

Sensors, empowerment, and accountability: a Digital Earth view from East Africa

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Abstract

Several innovative ‘participatory sensing’ initiatives are under way in East Africa. They can be seen as local manifestations of the global notion of Digital Earth. The initiatives aim to amplify the voice of ordinary citizens, improve citizens’ capacity to directly influence public service delivery and hold local government accountable. The popularity of these innovations is, among other things, a local reaction to the partial failure of the millennium development goals (MDGs) to deliver accurate statistics on public services in Africa. Empowered citizens, with access to standard mobile phones, can ‘sense’ via text messages and report failures in the delivery of local government services. The public disclosure of these reports on the web and other mass media may pressure local authorities to take remedial action. In this paper, we outline the potential and research challenges of a ‘participatory sensing’ platform, which we call a ‘human sensor web.’ Digital Africa’s first priority could be to harness continent-wide and national data as well as local information resources, collected by citizens, in order to monitor, measure and forecast MDGs.

Keywords

Human sensors, empowerment, accountability, Digital Africa, geo-browser, water resources