

What
civic technologies are being used to
aid the **fight** against **COVID-19** in **Africa**?

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Introduction

While civic technology (civic tech) in Africa has been driven by the rapid growth in internet penetration and access to related infrastructure such as smartphones, it has also been influenced by citizens' and communities' need to engage on issues affecting their daily lives and governance.

Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, innovators had created applications (apps) for citizens to access and monitor public services, campaign and mobilise on issues affecting communities, as well as to participate in policy processes, thereby providing opportunities for government-citizen interaction, convenient access to public services, and peer-to-peer communication.¹ Indeed, technology has been key in supporting citizens, governments, businesses and communities to respond to the Covid-19 crisis.

Civic tech initiatives in Africa have developed and deployed a wide range of technologies in response to the pandemic. Similarly, governments with the need to provide citizens with essential information and basic necessities were prompted to deploy platforms for citizens to engage with duty bearers on Covid-19 issues. Governments and civic tech initiatives across the continent have built dashboards – or turned existing platforms - and populated them with key information such as data on the number of infections, deaths, and recoveries; predictions and vulnerable hotspots; response measures; health and lifestyle information; and how to access essential services such as food and clothes relief.

The importance of technology-based innovations during the pandemic was cemented by innovation challenges, funding opportunities and hackathons encouraging African civic innovators to pilot solutions to aid the fight against Covid-19. The challenges included the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Africa [hackathon](#), the Global Innovation Fund [Covid-19 response](#), several [funding opportunities](#) listed by the Covid-19 Innovation Hub, Innovation Edge Covid-19 Early Childhood Rapid [Response Fund](#), and the African Union's Impact of Covid-19 on [gender equality and women's empowerment](#).

This paper explores select civic tech initiatives that have been adopted during the Covid-19 crisis in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda. The initiatives studied are part of the African Civic Tech Atlas hosted by the Civic Tech Innovation Network. Reference is made to some multi-country initiatives as well.

¹ Peixoto, Tiago and Micah L. Sifry, eds. 2017. *Civic Tech in the Global South: Assessing Technology for the Public Good*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Methodology

The primary data collection method for this study was in-depth interviews with civic innovators. These interviews centred on platform data or analytics such as user statistics, feedback from users and any other qualitative or quantitative metrics or information available. A survey was also conducted among the civic tech innovators, with the responses informing follow-up questions for the in-depth interviews. The research also involved a desktop review of apps, news articles, and open-source material on the role of civic tech before and during the pandemic.



Findings

Kenya

Kenya is among the pioneers of civic tech development on the continent, with groundbreaking initiatives such as **Mzalendo** launched in 2005 and **Ushahidi** which followed in 2008. The Kenyan civic tech community has grown over the last decade and now has over 30 initiatives listed on the African Civic Tech Atlas.

Mzalendo

Mzalendo facilitates public participation in Kenya's parliamentary processes through information sharing, research, and networking. Mzalendo's aim is to promote a greater public voice and enhance public participation in governance by providing relevant information about the activities of Kenya's National Assembly and the Senate.

In response to the pandemic, Mzalendo has continued to leverage its platforms to facilitate public participation. Mzalendo's Dokeza platform, which supports and encourages citizen participation, shares parliamentary proceedings including on the progression of the **Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (Amendment) Bill, 2019** and the **Community Health Services Bill, 2020**.

Mzalendo reports that CSOs have had their normal operations affected by the Covid-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), such as social distancing and restrictions on gatherings. Through the Dokeza platform, Kenyan CSOs are able to monitor and keep abreast of any proposals by the executive in parliament and engage accordingly. Mzalendo has also engaged citizens at the grassroots level through its "Bonga-na-Mzalendo!" SMS platform to collect views on issues pertaining to the socio-economic impact of Covid-19. Bonga-na-Mzalendo is available in 42 out of Kenya's 47 counties. The bi-monthly polls via the platform generate on average 250-300 responses, which feed into wider advocacy.

Through its social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, Mzalendo has also provided resource tools on research and advocacy related to the impact of Covid-19. This, alongside research on how Covid-19 has affected nine **governance sectors in Kenya**, in addition to documenting how political parties were **performing in the wake** of Covid-19.

Mzalendo's mixed platform and methods approach enhances public awareness and engagement. For example, an illustrated video on the **Impact of Covid-19 on Governance in Kenya** has recorded increased engagement on Mzalendo's Twitter account within four months - from 939,000 impressions and 359 mentions in March 2020 to 3.44 million impressions and 901 mentions by July 2020.

Action for Transparency

Action for Transparency (A4T) is a pre-Covid-19 initiative. It is an accountability tool for promoting transparency in public expenditure in the education and health sectors. Through a web-based platform accessible via mobile and computer, citizens are able to track government allocations and expenditures for schools and health facilities at the local government level. The data gathered is shared with journalists and activist groups to investigate and report on corruption.

As part of A4T efforts to enhance transparency and accountability during Covid-19, it developed a **Covid-19 Aid Tracker**. In addition to national statistics on the spread of the virus, citizens' experiences on Covid-19, policy and legal information on response measures, and fact-checking, among others, the new feature provides information on the mobilisation, allocation, distribution and utilisation of monetary and non-monetary aid from public and private institutions in Kenya.

The Covid-19 Aid Tracker is an effort to ensure that the aid received is fairly distributed. Social media platforms have also been incorporated into the project to support wider information dissemination and community engagement. A4T has also trained journalists, community leaders, activists and local government officials to probe and report inconsistencies within aid distribution efforts.

Nuru

An initiative of the **Open Institute**, Nuru allows citizens to document Covid-19 related issues and concerns in their communities. Using live images and location, citizens can report on the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, including the availability of water and sanitation, food prices, acts of kindness, innovations, lost income and more. The information crowdsourced via Nuru is shared with the government and other stakeholders to support the development of responsive solutions to the unique challenges facing Kenyans during the pandemic.

The Open Institute is cognizant of challenges related to access and affordability of devices and the internet and has incorporated a WhatsApp feature that allows people to send their issues via instant message for the Nuru team to upload onto the app. This function also allows for anonymity which is a key component of whistleblowing and reporting of poor service delivery especially in areas where there is potential for retaliation.



Nigeria

According to the African Civic Tech Atlas, Nigeria boasts more than 20 civic tech organisations including initiatives like Budget, Enough is Enough, and Connected Development. This case study focuses on two pre-Covid-19 initiatives and one new initiative.

CovidFund Tracka



The civic organisation BudgetIT focuses on simplifying the national budget and public data, making it accessible to citizens so as to aid participatory governance. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, BudgetIT in partnership with [Civic Hive](#) have been tracking Covid-19 funds and allocations through the [CovidFund Tracka](#) portal. The initiative tracks donations to the federal and state governments of Nigeria and allows citizens to search through the datasets by state, donor, donation type and more.

The [CovidFund Tracka](#) incorporates additional information including statistics on tests, confirmed cases, active cases, recoveries and deaths. BudgetIT's media and communications lead, Damilola Ogundipe explains that this data has served to also enable the state to devise approaches on how to flatten the curve."

Further to ensuring that funds designated for medical, humanitarian and infrastructural responses to Covid-19 are not diverted or embezzled, BudgetIT also submits freedom of information requests to government ministries, departments agencies to disclose expenditure.

As of June 2021, CovidFund Tracka had documented 636 donations by private and public, local and international organizations. Information on donations is also shared through [social media](#) so as to promote transparency and to amplify advocacy.

BudgetIT has also co-hosted a series of [webinars](#) under the theme #Account4Covid to further push for accountability in Covid-19 funds and expenditure among other African countries.

While BudgetIT has had some success in its efforts, the biggest challenge is the limited availability of information on government expenditure in the public domain, which restricts storytelling and stakeholder engagement.

Wellvis

Wellvis Health - an on-demand health information and service platform - developed a [triaging app](#) to help users self-assess their coronavirus risk category based on symptoms and exposure history. Depending on the answers provided, users are offered remote medical advice or redirected to a nearby healthcare facility. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) [officially adopted](#) Wellvis' Covid-19 triage tool as a means to amplify its [screening and disease surveillance efforts](#). The tool, together with an awareness drive via social media, has provided an avenue for self-reporting and escalation of cases to the relevant public health authorities.

CovidGuide Africa

Through frequently asked questions, CovidGuide Africa provides Covid-19 facts in English and two Nigerian languages (Igbo and Yoruba) to debunk common myths and misinformation about the virus. The web-based platform also provides information on emergency helplines, test centres, and Covid-19 statistics in Nigeria. It has a Whatsapp chat function that allows users to connect with the NCDC.

South Africa

South Africa is the biggest player in the civic tech landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa, with more than 40 initiatives listed on the African Civic Tech Atlas. These range from **Open Up**, which has built many civic tech platforms such as Wazimap, Vulekamali, Municipal Money, to digital advocacy platforms such as Amandla.mobi. As the pandemic broke out the civic tech community introduced some new initiatives and repurposed other pre-existing initiatives, as outlined below.

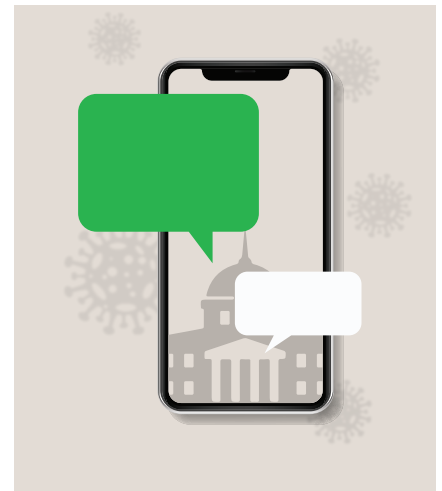
GovChat

Govchat is the official citizen engagement platform in South Africa. It allows citizens to connect and communicate with national, provincial and local government representatives at no cost.

In response to the Covid-19 crisis, **GovChat** integrated new features that allow citizens to use WhatsApp for Covid-19 screening, facility searches, and status reports. By September 2020, GovChat reported that it had seen an increase in traffic since the pandemic began, with over 5.5 million users in South Africa and about 100 million queries per month.

Additionally, it built UNATHI, a Covid-19 pre-screening and early warning digital interface feature within GovChat. This feature was born out of a partnership with the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA). It operates as a ChatBot available on WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. UNATHI assists South Africans by providing Covid-19 testing details and pre-screening information and authorises the South African Government to collate and report real-time Covid-19- related activity and symptoms.

In addition, the GovChat **platform** manages the frequently asked questions (FAQs) about the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) Covid-19 social relief grant of R350 (USD 24) per month offered to citizens to alleviate the economic impact of the pandemic.





Grassroot

Grassroot works to build technology for social movements and community organisations in low-bandwidth and non-smart device settings, including through text message (USSD and SMS). In response to the Covid-19 crisis, Grassroot developed the ‘Teaching on WhatsApp: Leadership and Storytelling for Grassroots Community Organizers’ course that is delivered via WhatsApp.

The **storytelling content** of the course is based on Harvard Professor Marshall Ganz’s “**Public Narrative**” work, which focuses on identifying sources of hope and motivation to build shared visions for change. Towards building participants’ human rights and policy advocacy skills, Grassroot incorporates information on South Africa’s constitutional and legislative provisions on rights related to water and housing.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, Grassroot has utilised the course (which piloted in 2019), to empower community leaders to confront emerging issues. Grassroot, in partnership with civic technology initiative **Asivikelane**, have facilitated seven courses and awarded 60 certificates to community leaders in informal settlements towards minimising the spread of the virus in highly populated areas.

Via WhatsApp, Asivikelane collects data on public service delivery services such as water supply and sanitation issues in informal settlements around the country. The data is shared with municipalities to help identify community needs. Even though WhatsApp is a convenient application, Asivikelane acknowledges that it may be inaccessible for some individuals and provides Rand 10 (USD 0.68) worth of airtime to enable participants to respond to questions via SMS.

Where there is non-responsiveness by local authorities, Asivikelane collaborates with communities to petition senior officials to engage. Despite this, they noted the government is content with receiving data from communities but seems to be unable or unwilling to implement the necessary solutions expediently.

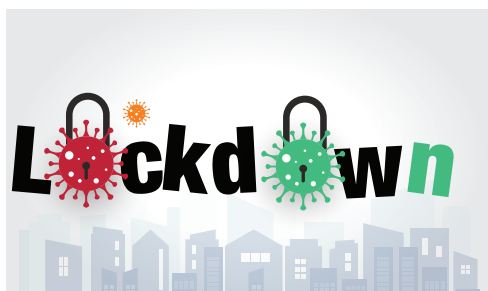
In 2020, Grassroot **closed down** due to funding challenges however its core technology and platforms were handed over to, Amandla.Mobi, who have continued to use the platform for various campaigns.

Amandla.Mobi

The community advocacy organisation Amandla.Mobi seeks to build a more just and people-powered South Africa through a range of campaigns including on Covid-19 related issues. With a membership of over 962,049 people, Amandla’s recent Covid-19 related campaigns include **Make schools safe before they re-open**, **Stop the late payment of social grants, families are struggling enough**, **Demand Minister of Social Development and Sassa CEO act**, **Coronavirus, here’s what mobile networks should do**. All these campaigns focus on daily issues that South Africans are facing.

The campaigns are run based on Amandla.Mobi's founding principle – turning every mobile phone into a democracy building tool so that no matter where South Africans live, the language they speak or issues they care about, they can take action with others. Amandla.Mobi engages with the community through SMS, USSD, Whatsapp, email, website and social media, and it also ensures that the campaigns are translated into local languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa and Setswana.

Lockdown Bozza



Lockdown Bozza is an application **developed specifically** to help South Africans understand the **Covid-19 lockdown** measures. The app provides a simplistic model of what is permitted or prohibited under each lockdown level in the country. Red indicates prohibited activities; amber indicates the specific activity is restricted, and green indicates what is permitted.

Based on government lockdown measures, information on Lockdown Bozza is updated within 24 hours of Covid-19 related lockdown level announcements both at national and province levels. This app also assists in mitigating the dissemination of false and misleading information regarding lockdown. According to the developers, the app had been downloaded 8.5 million times by August 2020 since it was launched in May 2020. The app can be downloaded from either the Apple App Store or Google Play store and is also available **via the web**. However, usage has dropped since the **lockdown measures** were downgraded to level one in February 2021.

South Africa Corona Virus Resource Portal

In addition to using the GovChat platform, the South African government also established an online resource portal on the pandemic. The platform disseminates information on lockdown measures and departmental protocols, resources such as mental health tool kits, academic articles and disaster guidelines. It also includes press releases and notices by government officials. Some of these services are also available via a WhatsApp chat line.

Contact Tracing Apps

The South African government, in partnership with the University of Cape Town, also developed a **smartphone app** to track individuals who may be unaware that they have been in contact with infected people. The app, known as **COVI-ID**, uses **location data** and infection statuses, stored on individuals' phones using a technology called **self-sovereign identity** – not on a centralised government or private-sector database. This will supposedly provide the user with full authority and control over who gets access to the data, for what purposes, and for how long. However, at the end of August 2020, **the South African president** encouraged citizens to download another contact tracing app, **COVID Alert**. The app notifies people when they have been in proximity to another app user who has tested positive for Covid-19. This initiative is part of COVIDConnect, the National Department of Health's digital response platform.

Uganda

With initiatives such as Parliament Watch, Yogera, Pollicy, SEMA, KnowYourBudget and more, Uganda is a big player in the civic tech community. The African Civic Tech Atlas lists at least 15 civic tech initiatives in the country, however, this study focuses on three: Pollicy, SEMA and Women of Uganda Network's use of M-Omulimisa.

Pollicy

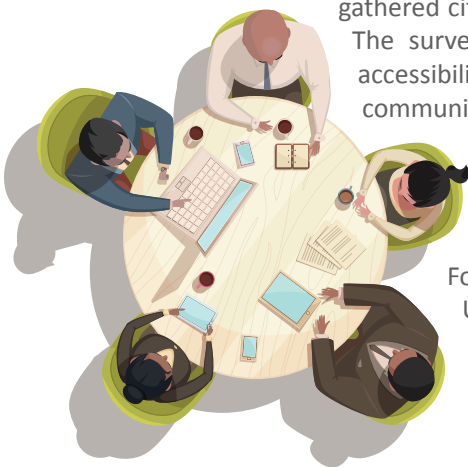
The technology consulting and development firm Pollicy aims to improve government service delivery through improved civic engagement and participation. In response to the pandemic, Pollicy has been organizing online training and provided online support for human rights defenders, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) on how to harness digital tools/technologies to ensure continuity of their work. Pollicy is also sharing useful blog posts from the civic tech community on **misinformation**, **virtual events**, **digital security** and **digital data** collection during Covid-19.

Pollicy initiated **WhatsApp Workshops** on digital security, data visualisations and creating awareness on determining fake news on COVID-19.

SEMA

SEMA is a civic tech organisation that collects citizens' feedback on public institutions and services and translates their responses into recommendations for improved service delivery. Due to Covid-19 lockdown measures, SEMA could not collect data physically so it ventured into data collection via online surveys. One such online **survey** gathered citizens' opinions and needs regarding access to public services during the lockdown. The survey established which services are most needed, how government can improve accessibility to those services, and what citizens do to support the government and their community to overcome the crisis. The survey focused on public services such as health, utilities such as water and electricity, security in terms of police, food, rent, mobile money and business and immigration services. The results show that health services were the most needed public service during the lockdown.

Following the survey, SEMA organised a **dialogue** with 22 civic leaders from the Ugandan government and civil society representatives to discuss how to bridge the gap between citizens and the government for better service delivery in times of crisis

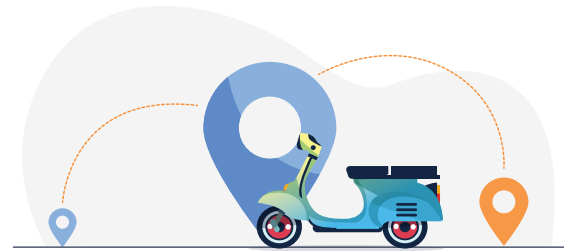


M-Omulimisa

The **Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)**, a network that aims to empower women through the use of technology, has been using a platform called **M-Omulimisa** to send Covid-19 related messages to rural communities who might not have access to information to reduce misinformation. The network has also published commentaries on misinformation, disinformation and **internet access**. WOUGNET also designed a Covid-19 **portal** to enable people, especially women and girls, to access accurate and timely information on the pandemic including health advice.

SafeBoda

SafeBoda is a Ugandan bike ride-hailing platform that partnered with the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) to launch an initiative to provide 800 market vendors with access to the SafeBoda app. The vendors can use the app to sell their products while creating and maintaining the livelihoods of the 18,000 SafeBoda riders whose income was been affected by the ban on public transport during the lockdown. The application was expected to enable about 50,000 customers to be reached daily with food and goods delivery.



Multi-country initiatives

- In response to the pandemic, **Code for Africa-Africa (CfA)**, one of the largest civic tech organisations in Africa, started working on multiple **initiatives**, including using its fact-checking organisation, **PesaCheck** to debunk the most harmful misinformation and quackery, while working with partners through fact-checking misleading memes and claims, as part of a partnership with Facebook and WhatsApp. The platform also amplifies the voices of credible African scientific researchers and empowers African newsrooms and social media influencers to fight misinformation with facts and compelling storytelling
- **U-report-Africa** - a UNICEF programme that uses polling for community participation to address issues of concern in sectors including health, education, water and sanitation, and youth unemployment, among others has supported surveys on Covid-19 related topics such as **nutrition for infant and young children in Uganda**; **coping with school closures in Zimbabwe**; **volunteering for the Covid-19 response in Senegal**, and **Covid-19 information and awareness campaign in Tunisia**.

Key Findings

This research shows that Africa has a multitude of innovators who can help the continent to fight the pandemic. NGOs, civil society, companies, citizens, and governments alike realise the potential of technology as part of Covid-19 response measures and have worked to prioritise initiatives aimed at providing essential information, facilitating citizen engagement, tackling transparency and accountability issues, fighting fake news, assisting health systems, managing the continuity of essential services, and protection of vulnerable populations.

The various initiatives studied also highlight the potential for repurposing innovations to serve a diversity of needs. Indeed, smart tech options that incorporate low-tech, affordable and easy-to-implement civic technologies which feature USSD or SMS can potentially reach larger audiences.

Civic tech innovators predominantly rely on international funders. While there is some government support emerging especially during Covid-19, more support in terms of incentives, funding, effective policies which support local innovations could boost the work of the community. Support from the government could also mean the profiles and work of civic technologists can raise awareness and enable citizens to use civic tech in their daily lives. Some governments have shown that there is space and opportunity for government and civic tech innovators to work together for the benefit of citizens. Govchat and Mzalendo are key examples of this mindset. Other issues of concern include high data costs across the continent which further exclusion and inaccessibility of services.

Recommendations

- Increase government support including usage and adoption of existing civic tech programmes to avoid duplicating efforts and to support local civic tech innovations.
- Civic tech initiatives need to start collaborations with CSOs, NGOs, organisations for a wider reach.
- The civic tech community must invest in raising awareness to reach more citizens.
- The community must also consider the usability of civic technology apps or websites. They should especially build tools that can improve livelihoods outside of a pandemic, including those for accessing services.
- Civic tech innovators need to develop funding models that can allow projects to run sustainably.
- Focus on building simple websites to educate the public and combat fake news and meet the audience where they are.



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