

The Power of the Networks, Networks of Power. Civil Society, Mobile Communication and Post-electoral Violence in the Slum of Kibera, Kenya.

Gianluca Iazzolino¹

¹University of Amsterdam, MSc in Conflict Resolution and Governance, Amsterdam, NL

giazzolino@gmail.com

In December 2007, Kenya plunged in its worst political crisis since independence, after a contested electoral result sparked outbursts of ethnic violence. At least 800 people were killed and 180.000 forced out of their homes until, in March 2008, a power sharing agreement between the two main contestants restored the order. During the crisis, the vacuum of power was filled by a multitude of civil society and community-based actors, which provided basic assistance to the Kenyans affected by the violence. Mobile communication, increasingly diffused in sub-Saharan Africa and particularly in Kenya, played a critical role, helping individuals and communities to cope with the widespread insecurity. This article examines usage patterns of mobile phones in the slum of Kibera, one of the epicenter of the violence, before and during the crisis. Its central analytical focus is on the interplay between two entities which used mobile technology to build a grassroots response to the conflict: *PeaceNet*, a Kenyan umbrella organization of civil society actors which set an SMS-based network of monitors to track the campaign, the elections and the crisis; and the *Kamukunji*, a pressure group made by Kibera's community leaders. The article analyzes the concepts of power, knowledge and trust as they emerge from the networks interwoven by *PeaceNet* and the *Kamukunji*, focusing on three sets of mobile-mediated relations: *PeaceNet*-monitors; *Kamukunji*-the community; *PeaceNet*-community leaders. In the course of an ethnographic investigation, the author met with *PeaceNet* officers and monitors, members of the *Kamukunji*, opinion-leaders and Kibera dwellers from different ethnic backgrounds and international development workers. Actor-network theory provided the analytical framework for grasping features of networks formed and maintained by both human and not-human actors. Empirically, this study describes how social and mobile networks intertwine and in which manner this process informs the agency of civil society actors in situations of conflict. An argument is made that people's appropriation of mobile technology, which is embedded in their normal pattern of action, should be identified and then considered in the design and the implementation of projects aimed at empowering local civil society organizations through ICT's.