

Building a Presence: South-South cooperation, the Pan-African e-Network Project and India's Digital Bridge to Africa

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Over the last ten years, India has emerged as the site of various experiments in the field of telemedicine or e-Health. Indian e-Health projects usually connect rural areas to urban Super-Specialty Hospitals, and provide medical services (tele-consultation, tele-radiology, mobile ECG etc.) at-a-distance. In the larger ambience of medical markets integration and of a rising South-South cooperation, the techno-humanitarian ethos developed within the national scenario now serves as the stepping stone to India-led initiatives such as the Pan-African e-Network Project or the SAARC Telemedicine Network. The objectives of this paper are twofold. First of all, it will present ethnographic data on the Pan-African e-Network Project, announced by ex-President Dr. Abdul Kalam with the aim to connect Indian Super-Speciality Hospitals (12) and universities (5) to learning centres and patient-end hospitals in all 53 states of the African Union. Funded by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, this public-private partnership is providing tele-education and telemedicine services through a nexus of optical fibre, satellite connectivity and a submarine International Private Leased Circuit (IPLC). Given the central role awarded to capacity-building, technology transfer and expertise transmission in India's commitment toward a distinctive African aid policy, it is no surprise that the Pan-African e-Network Project is often singled out as a « Shining example of South-South cooperation ». Secondly, it will be argued that such e-Health networks are not merely allowing information to circulate « freely » (as though in « weightlessness ») but are also occasions to engage anthropological interest in the entanglements of technicity, materiality and information flows. Optical fiber, satellite dishes, mobile ECGs or CT-Scans are mediums of politics, forging new ethical spaces of connectedness. India's digital bridge to Africa is not so much about communication or enlightened decision making, as it is about producing new ways to be(come) with the world. In this sense, it may offer fruitful perspectives on resurgent ideas of nationhood (Dr. Kalam being himself a famous protagonist) as well as emergent ethical spaces within countries eager to play an active role in the global economy.