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Mellon Recruitment Award
Summer 2016

The Mellon recruitment award through the Institute for Regional and International Studies enabled me to conduct pre-dissertation research in East Africa over summer 2016. I spent eleven weeks in Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda exploring political dynamics related to the adoption and use of technologies in different sectors. In addition to conducting interviews to investigate factors of variation in technology adoption, I connected with East Africa research organizations to initiate opportunities for affiliation during future field research.

I spent the first month in Nairobi, Kenya. In Kenya, I met with Nairobi-based technology startups, multinational companies, international organizations, and researchers to discuss government relationships, regulatory environment, intellectual property, domestic policies, and technology use in finance, energy, transportation, agriculture, and ICT. While I was in Nairobi, I also had the opportunity to participate in graduate workshops and attend conferences at the British Institute in East Africa.

My interviews in Kenya highlighted the relationship between state development strategy and technology startup economies, and raised questions related to the pursuit of digital economies across East Africa. I also became interested in how political institutions affect the rural/urban technology divide. Devolution in Kenya could provide an opportunity to investigate how increased local authority or capacity affect technology preferences, or how rural populations use technologies. My initial research in Kenya also highlighted questions about the role of technology in transportation and mobility, which are vital aspects of urban development for African cities.

During the month I spent in Kigali, Rwanda, I continued to focus both on the role of technology use in state development strategy and technology adoption related to urban development. Technology is an important component of economic development, and African governments are increasingly prioritizing the use of information and communication technologies (ICT). Rwanda has elevated the importance of ICT adoption across sectors, often as part of a move towards a cashless economy.

My last visit was to Kampala, Uganda, where I spent three weeks learning about ICT use in health, education, and urban development. I found that despite significant increases in the individual use of cell phones and internet access, ICT adoption at the sector level within and across countries remains unequal. As well, the introduction of some technologies often does not create sustained use. I continue to investigate how institutions and political networks affect differences in sustained ICT use.

I was able to explore the importance and dynamics of potential topics and refine my areas of interest through conducting pre-dissertation summer research in East Africa. This preliminary work was invaluable for the collection of initial data that will inform the development of my dissertation focus. I am grateful for the generous support from the Institute for Regional and International Studies.