

# Why it is essential we design the right digital democracy tools to suit local conditions

*Online tools that improve citizens' access to information about their political system and enable greater democratic participation have become central to the political landscape in many democratic countries. A new report examines how such tools have worked in Sub-Saharan Africa, and finds that they can be effective, as long as initiatives are designed for each country's circumstances, writes **Rebecca Rumbul**.*



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The publication and dissemination of parliamentary information in developed countries has been [shown](#) to improve citizen engagement in governance and reduce the distance between the representative and the represented. Over the last 20 years, there have been increasing efforts to use digital tools to facilitate this process, which has resulted in highly successful parliamentary monitoring websites such as [TheyWorkForYou.com](#). International development actors have recognised the potential for these kinds of digital tools to bring similar benefits to developing countries, enabling citizens to see what is happening in parliament and hold their representatives to account. Similar websites are now operating in Sub-Saharan Africa, among them [Mzalendo](#) in Kenya, [People's Assembly](#) and its sister site [PMG](#) in South Africa, [ParliamentWatch](#) in Uganda, and [ShineYourEye](#) in Nigeria. Alongside dedicated digital parliamentary information tools, a range of other digital channels are now popularly used to create and disseminate information about parliaments and politicians, most influentially via social media platforms and online news media websites.

While it is clear that these channels are being used, it is not clear *how* they are being used, or why some digital tools have greater reach or influence than others. Study into this area is in a nascent state even in developed countries, and while digital tools for democratic engagement are being implemented in Sub-Saharan Africa at pace (primarily funded by donors such as USAID, DFID and international development organisations such as Oxfam and the UN) there is little research into either their effectiveness or the landscapes in which they are being introduced to.

Significant funding is now being directed at digital solutions for development, and as such, organisations working in this sphere should be asking tough questions about how the benefit of tools can be maximised.

With the support of the [Indigo Trust](#), mySociety has investigated [how digital tools for parliamentary openness and engagement are operating in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), and how future tools can be better designed and targeted to achieve greater social impact. The research provides an analysis of the data and digital landscapes of four case study countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda), and interrogates how digital channels are being used in those countries to create and disseminate information on parliamentary activity.

The research identifies a number of factors significant in the relative success or failure of digital tools in the case study countries, specifically concerning the quality and accessibility of data, the necessary socio-political environment to foster their use, the importance of political buy-in, and the relevant expertise in building and managing organisations to run such tools.

Without the right local conditions, digital democracy tools are doomed to failure or irrelevance, and high-value projects can quickly fall apart if the digital solutions implemented are not appropriate to the local culture or structural environment. An example of this last point is Uganda, where much of the population that technically has internet access, in reality uses SIM packages that only provide access to the main social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. Where people cannot freely or easily browse the web, investment in a shiny political website in Uganda is an absurd proposition, as the majority of the population will not be able to access it.

Several examples of this kind of problem emerged from this research, evidencing a lack of meaningful engagement by foreign donors with the needs of local populations when attempting to design and implement digital democracy solutions. Digital tools providing contact details for parliamentary representatives in countries such as South Africa, where politicians are responsive to their parties not their constituencies, as a result of the closed party-list system used in elections, are not at all helpful for citizens trying to hold their governments to account. In contrast, in Nigeria, where direct contact details for politicians are very highly sought after, the digital system in place was quickly rendered obsolete, as politicians change their contact details with a frequency that could not be accommodated by the system. These digital 'solutions' echo similarly poorly researched physical interventions funded by eager international donors, such as the notorious [Playpump scheme](#), which promised an innovative way to pump fresh water in rural communities in Africa, but in reality was inappropriate for the conditions it was deployed in.

There is, however, reason for optimism.

The digital development landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa is an energetic and enthusiastic sphere of activity, and currently the 'youth bulge' is pushing for greater digital interaction and improved transparency and accountability of government. Digital tools to facilitate the flow of information between parliaments and the people are valued, if currently under-utilised, resources, which have the potential to have significantly wider impact through so-called 'infomediaries' who are able to repackage information into a more consumer-friendly format. Citizens are increasingly interested in the possibilities that digital has to offer. If the recommendations of this research are accepted and implemented by stakeholders in the digital democracy and development fields – in particular by starting with in-depth in-country research, working with domestic partners including the countries' parliaments and with reference to local conditions rather than using replicable templates – meaningful tools for digital democracy can be of ever greater value to citizens in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Read [the full report](#) on [the mySociety website](#).

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.*

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## About the author



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