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Thirty Years of Redemocratisation



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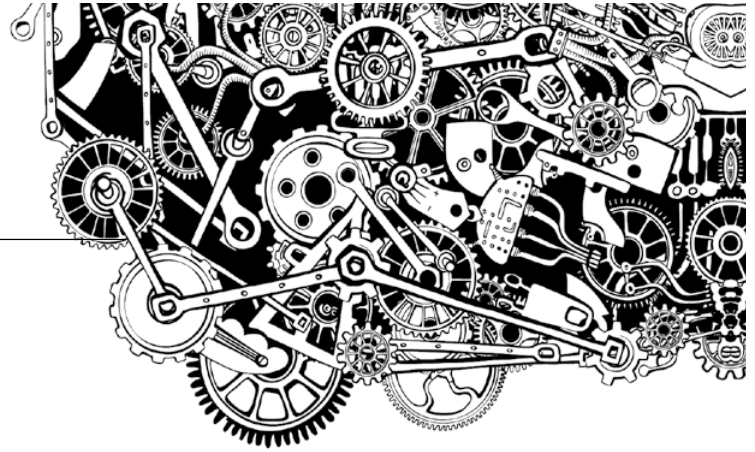
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Context Matters

The Role of ICTs for Supporting Democracy in the Southern Hemisphere



Rüdiger Schwarz

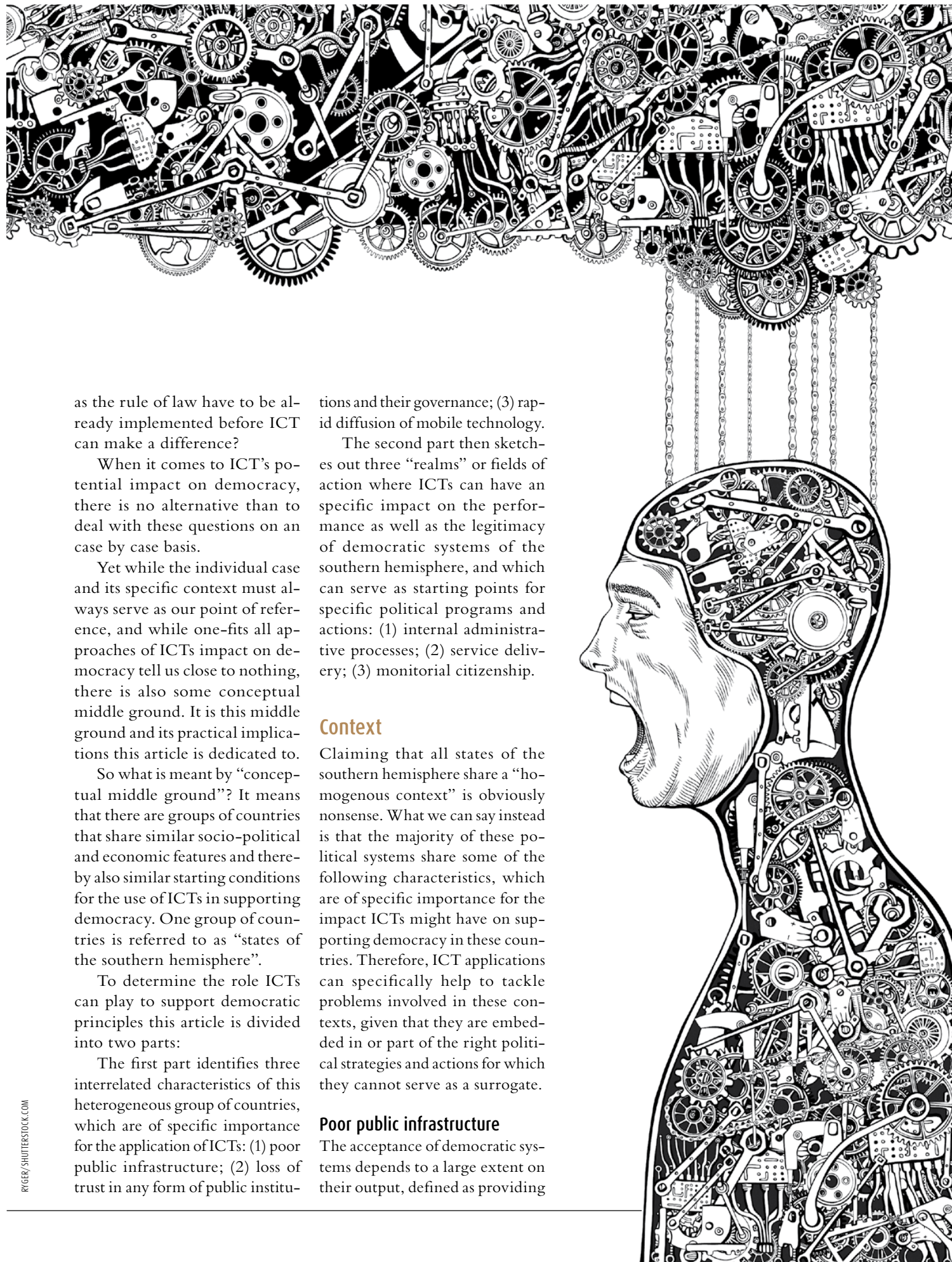
Rüdiger Schwarz studied Political Science, Economic and Social History/ Modern History at the Universität Mannheim, the Johns-Hopkins University (JHU) in Baltimore and the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington D.C. He did Internships with the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) as well as the Armed Forces Staff, German Defense Department, (BMVg). He also worked for the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIK) holding the position of head of the study group on African conflicts during 2005 and 2010. From 2007 to 2012, he worked for the Walter Hallstein-Institute for European Constitutional Law (WHI). Since 2012, he has been acting as project lead for the research department of Global Constitutionalism and the Internet.

To use Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) for supporting democratic and good governance especially in the Southern Hemisphere seems convincing. Yet in the past, 60–80% of e-government/ e-democracy projects in the non-OECD world, mostly transplants of industrialized, northern contexts partially or totally failed¹. Why has this been the case? To answer this question we need to have a closer look at the relationship between democratic principles (including good governance) and the context in which they are implemented.

My argument is that, while we share an idea – although vague – about the normative concept of democracy, such as government of the people, by the people and for the people, as Abraham Lincoln aptly put it, there is neither a global standard for its implementation, nor do we see anything like universal socio-political context conditions on which democratic systems are built upon. We

share a norm, interpreted in a thousand different ways, implemented in a thousand different contexts.

Should a democratic system entail forms of direct democracy? Should a democratic system be organized in a central or rather in a distributed way? What goals should be prioritized for democratic systems to achieve? Under which socio-political and economic context conditions is a democratic system operating or is supposed to be implemented? Are we talking about a case of established statehood, emerging markets or about a developing country? How to translate democracy in multi-ethnic contexts, where political affiliations often primarily mirror ethnic backgrounds? What are the expectations and, especially, the level of trust citizens have in their respective political system? And to what extent do ICTs presuppose what they are supposed to support. Or in other words, what level of "democratic preconditions" such



as the rule of law have to be already implemented before ICT can make a difference?

When it comes to ICT's potential impact on democracy, there is no alternative than to deal with these questions on an case by case basis.

Yet while the individual case and its specific context must always serve as our point of reference, and while one-fits all approaches of ICTs impact on democracy tell us close to nothing, there is also some conceptual middle ground. It is this middle ground and its practical implications this article is dedicated to.

So what is meant by "conceptual middle ground"? It means that there are groups of countries that share similar socio-political and economic features and thereby also similar starting conditions for the use of ICTs in supporting democracy. One group of countries is referred to as "states of the southern hemisphere".

To determine the role ICTs can play to support democratic principles this article is divided into two parts:

The first part identifies three interrelated characteristics of this heterogeneous group of countries, which are of specific importance for the application of ICTs: (1) poor public infrastructure; (2) loss of trust in any form of public institu-

tions and their governance; (3) rapid diffusion of mobile technology.

The second part then sketches out three "realms" or fields of action where ICTs can have an specific impact on the performance as well as the legitimacy of democratic systems of the southern hemisphere, and which can serve as starting points for specific political programs and actions: (1) internal administrative processes; (2) service delivery; (3) monitorial citizenship.

Context

Claiming that all states of the southern hemisphere share a "homogenous context" is obviously nonsense. What we can say instead is that the majority of these political systems share some of the following characteristics, which are of specific importance for the impact ICTs might have on supporting democracy in these countries. Therefore, ICT applications can specifically help to tackle problems involved in these contexts, given that they are embedded in or part of the right political strategies and actions for which they cannot serve as a surrogate.

Poor public infrastructure

The acceptance of democratic systems depends to a large extent on their output, defined as providing

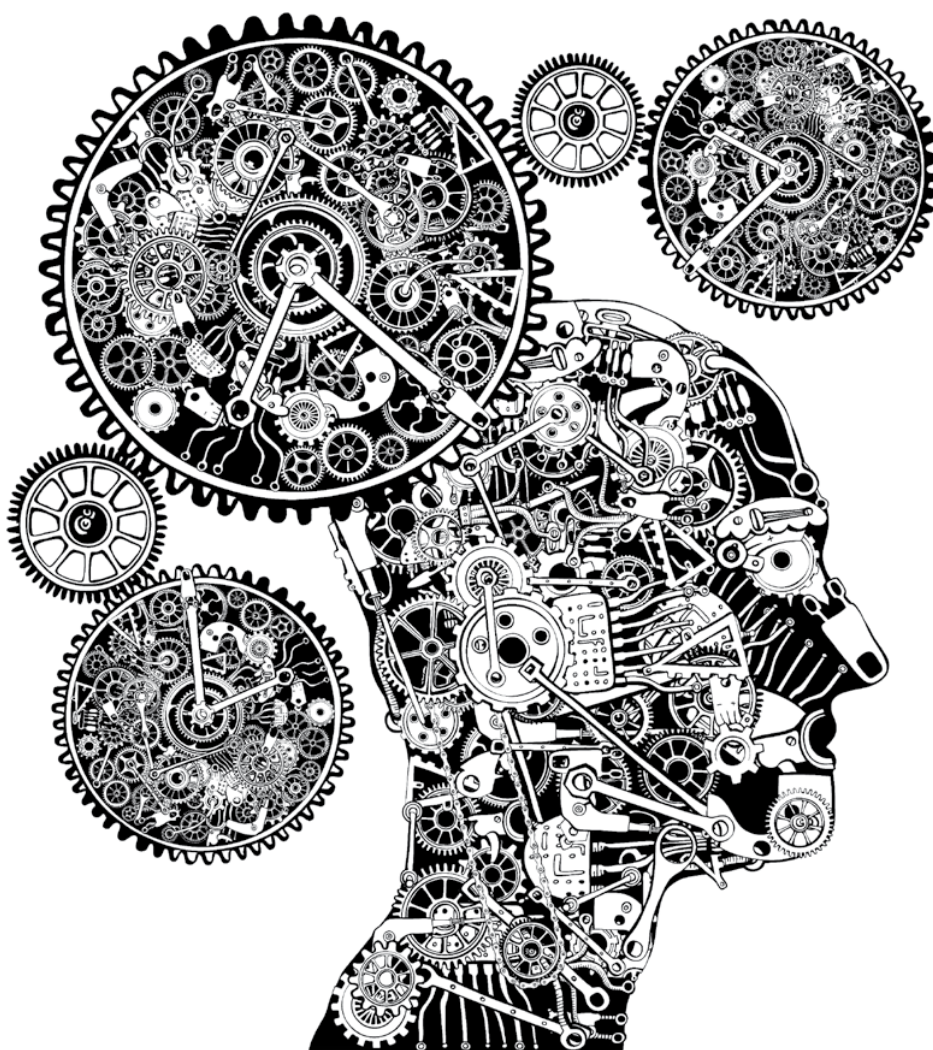
collective goods and implementing collectively binding rules. A political system might be grounded in democratic processes, but if public institutions and their governance remain invisible to the majority of its citizens or if they cannot deliver services, then it is unlikely that the principle of democracy has any meaning to its people. Sometimes described as “limited statehood” the insufficient presence of state institu-

tions and their poor ability to provide public services are often an everyday reality to people in these states.

Mistrust

Particularly but not exclusively connected to the limited ability to provide services, a deep mistrust of citizens towards their public institutions often characterizes political systems of the southern hemisphere. On the one hand,

this is due to the inadequate provision of services or to arbitrary/biased enforcement of laws and regulations. On the other hand, this mistrust is also rooted in the non-transparent, opaque and seemingly arbitrary way public institutions often act. Is the government just not providing enough resources for the education system, or are local authorities misusing them? How much public money is provided for local healthcare, and how is this money spent for? If people do not have this information, it is impossible for them to hold their representatives accountable. For many, opaque and arbitrary action of public authorities has been a daily experience for decades, which has led to a deep mistrust in public authorities and actions.



Rapid Diffusion of Mobile Technology

While there has been and will be a Digital Divide between industrialized and nonindustrialized nations, the speed and depth by which mobile technology have made inroads in many states of the southern hemisphere is unparalleled. Until a few years ago, mobile phones served as a status symbol for members of the elite. However, estimations now assume that by 2019 there will be around 930 mio. mobile accounts operational on the African continent (this equates to one per African). In addition, these mobile phones are increasingly succeeded by low cost smartphones, which are expected to increase the Internet penetration rate on the African continent to 50%

within the next decade². This is important because, as we will see, especially in the field of service delivery and monitorial citizenship, the mass diffusion of cell-phones and smartphones is a pivotal precondition for ICTs supporting democratic principles.

Realms for ICTs Specific Impact

Against this backdrop, what precisely can ICTs do to help improve the input as well as output legitimacy of democratic systems? As mentioned above there are three “realms” where ICTs especially can make a difference.

Digitization of Administrative Processes

It is an often undervalued fact that in the past public administrations of the southern hemisphere were much less able to adopt ICTs to support their internal processes and modes of operation than their counterparts in the industrialized world. While public administration in the latter cases often have been computerized and to some extent interconnected on larger scales since the 1960s and 1970s, the situation of many public administrations in the southern hemisphere looks quite different. Here, paper based, non-connected administrative units with little horizontal and vertical interchange of information are often the standard. ICTs and especially the Internet in these contexts are expected to systematically change that practice, enabling a direct shift towards highly digitized and interconnected structures of public institutions.

In addition, there is also hope that the collection of new data and their integrations in the so-called integrated information structures will enable public institutions to better plan and implement fact based policies. Translated into practice, this can result in projects like IFMIS³, a computerized financial management system that the Kenyan government is using to improve the internal administrative organisation of financial management and revenue mobilization of their public administration; or iTax⁴, which is used by the Tanzanian government, serving as an accounting system for state revenues.

lack resources to establish a dense net of outlets or offices throughout their territory. There are two ways ICTs can have a positive impact on this situation: either through dispensing the need for having a physical infrastructure (offices) for delivering services completely, or by enabling the effective combination of physical and digital infrastructure, e.g. through one-stop-shop settings. The first case is particularly feasible when the service sought after is just information. If I want to buy a piece of land and want to be sure that the alleged seller is in fact the rightful owner of

In the Southern Hemisphere, it is a common norm that administrative units are not connected. They are based on paper, with little horizontal and vertical information exchange. The spread of ICTs is expected to change this practice systematically.

Improvement of Service Delivery

In many states of the southern hemisphere the delivery of services by public institutions is inadequate, often in the sense that there are only few physical representations of these public institutions, especially in rural areas. Therefore, just reaching these offices often entails significant costs in terms of time and money (e.g. for travelling long distances for a public administration’s office). At the same time, states often simply

that property, then a digitized land registry with the opportunity to send an inquiry by text message instead of visiting a distanced office to consult the paper records is the way forward.

In cases where the service entails more than information, e.g. issuing a single business permit, identity card or driver’s license, some sort of physical infrastructure however remains needed. But instead of having an administrative office for every single service, their integration in one-

stop-shop centers, where all public services are available in one place, is a resource-saving option. This approach can be combined with digital components in the way that the application process, let's say for a business permit, is done online, while the actual issuing and picking up of the permit happens at the one-stop-shop location. Countries as different as Chile (Chile-Atiende⁵) and Kenya (Huduma⁶) are pursuing such one-stop-shop approaches. This, however, only makes sense if the internal structures and processes of the respective administrative system have already been changed through ICTs. Only when public administrations have digitized their internal procedures and implemented integrated information structures where information is horizontally and vertically interconnected and available to all administrative institutions, can approaches like one-stop centers including their digital components succeed.

Establishment of Trust by Monitorial Citizenship

Referring to the initial definition of democracy, the first two "realms" of ICTs' impact mainly refer to the aspect of "government for the people", or to put it more simply, they refer to the question how ICTs could improve the performance of

public institutions. Yet there is also the question how ICTs could support "government by the people", which in our context means how citizens can play a direct role or have a direct impact on the actions and performances of public institutions. This certainly also entails the question of how ICTs could enable citizens to directly govern themselves without any involvement of state or public institutions or administrations. While it is absolutely legitimate to focus on that aspect, and while there are certainly examples of ICTs enabled forms of self-governance, it would go far beyond the scope of this article to cover with these issues. Therefore, the focus here is on the question how citizens can impact and control actions of public institutions by using ICTs.

As I mentioned in the beginning, there is frequently a deep level of distrust by citizens towards any form of public authority, more often than not for good reason. This mistrust is rooted in experiences of corruption, mismanagement and impunity on the side of public actors. One way to reestablish trust, or better, establish it in the first place, is to provide citizens with the opportunity to "*monitor what powerful institutions do...and demand change when they misbehave*"⁷, as Ethan Zuckerman, the director of MIT's

The impact of ICTs on democracy depends on a wide array of contexts. The application of ICT to support governance requires a case-by-case response.

Center for Civic Media⁸, defines his idea of monitorial citizenship⁹. ICTs offer plenty of technical instruments ranging from applications aimed at providing citizens easily with the information they need to monitor public institutions to technical systems that ensure that their queries or complaints are effectively channeled back into public institutions. That means, e.g., that mobile apps enable me instantly to figure out how much money a county received from central government for education, and based on this information to assess whether this is spent diligently. It also can mean that a citizen's complaint by text message is automatically processed in a way that the responsible institution has to react to this complaint within a set time frame, otherwise the complaint is automatically forwarded to legal authorities.

It entails whistleblower systems to report corruption as well as simple free telephone lines to report misconduct of any public authority. ICTs thereby have the potential to support not only the transparency of political actions, a topic that is often covered, but also to support a balance of (informational) power between citizens and public authorities, which is a prerequisite in establishing trust in public authorities and in the functioning of democratic system in general.

Conclusion

As I suggested in the beginning, there can be no such thing as a general impact of ICTs on democracy, as this (potential) impact is highly dependent on the societal, political and economic contexts in which ICTs are applied. That also means that the question whether and how ICTs can be applied in a specific case to support the principle of democratic governance requires an answer on a case by case basis.

What we can identify instead are groups or clusters of political systems that share to different degree the same context conditions under which ICTs can be deployed. Building upon these shared context conditions we can discover common “realms” of ICTs’ potential impact. As regards states of the southern hemisphere, this article identifies two “realms” in the performance of democratic systems (improvement of internal organization of public institutions and the delivery of public services) and one “realm”

concerning level of trust citizens have in their democratic systems (monitoring citizenship), where ICTs can make a specific difference.

It is thereby important to realize that these different “realms” of ICTs’ impact, though referring to different aspects of the process of democratic systems, are functionally highly interconnected. Any project of improving the provision of public services e.g. by one-stop shop approaches, is doomed to failure if it is built upon a paper based, non connected administrative system.

At the same time, any form of ICT related enhancement of public institutions and their provision of services is unlikely to yield long term results, unless there is a chance for citizens to monitor the actions of these institutions. And monitoring citizenship itself only makes sense if there is something to monitor at all, that means, if the administrative system through the reform of internal processes is at least able (not to be equated with willing) to provide services, what brings us back again to improved performances of public administrations by ICT...

So there is no magic formula per se by which ICTs can support or enable democracy. Yet if we take the trouble to precisely analyze the context, we are likely to discover at least “realms” in specific groups or clusters of states where ICTs have the potential to render political systems more democratic. ■

Notes

1. HEEKS, Richard: *Most e-Government-for-Development Projects fail: How can risks be reduced?*. i-Government Working Paper Series, Institute for Development Policy and Management, Universidade de Manchester, no. 14, 2003; Gartner Symposium/ITxpo (2002); UN World Public Sector Report 2003: E-government at the Crossroads (2003).
2. *The Economist*, 25/04/2015, p. 32.
3. IFMIS stands for Integrated Financial Management Information System. (<http://www.icta.go.ke/integrated-financial-management-information-systems-ifmis/>).
4. iTax stands for integrated Tax Administration System. (<http://www2.gtz.de/dokumente/bib-2011/giz2011-0048en-itax-case-study.pdf>).
5. ChileAtiende is a one-stop shop infrastructure in Chile that offers public services via 206 stationary and 5 mobile outlets, as well as via Internet. (<http://www.chileatiende.cl/>).
6. Quite similar to ChileAtiende, the Kenyan equivalent is called Huduma, the swahili word for “service”, which is supposed to provide a one-stop infrastructure through approx. 50 outlets and via Internet, when the rollout phase will have finished. (<http://www.hudumakenya.go.ke/>).
7. <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2014/01/24/promise-tracker-and-monitorial-citizenship/>.
8. <https://www.media.mit.edu/people/ethanz/>.
9. In this respect he also initiated a project called “Promise Tracker”, which is designed to enable citizens via ICT to effectively monitor the implementation (or non-implementation) of promises made by elected officials.