Orange. In July 2011, Ethio Telecom announced that it had exceeded 10 million mobile subscribers. The incumbent announced that the total number of clients, including fixed-line and internet subscribers, had reached 11.3 million clients.²

However, other telecom segments have not developed as quickly as the mobile business. The penetration rate of fixed-line subscribers, for example, increased from 0.82% in 2005 to 1.1% in 2009.³ Internet access across Ethiopia is also very low. The penetration rate in the country is one of the lowest in Africa, standing on the same footing as Liberia at 0.5% in 2011.⁴ But this penetration rate is slowly increasing as wireless broadband technology becomes more established and prices fall.

This report considers the progress achieved in the telecom sector in Ethiopia and its impact on the socioeconomic and political development of the country, with particular reference to the role of the internet and mobile in the socio-political landscape.

Policy and political background

The role played by ICTs in the socioeconomic and political development of the nation is well recognised in the emphasis given to the sector in recent years. Its significant contribution to GDP has been growing (for example, 1.38% in 2008). However, the sector remains a monopoly of the government with no clear sign of liberalisation in the near future. As a result, the sector has not been exploited to its full potential in the last few years through diversified and value-added services.

While the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia guarantees freedom of expression and of the mass media, a number of people argue that some of the recently enacted legislation could potentially restrict such freedoms.

The recently enacted legislation regarding access to and dissemination of information is the Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation (Proclamation No. 590/2008). This proclamation, in its Article 4 on Freedom of Mass Media, stipulates that “freedom of the mass media is constitutionally guaranteed. Censorship in any form is prohibited.” Article 12 of this proclamation on the Right of Access to Information states that “all persons have the right to seek, obtain and communicate any information held by public bodies, except as expressly provided for by this Proclamation.” As stated in this article, this right includes access to information from any public body by means of “diskettes, floppies or any other electronic mode or through print-outs where such information is stored in a computer or in any other device.”

Furthermore, the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation No. 620/2009 provides the executive organs – for instance, the National Intelligence and Security Service – the power under court warrant to gather or collect information, intercept or conduct surveillance of telephones, faxes, radio, the internet, electronic, postal and similar communications, and to enter into any premise in secret to enforce that interception, or install or remove instruments enabling the interception.

Key issues

Over the past five years, mobile and internet services have made significant contributions to the socioeconomic and political participation of the

1 World Bank (2011) *Global Economic Prospects 2011*, The World Bank, Washington, D.C.

2 www.ethionet.et

3 www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics

4 www.internetworldstats.com

citizenry. In this regard, a couple of events can be cited that can demonstrate such developments in the country.

One example in the context of social contributions, particularly by mobile service, is the use of RapidSMS in UNICEF's work in supporting the drought-affected areas in Ethiopia in 2008. The impact of this service was dramatic in that UNICEF Ethiopia launched a massive food distribution programme to supply the high-protein food Plumpy'nut to under-nourished children at more than 1,800 feeding centres in the country.⁵

Previously, UNICEF monitored the distribution of food by sending a group of individuals who travelled to each feeding centre. The monitoring group wrote down the amount of food that was received and distributed, and if more food was needed. But there had been a two-week to two-month delay between the collection of that data and analysis, which in turn delayed action. In a famine situation, each day can mean the difference between recovery and starvation, or even death.

With the use of RapidSMS, the delay was completely eliminated. After a short period of training, monitors were able to enter information directly into their mobile phones as SMS messages. This data would instantaneously appear on the server and immediately be visualised as graphs showing potential distribution problems and displayed on a map clearly showing where the problems were. The data, therefore, could be seen not only by the field office, but by the regional office, supply division and even the headquarters, greatly improving response coordination. The process of entering the data into phones was also easier and more cost effective for the monitors themselves, leading to quick adoption of the technology. In this context, it is highly important to have accurate and timely data to make decisions, so that where there are problems, response can be quick, and resources effectively allocated to ultimately save lives. This is a highly dramatic result of the use of mobile technology in social services.

Mobile technology has also been instrumental for the active participation of citizens in the recent political history of the country. The denial of public access to SMS by states is not new in the mobile arena. The SMS ban was enforced during the political unrest that followed the highly contentious May 2005 elections. At that time, the Ethiopian government banned SMS because, it claimed, the main opposition party was exploiting it to organise activities during the elections – just as happens

elsewhere. The opposition was particularly effective at using text messaging to mobilise its supporters and get them to the polling stations.

When the election result was announced and subsequently contested, the government moved quickly to shut down the SMS service to ensure the opposition party could not use it again.⁶ The service, which was interrupted in June 2005, was restored only after two years in September 2007. The restoration of the service improved the political space and allowed for its use by different actors for socioeconomic development activities, as seen in the case of the RapidSMS service for humanitarian aid.

However, mobile services have not developed far beyond basic voice and limited data services. With the expansion of the currently limited 3G network as well as integrated IP networks as a result of Ethio Telecom's NGN (next generation network) project being finalised and implemented, Ethio Telecom is able to provide data services (simple text/email messaging as well as internet and value-added services) in addition to basic mobile telephony. As a result we see a number of initiatives that have contributed to the socioeconomic development of the country.

The Ethiopian Commodity Exchange (ECX) is one recent success story. It provides IVR (interactive voice response) and SMS-based mobile market information delivery to farmers and traders, avoiding the information gap between the ends of the chain.

Nevertheless, despite this potential for socioeconomic and political participation, the adoption and use of the technologies has been slow. A number of factors could be contributing, including the illiteracy rate, the relative affordability of the telecom services compared to the average income, and insufficient transfer of technology among professionals and technology firms.

The impact of the internet is lower compared to the increasing penetration of mobile. Ethiopia, with the second largest population in Africa, had only 445,500 internet users in early 2011 with a penetration rate of 0.5%. Given that broadband internet is underpinning the fundamental rights of citizens in a number of countries like Finland, providing access to basic connectivity is of paramount importance if countries are to benefit from the global economy, and to participate in increasingly global political spaces.

To bring isolated communities into the global socioeconomic landscape, a number of technology solution providers have developed new technologies

⁵ www.mobileactive.org/preventing-famine-mobile

⁶ www.balancingact-africa.com/news/en/issue-no-374/telecoms/sms-ban-lifted-in-et/en

to facilitate communication and access to information. Nokia, for instance, recognises the impact of illiteracy in this regard, and the launch of mobile handsets with local language support in a number of models by the company is a commendable start. And as much as technology providers make every effort to provide mobile operating systems as well as software applications in local languages, it is also in the interest of governments to open up their telecom networks to ensure the full participation of citizens in the information society – and in return utilise the network's full potential for their development goals.

Conclusions

It is widely acknowledged that the internet is still in its infancy in Ethiopia. Access is limited and slow. Where broadband is available, it is typically very expensive – far beyond the financial means of the majority of Ethiopians. This is evident from the low number of fixed broadband internet subscribers, which stood at around 3,500 subscribers in 2009. The challenge for policy makers is to ensure that networks are capable of delivering broadband internet access at affordable prices.

To this end, the government has pledged to dedicate 10% of its annual budget to the development and maintenance of telecom networks.⁷ This effort will hopefully improve the expansion of the network and access to information and ICT services.

As seen in the examples above, the role of the internet and mobile in promoting the socio-economic and political participation of the citizenry is of paramount importance.

Currently, satellite internet is available to some large corporations, but individuals are not permitted to have private satellite connections. Ethio Telecom also bans call back or use of modern technology such as voice over internet protocol (VoIP).⁸

Furthermore, like many countries in Africa, the new ICTs are unequally distributed in Ethiopia, so that to speak of a new communication revolution is still something that must be interpreted within specific social perspectives. Seen in a broad perspective there can be little doubt that the media and the rise of new communication systems have contributed to democratisation in many African countries – including Ethiopia, where at least it has given some people access to information and alternative viewpoints and to channels in which to express their opinions and dissatisfaction.

Action steps

Given the low penetration of ICTs across the country, the role of multimedia community centres is important. These would serve to draw wide and new popular sectors into a media environment.

Low literacy levels and the dominance of international (especially English) rather than local languages on the internet serve to limit the use of computers. These challenges are part of wider issues of underdevelopment central to the role and future of communication policies. This includes connectivity and capacity problems, content development, questions of costs, and unequal social and political access.

Today, access to high-tech communications is accepted as integral to modern life. Communication systems are essential for commerce, culture and politics. More and more they are becoming a basis for multifaceted development strategies. Given the role of media and communication for social change and the full participation of citizens in the socio-economic and political development of the country, all-inclusive and gender-sensitive ICT policy implementation is essential to build the information society and benefit from the emerging information and knowledge economies. ■

⁷ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_in_Ethiopia

⁸ Adam, L. (2010) *Ethiopia ICT Sector Performance Review 2009/2010: Towards Evidence-based ICT Policy and Regulation*. www.researchICTafrica.net

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

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GISWATCH also includes thematic reports and an introduction from Frank La Rue, UN special rapporteur.

GISWATCH 2011 is the fifth in a series of yearly reports that critically cover the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GISWATCH is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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www.GISWatch.org

