Of fissures and Reforms: Tracing Digital Transformation in Africa

By:

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There lay no uniform definition of “Digital transformation” (DT). Gregory Vial, taking stock of existing knowledge on DT indicates absence of conceptual clarity on DT and constructs a definition of DT as “a process that aims to improve an entity by triggering significant changes to its properties through combinations of information, computing, communication, and connectivity technologies”. The Organisation for Economic Development (OECD) defines DT as the economic and societal effects of digitisation and digitalisation. Digitization, changing from physical to digital form and digitalization, using digital technologies an information to transform individual institutional operations. A catch all in the DT discourse is reliance on digital technologies as an enabler or disruptor of operational processes.

Africa’s digital transformation ordering may be gleaned from numerous policy documents, partnership agreements and the fruits from lived realities of its citizens. With a focus on evaluating the extent of technology dependency by governments, this blog piece probes the features of digital transformation

discussion in Africa through examination of regional and national digital transformation plans and drawing from socio-legal analysis, conducts assessment of implementation of the plans. As an uncanny fixation on gains to be realised from technology becomes a mainstay, certain workings of technological development are overlooked. Thus, this blog is an endeavour in illustrating how excessive trust in and unaccountability of technological systems runs against digital transformation aims sought after.

Features and Assumptions of Africa's Digital Transformation Discourse

Various constitutive documents map Africa's digital transformation discussion. They include: the Africa Digital Transformation Strategy (ADTS), the Smart Africa Manifesto and Blueprints; the World Bank Group Digital Economy for Africa (DE4A) flagship initiative and the Africa-EU Digital Economy Partnership (AU-EU Partnership). A cursory and in-depth analysis of these documents reveal marked peculiarities of digital transformation discourse in Africa.

Firstly, and predictably, there is a heightened need and centrality of ICT technologies and connectivity infrastructure which are recognised as tools for spurring social and economic development within the continent. The ADTS lists Digital Infrastructure as a foundational pillar "without which a Digital Transformation would not be stable and self-sustaining." Additionally, that an "Affordable, accessible and reliable infrastructure is the foundation to achieve an inclusive digital transformation" suggesting a means to alleviate the digital divide. Likewise, Principle 1 of the Smart Africa Manifesto reiterates the commitment of Heads of State towards integrating ICT in development agendas to reduce poverty, create prosperity and increase productivity on the continent. Further on, one of the pillars of the DE4A initiative rests on connectivity portending that "without being connected to the global internet, countries in Africa may not be able to kickstart a digital economy."

This quasi-instinctive prioritisation of digital infrastructure is attributable to the predominance of digital technologies, their centrality to economies and whose sustenance is crucially reliant on connectivity networks. The digital economy, fronted as a necessary frontier of trade for Africa, will not be firmly established with measly infrastructure systems, both digital and terrestrial. There however is need to make investments in digitalisations while simultaneously accounting

for its social cultural determinants of success. For availability and access to digital tools does not always equal participation. A noteworthy demonstration is South Africa's launched app to tackle potholes. Such recourse will lead to an inequality as a certain class of people—only those affording a smartphone— a class well off and living in better areas will have their roads revamped. What about roads in neighbourhoods whose communities do not have smartphones?

Secondly, accompanying the digital transformation discussion is the objective of digitalisation of services with an expected causal effect of efficient resource allocation and better governance. This, to the manifold translation of an improved healthcare system, poverty reduction/alienation, job creation, and overall reduced inequality. "To harness digital technologies and innovation to transform African societies and economies to generate inclusive economic growth, stimulate job creation, break the digital divide, and eradicate poverty for the continent's socio-economic development"- is constituted as the overall objective of the ADTS. Of the four main goals of the AU-EU Partnership, one is aimed at 'accelerating the adoption of e-services and the further development of the digital economy for achieving the SDGS.' Under the goal, it is detailed that the implementation of an e-Governance plan leads to an overall improvement in the quality of services provided to citizens and businesses, increases, and facilitates access, enhances transparency, ensures better access to information, and widens work opportunities.

Transposition of the above is visible in various countries ICT plans. Kenya's National ICT Masterplan 2014-2017 first pillar was e-Government services, aimed at 'ensuring provision of e-Government information and services as key to improving productivity, efficiency, effectiveness and governance in all key sectors. Its successor, the Kenya National Digital Master Plan 2022-2032 maintains digital government service as a pillar. Various African governments have digitised various public services: Ghana has an online Trade Facilitation Platform- Ghana Community Network, Namibia with an e-Government interoperability system Nam-X and Uganda's and electronic Crime Records Management System to list but a few. A successive and primal question here is whether these undertakings are delivering on their goals. Are portals to government digitised services designed with accessibility to citizens with limited or no connectivity as well as persons with disabilities? Moreover, when an e-government service is launched, it's initial serving should be to offer

analog and digital improvements to accessing government services, as it was with Kenya's one-stop citizen service — eCitizen, showing the importance of understanding that e-gov services alone are not going to directly translate to better served citizenry.

Thirdly, owing to Africa's lagging status in digitalisation, its digital development and transformation strategies are often moulded and receive financial support from foreign players in the Global North. This portends the risk of a captured narrative to the ideologies of distant agents, resultantly forsaking the needs of locales or appreciating the nuance of local context. Foreign support is exhibited for instance in the harmonization of the ICT Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa support project, launched in 2008, funded by the European Commission. Exhibition of the other characteristics are proved in the importation of privacy norms to Africa in bid of compliance to 'established' data protection frameworks such as the GDPR, building of digital identity systems on blockchain technologies to aid build a nation's identification system overlooking structural deficiencies such as low internet coverage and the 'overtaking Western development paths' chronicle termed leapfrogging, a narrative fixated on technological interventions to Africa's systemic challenges, as if their success were determined in a vacuum.

Realities of Implementation of Digital transformation strategies

With countries at differing levels of economic progress and with divergent political visions, Africa's digital transformation can be characterised as uneven but with convergence in certain industry fields. Take mobile money for instance. As smartphone usage on the continent gradually rises albeit with a dump in smartphone shipment, feature phones continue to account for the majority of the African mobile phone market due to their relative affordability and durability. The difference in utility over the forms of mobile telephony has not deterred mobile money growth in the continent with the value of Africa's mobile money transactions, for instance, leaping to $701.4 billion in 2021 from $495bn in 2020. Fintech providers in the continent have thus mulled over rolling out their services with convenient features such as USSD (Unstructured Supplementary Service Data) for its ease of reach to feature phones and smartphones customers.

Far from touted advantages, policy makers and technology companies are often misapplying technology solutions to identified challenges and overlooking the resultant effects of a misapplied digitalisation. Throwing technology solutions to systemic social challenges, in other words, the reordering of complex social problems as challenges a priori solved with computational resolutions has almost become the norm. This exemplar pattern is coined as techno-solutionism by Morozov E. in *To Save Everything, Click Here*. It is a recourse to technology utopianism where emphasis is placed on technology's capacity to change our society whilst neglecting human beings own agency in doing this ourselves and the context of the societies experiencing these challenges. The expanse reach of techno-solutionism has folded into agriculture , education, health, security, electoral systems and other public areas of social ordering. Accompanying the quick resort to technological fixes is the absence of adequate structural implementation systems and in certain cases, the carrying forward of colonial practices and legacies of marginalization. By way of illustration, a majority of African national identity systems retain colonial legal models, for instance, ethnic community classification arbitrarily determined by colonial rule. Such innate difficulties in obtaining national identity in 'analogue' systems are carried forward to digital identity systems leading to the continued exclusion of ethnic minorities.

With effectuation of digital IDs, the legal frameworks enabling identity digitisation prioritises introduction of technology without resolving many other problems. Such problems for instance include discretionary powers of registration officers to issue national identification card in registration of persons laws or the lack of coherence between citizenship laws. Deficiency in structural implementation systems are observed in failure to avail alternative means of verification for people excluded in previous ID systems, failure to afford alternate biometric information for persons with disabilities, centralised databases without security safeguards, inadequate public participation or coercion to mandate transition, absence of governing law or overbroad law resulting into mission creep.

With an ambitious vision to leverage digital finance to achieve its financial inclusion goals, Ghana through its Digital Financial Policy asserts that 'the shift from a cash to a digital economy will increase convenience, security and ease of use for citizens and cater to Ghanaians in both the urban and the rural

areas.' It further lists the features Ghana's financial services landscape should exhibit by 2023, including, a holistic digital payment ecosystem for goods and services including where individuals can pay for most goods or services simply by providing their national ID number with a biometric check or using a contactless NFC-enabled national ID card; digitized pension payments for all and seamless connectivity between government and private institutions. While certain action areas of the policy are worth commendation, such as Fintech support, a tell-tale sign of the goals of the policy ensue from association with the Better Than Cash Alliance - an entity right at the core of demonetisation - who helped prepare the baseline indicators for the Policy's targets. As the policy targets a cashless society- cashless society is a euphemism for the "ask-your-banks-for-permission-to-pay society – it sparsely centres cybersecurity guarantees and omits to address how concerns of surveillance would be allayed in implementation of the policy.

Reckoning the potential for convenience and efficiencies of digitalised systems, the revulsion here is not against the advancements—actualised or imagined—made possible by technology but rather against the prevailing discourses of efficiency, technicism and technology-as-a priori good, external to social, political and economic context. There is mounting evidence alluding to the need to pay heed to the alternative discourse of cautionary digital adoption, through critique of technological advances and in the form of proof of failed remedial ventures reliant on technology. For case in point, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, an agricultural program aimed at boosting crop productivity through technology has been found to fail. Adoption of drone technology to combat Covid-19 has led to a surveillance assemblage with their efficacy in spraying disinfectants argued to have little or no effect on disease control.

In the realm of regulation, African governance approach to companies in the technology domain has not been immune to the lyrical anthem of "regulation stifles innovation". Designated as technology exceptionalism, it is an ideology sustained by technology leaders that their service offerings are fundamentally different from every other industry that has become before it and that any government intervention will stymie its growth and future innovations. This creed is starkly present in the Global North but the assuredness of regulation stifling innovation much so pervades the world. We are remiss of conceiving

and prioritising stymied growth over appreciating the necessity in guardrails of accountability for ensuing harms of innovation. Africa's attempt at regulating digitalised activities pans out differently on account of varying forces such as the need to attract investments, geopolitical influence and conceding to elitists' needs among others. As finance is a strictly regulated area, regulators are exercising oversight of various digital financial services. Egypt has rules for digital lending and saving rules for mobile wallets, Tanzania's digital financial services are overseen by the same regulatory framework applied to all financial services providers. Tech-exceptionalism has even so been rife in the Fintech domain particularly in digital lending activities.

Tala, a leading digital financial service provider offering unsecured loans over smartphones launched its app in Kenya in 2014, becoming the first entity to offer digital lending in Kenya. A slew of other digital lenders followed thereafter. A collaborative research output by Tech Hive Advisory on the state of digital lending in Nigeria revealed a host of crude practices by digital lending platforms such as use of threat of social disgrace and false allegation of crime against users for debt recovery, use of unfair, unreasonable and unjust contractual terms in the terms of use, use of dark patterns to manipulate users, use of incomplete or absence of privacy notice and embedded trackers in apps without appropriate lawful basis of use or notification to users. A similar study conducted by CIPIT revealed that enormous data collection is conducted by digital lending apps such as phone status and identity, contacts, location data and access to network connectivity data. Kenya passed the Central Bank of Kenya (Amendment) Act, 2021 in December and the Digital Credit Providers Regulations in 2022 only after much hue and cry over the predatory practices by digital lending platforms. Nigeria is yet to effectuate legislation to regulate its digital lending providers. A spill over of this offhand regulatory attitude may cascade in the Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) market envisioned to drive financial inclusion but is already spiralling its users into further debt. Resultant harms of technology orderings should not be perceived as an acceptable by-product of innovation with regulation only setting in when damning harm has been served on individuals/communities. To maintaining a delicate balance between innovation and regulation, we must not be naïve to the political hostage taking of regulatory processes but should also resolutely oppose unaccountable innovations. And sandboxes, as an instance, helps us all too well in charting

unfamiliar territories.

Governance norms by African governments to digital technologies

To attempt to scout what norms account for the governance approaches by 54 African governments to products and services in the technology domain is a herculean task. More-so for a continent whose leaders continue to jettison the idea of collectivity in securing economic and social development to the continent. Even in the digital domain, African Union member states are yet to rally coordination on digital policy issues. Nonetheless peculiarities emerge. First off, countries have resorted to a raft of measures such as poorly designed taxation schemes which quell any appeal for digitalized services. There is additionally a heavy-handed approach in cybercrime/security legislations, with many having the effect of curtailing freedom of expression. As technology increasingly becomes gripped by geopolitics, Africa remains a strategic techno-geopolitical theatre which must straighten out its stand on digital policy issues with added urgency.

Conclusion

A worthy outcome of digital transformation should be one that addresses societies practical challenges while not inflicting injury as a corollary simultaneously. With another wave of in emerging technologies — blockchain, digital assets, the metaverse or Central Bank Digital Currencies¬—there is an absolute need for sound promotion of digital transformation. African governments must appreciate that for technology to deliver on its intended goal of economic growth or overall improvement to citizen's lives, these virtues must be embedded in and during the operation of the systems.

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