Civic tech research

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Backdrop

- Little existing research; surprising considering recent academic interest in technology and deliberate democracy
- No established terminology; disagreement about what 'civic tech' even means
- Makes it exciting but also slows down progress (every step has to be considered)

Objectives

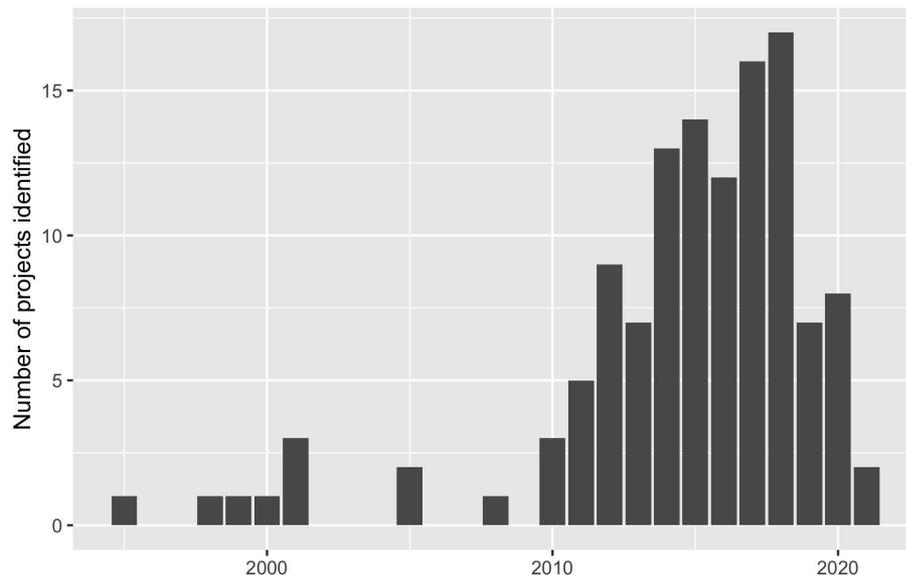Understand the civic tech space in Africa

- Who are the actors?
- What are their objectives are 'models'?
- What technology is deployed?

Compare this with assumptions about civic tech (largely based on research in Europe/North America)

Data

1. Exploratory interviews with civic tech actors to identify key questions
2. A database containing information about approximately 180 civic tech projects (country, duration, objectives, technology etc.)
3. An incomplete online survey (low response rates due to errors in database)
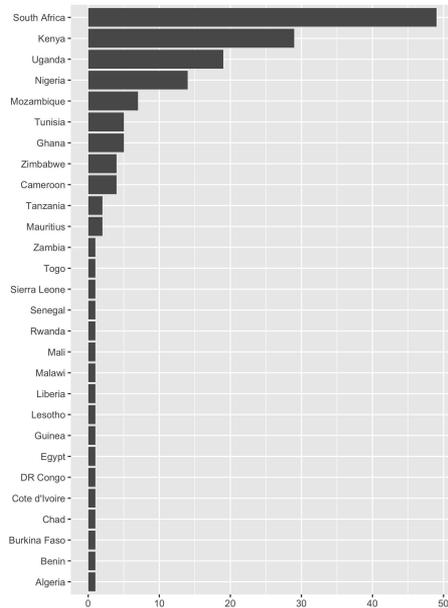
Some preliminary findings

Projects over time
- An increase after 2010 (consistent with existing literature)
- A drop in recent years or delays in data capture? Not clear

WITS SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE
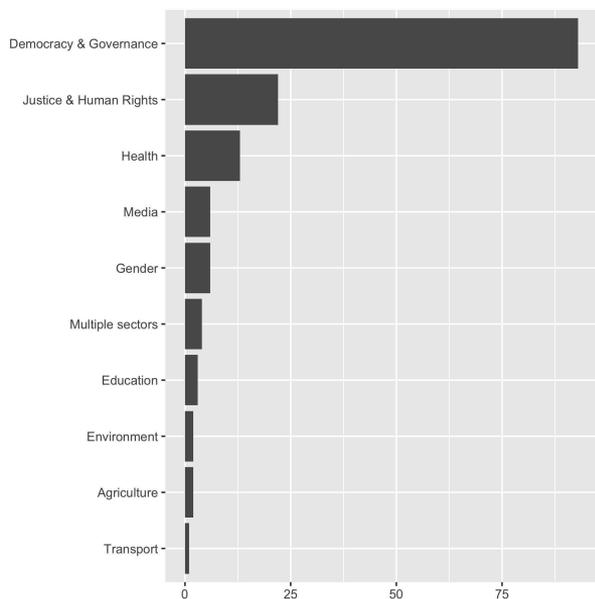UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Some preliminary findings

Country distribution
- Concentration in more advanced economies
- Possible bias (due to language barriers, personal contacts, and knowledge about specific countries)

Some preliminary findings

Sector distribution
- More than half the projects are concentrated in one sector: Democracy & Governance (also consistent with the literature)
- Possible bias (Democracy & Governance as default code)

Emerging research questions?

What is civic tech?

- Limited to civic engagement? Limited to specific technologies? Presupposes non-profit?
- If not, what is NOT civic tech?
- We see projects 'marketed' as civic tech; in substance, they are commercial products and services (i.e. regular business innovation)

Emerging research questions?

What are the drivers of civic tech?
- We assume civic tech is driven by problem solutions and public good creation
- Some evidence that funding is more important
    - Projects active in 1-3 years (perhaps the duration of a grant); then they die
    - Often little evidence of actual adoption

Emerging research questions?

What is the relationship between civic tech and the state?

- Dominant narrative: Civic tech must hold governments accountable
- In Africa, civic tech sometimes fills the vacuum left by (weak) states (e.g. service delivery)
- Again challenges definitions of civic tech

This analysis was an output for Civic Tech Innovation Network's research into several themes of civic tech in Africa.

Compiled by Dr Halfdan Lynge, Senior Lecturer

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