

Chapter 13

Civic Engagement and E–Governance in Gauteng: Grounds for Universal Household Broadband Internet Service

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ABSTRACT

Gauteng, South Africa's economic center, has a history of social exclusion by virtue of differentiated access to employment, income, assets, and education. Levels of civic engagement prior to 1994 were limited by the absence of universal political suffrage and a society in which the majority of the population was denied the right to participate in decision-making based on racial discrimination. The achievement of universal suffrage in 1994 created the foundations for greater civic engagement. However, as social interaction and societal governance becomes increasingly electronically mediated (through the Internet, Web 2.0 technologies, and mobile content platforms), a large proportion of the population is excluded from these new forms of on-Net interaction. This chapter argues that policies that push universal household broadband service can contribute to reducing social exclusion through creating the foundation for households to operate as units of production and overcome economic deprivation, thus laying a stronger basis for civic engagement.

INTRODUCTION

One hundred and twenty years ago, Gauteng province emerged as a mining economy located at the southern-most tip of the African continent. A century later, this sub-national constellation of highly urbanized centers has become a services-based economy, founded on information infrastructure and the utilization of new media. Banking and financial, personal, and public services are the leading components of this broad services sector. According to a 2010 survey, services contributed 70.5% to the gross geographic product in 2008 (GPG, 2010). This aligns with the global phenomenon of the dominance of services in the second half of the 20th century (Cuadrado-Roura, Rubalcaba-Bermejo & Bryson, 2002).

The distinctive nature of Gauteng, in comparison to South Africa's other eight provinces, is that the services sector has developed on the back of strong mining, manufacturing, and construction sectors, as well as on a small, but growing knowledge-intensive sector. The knowledge-intensive sector comprises innovation output from firms, research-based universities, and scientific agencies. This creates the foundation for a strong, diverse services-based economy.

From an information society perspective, Gauteng occupies a position defined by comparatively high levels of fixed, mobile, and broadband infrastructure, as well as being the space where a large proportion of online content producers – broadcasting, Internet, and mobile content – are located. However, there is only limited content available related to civic responsibilities, such as community leadership, human rights, trade union organization, e-governance, and cultural expression. Observations suggest that blogging and social networking are becoming popular in middle- and high-income households. User-generated content is increasing in volume as professionals and administrators gain access at the workplace.

On a theoretical curve for information society development, Gauteng is positioned at the point

of entry – information infrastructure and content is available – but small firms, households, and non-governmental organizations are largely disconnected from the network. This suggests that there is much to be done from the perspective of public policy and development management.

Social exclusion has deep roots in the society and its long-term effects are being further exacerbated by the emergence of a global culture of using electronic media for communicating and transacting. The system of 'apartheid'¹ (1948 – 1990) formalized centuries of socio-economic exclusion on the grounds of race, relegating the majority black population to particular segments of the national economy and geography. There was effective exclusion from positions of economic and political leadership, as well as from quality education. Public services were racially segregated and offered limited value to the majority of citizens.

Political democracy was introduced in 1994 through universal suffrage and public services were desegregated in the ensuing period. However, certain tropes of this entrenched system remained in institutions and society, because of the particular forms of systematic and institutionalized exclusion. In particular, key development indicators show that household poverty (80% of the population earns 30% of the total income and 49% of the population lives below the poverty line of R524 per month²) and unemployment levels (32.5% of the economically active population) remain high (RSA, 2009, pp. 21, 23, 26) and these will be further negatively affected by the current global recession, compounded by a slow cycle of recovery.

In the past decade and a half (1995-2009), South Africa has been confronted with dual challenges – making the shift to democratic inclusion and joining the global information society. Thus far, it has had relatively greater success with respect to the former and more limited success with respect to the latter. South Africa has a system of democracy at work, which includes the regular conduct of free and fair elections, varying degrees

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