

# Mobiles for Development

Sanjana Hattotuwa<sup>1</sup>

Sustainable and equitable development is severely undermined when citizens do not have access to a voice. When basic human needs are marginalised or suppressed, the resulting emergence of communal violence in the negotiation of difference and grievances stunts economic growth – sometimes for generations. Today, the exponential growth in the use and ownership of mobile phones offers renewed hope of higher economic development. A well known example is the finding in 2005 by Leonard Waverman, of the London Business School, that an extra 10 mobile phones per 100 people in a typical developing country leads to an additional 0.59 percentage points of growth in GDP per person.<sup>2</sup> Yet the question is, is development just about economic growth? And what of the existing e-gov initiatives, such as we find in Sri Lanka, that have failed to inspire development or engender peace? A recent article on the future of e-government from the US proclaims that Web 2.0 will “transform service delivery, make smarter policies, flatten silos and, most importantly, reinvigorate democracy” and facilitate a shift “from monolithic government agencies to pluralistic, networked governance Webs that fuse the knowledge, skills and resources of the masses.”<sup>3</sup>

Sadly, such heady optimism is ill-placed in the context of Sri Lanka, where e-government reflects (and on occasion exacerbates) significant problems brought about by successive governments uninterested in participatory governance, democracy and sustainable development. Millions of dollars and billions of rupees in attempts to re-engineer government have largely failed to make public institutions and service delivery more responsive, accountable and transparent. E-gov is seen as purely transactional - one-way and top-down. The mechanics of citizen participation and feedback are feeble at best and non-existent most of the time. On many websites, content is to be found only in Sinhala and English, exacerbating problems of language discrimination faced by the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Amongst a litany of other issues, Government websites are replete with outdated information, dysfunctional links, pointers to websites that no longer exist and don't have common look and feel or functionality, making them difficult and confusing to navigate. The other significant problem is that e-gov as constituted today is mainly for PCs. Few citizens in Sri Lanka own or use PCs. Nearly 8 million people mobile phone subscribers are completely shut out of e-gov services and products. This means that the potential of e-gov is woefully under-realised through the use of an exclusive technologies and a mindset that does not yet see the potential of mobile phones in e-government initiatives.

For answers to these pressing problems, we must turn to citizens themselves. Using mobile phones and through other Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), citizens can now use a range of methods to hold State institutions and public officials accountable and place on record their grievances. These new conversations *amongst* citizens (on old problems) are decentralised, two-way, adaptive, resilient and pervasive. Importantly, they take place in the vernacular as well as in English. From Zimbabwe<sup>4</sup> and Kenya<sup>5</sup> to China and Kuwait<sup>6</sup>, from electoral processes and women's suffrage to the voicing dissent against oppression, mobiles have already revolutionised our approach to and understanding of political and social activism as well as public participation in governance. Yet in many cases, there is simply no interaction between State sponsored e-gov initiatives and citizen driven mobile phone based. The two exist in different worlds – one is about the promotion of the State as it is constituted and imagined, the other is about questioning the *status quo*. However, renewed interest in *governance* is forcing an urgent revision the conceptualisation of e-gov. Though the role of Government is still forward and centre in governance, citizens are now forcing politicians, public officials and the State to realise that through self-organisation and better communications between and within communities, an active and vocal civil society plays a growing and indispensable role in strengthening democracy and through it, sustainable and equitable development.

There are already many ideas and mechanisms that combine mobiles with various economic processes to engineer stronger GDP growth. From taking the middleman out and bringing the market closer to the producer to monetising ideas and talents in remote areas, mobiles (and

ICTs) have radically altered traditional economic models of consumption, production and delivery. More specifically, leveraging and adapting mobiles to strengthen democratic governance, understood as a vital ingredient of equitable economic development, requires us to think of new and strengthen existing ways through which mobiles help communities generated and exchange news, information and knowledge. On the one hand, not forgetting that leveraging existing e-gov initiatives is necessary if we are to achieve even a modicum of their much-touted potential, a few simple ideas to facilitate this transition could be to:

- **Design and deploy innovative products and services:** Tie ups with mobile telecoms companies can leverage geo-location based cell broadcasting mechanisms to deliver a range of timely information to citizens, from details of utility breakdowns to disaster early warning and security alerts. Citizens are able to receive SMS updates as well as create and send updates of their own, creating timely and useful interactions that can be featured across a range of media and accessed via a range of ICTs.
- **Celebrate what works in government:** Prize competitions to get civil society animated about the potential to use mobile phones the strengthen governance and development would be one way to get citizens to use them more for purposes other than the purely personal communications. Technology is often seen as a tool that helps citizens bear witness to the breakdown of democratic governance and basic service delivery of government. But by using mobile phones to capture and promote best practices and committed personal and institutional leadership in the public sector, citizens can inspire government mechanisms to be more service oriented and citizen centric. Focussing on the positive aspects of government (rare though they may be) can be a powerful catalyst for change by encouraging transformation from *within* the public sector.
- **Public private partnerships** – Amongst others in Sri Lanka, the nascent Easyseva entrepreneurship model<sup>7</sup>, based on the increasing footprint of relatively low-cost wireless broadband in Sri Lanka, proves that innovative public sector and private sector partnerships can avoid the pitfalls of State subsidised and unsustainable cybercafé models as we have seen in the past.

On the other hand, strengthening development requires citizens to be animated and vocal on the performance of democratic frameworks and institutions. Mobile phones allow citizens to communicate in ways hitherto impossible or prohibitively expensive. Citizen to citizen knowledge transfers through text, audio and video, no longer dependent on State sponsored e-gov mechanisms, nevertheless complement such mechanisms by fostering innovation and economic development. Some examples in this regard are:

- **Citizen journalism (CJ) initiatives** – *Groundviews*<sup>8</sup>, a pioneering citizen journalism website I created and edit in Sri Lanka, demonstrates by example that content produced by citizens that interrogates the status quo can be a powerful catalyst for change. Using text, photos, audio and video generated through and distributed via mobile phones (and PCs), citizen journalism shows demonstrable potential to transform repressive social, political and economic conditions that hinder sustainable development.
- **Development of mobile government (m-government)**<sup>9</sup> - The point here is quite simply that nearly 8 million Sri Lankans already own or use the devices necessary to interact with mobile government services and products. As Lirneasia's path-breaking research suggests<sup>10</sup>, mobiles are already used and owned by those who will never buy a PC, even at the lowest economic groups in Sri Lanka. M-government can complement e-gov (largely designed and built for PC based access) it by providing services through SMS and voice telephony such as free calls to services such as the Government Information Centre, automated voice prompt services (also called IVR services) and on-demand SMS multilingual information services. Using augmented reality and location aware services and devices, citizens can be informed on the availability of and proximity to various government services and products as they travel. Kiosks can be set up in remote villages with SMS devices that print government forms on demand upon a coded SMS instruction. The possibilities are as exciting as they are endless.

- **Web 2.0 technologies** - A plethora of Web 2.0 technologies that help coordination and collaboration can be leveraged, alongside mobile device based content generation and delivery, to strengthen efficiency in government and accountable, transparent governance – both vital anchors of economic growth. Even new technologies such as Google Maps, featuring user generated content coupled to location based information generated via mobiles can be leveraged by governments to create real time maps alive to the needs of citizens and reflective of the dynamism of all communities.

E-governance is ultimately about human engineering – using technology to strengthen the potential for social, political, economic and cultural growth. Mobiles have demonstrated in a few years that technology if affordable and pervasive can and will be used by citizens to interact with each other, hold governments accountable for their actions and mediate differences non-violently. Though the technology itself is often self-effacing, the conversations inspired, produced, stored and disseminated through mobiles, PCs, on the Internet and through the web are rapidly changing governance and government as we know them today.

Governments today can and need to be a part of this revolution. The point about development is that it is not just economic. A country prospers not necessarily because its GDP grows, but because all citizens feel they are part of the socio-political fabric of democratic governance. Love them or hate them, mobiles are the new glue of governance and democracy.

###

---

<sup>1</sup> Sanjana Hattotuwa (sanjana@info-share.org) is head of ICT and peacebuilding at InfoShare (www.info-share.org) in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He is a special advisor to the ICT4Peace Foundation (www.ict4peace.org) in Geneva and edits the online magazine, Groundviews (www.groundviews.org). He also has his own blog, ICT4Peacebuilding (http://ict4peace.wordpress.com)

<sup>2</sup> *To do with the price of fish*, [http://www.economist.com/finance/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=9149142](http://www.economist.com/finance/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9149142)

<sup>3</sup> *How Web 2.0 Can Reinvent Government*, <http://www.cioinsight.com/c/a/Expert-Voices/Web-20-Reinventing-Democracy/>

<sup>4</sup> *Kubatana reaches out with FrontlineSMS in Zimbabwe*, <http://www.blogspot.kiwanja.net/2008/04/kubatana-reaches-out-with-frontlinesms.html>

<sup>5</sup> *Kenya in crisis*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6241603.stm>

<sup>6</sup> *New political tool: text messaging*, [http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2005-06-30-politics-text-tool\\_x.htm?csp=34](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2005-06-30-politics-text-tool_x.htm?csp=34)

<sup>7</sup> EasySeva is a network of centers across Sri Lanka, owned and operated by local entrepreneurs, providing Internet access, IDD & local calls, faxes, training and other services. See <http://easyseva.com/>

<sup>8</sup> [www.groundviews.org](http://www.groundviews.org)

<sup>9</sup> *Taking e-Gov to the Bottom of the Pyramid NOW: Dial-a-Gov?*, Helani Galpaya, Rohan Samarajiva (LIRNEasia), [http://www.cprsouth.org/dspace/bitstream/123456789/232/2/cprs2\\_HG\\_B.pdf](http://www.cprsouth.org/dspace/bitstream/123456789/232/2/cprs2_HG_B.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.lirneasia.net/projects/current-projects/bop-teleuse/>