

**On line Mobilization and Publishing for African Civil Society:
Stakes and Impact on Audience**

Sylvie Niombo
Media Fellow, Panos London

Draft Memo -- December 2003

(Please do not quote or reference without permission by the author)

Introduction

The development of new technologies offers new opportunities but also new challenges. African civil society organizations have begun slowly to appropriate the Internet. Some of them have experienced on line mobilization and publishing. What are the challenges they meet in disseminating information through Internet? What is the contribution of “social tech organizations”¹ in these online activities? What audience is reached with what impact? Do African civil society organizations on line activities effectively influence a global audience?

I- Regional and international disparities

Telecommunications Infrastructure in African countries

The telecommunications infrastructure in general in Africa shows disparities in some regions. North Africa has 11.4 million² of phone line and South Africa another 5 million lines, leaving only 4.6 million for rest of the continent.

The Sub-Saharan Africa contains about 10% of the world population (626 million), but only 0.2% of the 1 billion of the worlds’ phone lines. On a sub-regional level, the countries of the Sahel and Central Africa are amongst the least developed countries (i.e. Mali, Niger, Congo and Chad) and have one phone lines for every 200-500 people. Countries in North and Southern Africa have more highly developed economies and better infrastructures. The majority of these countries were amongst the first to obtain Internet access on the continent.

These figures show that African intergovernmental organizations like the African Union with their programme, the New Partnership for African Development

¹ Expression used by Mark Surman and Katherine Reilly (2003) - Appropriating the Internet for Social Change: Towards the Strategic Use of Networked Technologies by Transitional Civil Society Organizations, SSRC. http://www.ssrc.org/programs/itic/civ_soc_report/index.page

²Mike Jensen (July 2002) - The African Internet Status Report. <http://www3.sn.apc.org/africa>

(NEPAD), and regional ones like SADC, CEDEAO, and CEMAC have to work hard to ensure an environment favorable to ICTs appropriation.

The marginalization of rural areas

The use of the internet and the cellular phones progressed quickly in the big cities in Africa to the detriment of rural areas. There are multiple barriers to the popularization of the ICTs in rural areas, like the lack of electricity, the cost of the equipment, the illiteracy, the urban drift, the demographic changes caused by conflicts, and many more.

This accentuates divisions between civil society organizations and creates relationships of power for those who are active in the urban area. It also creates a problem of representation for marginalized groups during important events.

All stakeholders must avoid the use of ICTs to dominate marginalized groups the way the African governments have monopolized the media for the propaganda and manipulation of crowds for ideological purposes.

Training in ICTs in Africa

Africa, tributary of the West and Asia, inherited some of their technology. There is therefore an important need to develop human skills for ICTs.

Presently, the availability of training specialists in telecommunications is limited. There are only two major centres: ESMT in Senegal and AFRALTI in Kenya. Few universities have internet connection though the virtual African university has trained at least 9.000 African students in internet and computer applications and programming languages. A number of private schools provide African students with basic training in computer applications which is accessible to those who have the necessary financial resources.

The “social tech movement”, as described by Mark and Reilly³ in the report plays an important role for building capacity of African organizations. There are two types of “social tech organizations” in this respect: African organizations established in Africa and international organizations established outside of Africa. This is how APC Africa, Kabissa, Wougnet, Association of the Data Processing Specialists of Congo, and others intervene at different levels.

³ Mark Surman and Katherine Reilly (2003) - Appropriating the Internet for Social Change: Towards the Strategic Use of Networked Technologies by Transitional Civil Society Organizations, SSRC.
http://www.ssrc.org/programs/itic/civ_soc_report/index.page

United Nations' institutions and North international organizations also support training workshops in ICTs for NGOs and grassroots. The contribution of the public sector in this field is not as visible.

Moreover, the knowledge transfer by Internet also represents a way to alleviate the lack of specialists in ICTs. The contributions of volunteers from different organizations like UNiTES, Geek Corps, and ICV Volunteers is not to be overlooked.

The implication of the African civil society in ICTs capacity building programs is proven to be crucial. However, the African civil society would need additional funding for this purpose. Because, training organized on the continent is proven to be beneficial since training outside of Africa promotes indirectly brain drain.

The linguistic disparities

The predominance of Western languages like French, English and Spanish on the web constitutes a major block in the use of the internet in Africa.

This, therefore, creates divisions between African civil society organizations and North organizations for disseminating and accessing information and knowledge. The development of content in the local African languages to meet the needs of the African people is crucial. Moreover, this requires skilled human resources in translation. Maybe at this level, the governments, African universities and volunteers would bring a change. The initiative of Mailafrica.com, pioneer in this field, is significant. Mail Africa.com allows users to communicate in ten African languages.

Other socio-economic factors

Many other problems cause the slow penetration of ICTs in Africa. The road, rail and air transport networks are limited and dilapidated. This reduces the movement of people and goods which are necessary to the stimulation of socio-economic activities which in turn further stimulates the use of ICTs.

The importation of computer and telephone equipment is subject to exorbitant taxes, which reduces the accessibility to equipment. The brain drain added to the low education levels creates a lack of competence and expertise. The low pay scales levels in the civil service is a constant problem for the governments and NGOs who continually lose their most experienced staff to the private sector.

Finally, the business climate for increased investment in Africa, which is necessary to the ICTs, suffers from various problems: no large market for some countries, lack of democratic governance, state control, currency instability, conflicts and rebels.

Therefore ICTs effective use by civil society organizations in Africa is conditioned by socio-economic issues.

II – On line Mobilization and publishing in the African context

The traditional mobilization and publishing

The mobilization and publishing go hand in hand because campaign awareness programs and other advocacy groups use appropriate documentation. As a result, the main consciousness-raising techniques used by the African CSOs are : conveying information by word of mouth, written correspondence and the mailing of documents by regular mail, petitions, public notices, conveying information through newspapers, radio and television, meetings or public gatherings, marches and public demonstrations.

The Medias greatly influence the success of awareness campaigns in Africa. The radio remains the most listened media on the continent and is also the most accessible because of its purchase price. It is estimated that 60% of the African population is reached by the existing radio networks, while the television coverage is limited to cities only.

Television is a medium that is more or less accessible to civil society organizations, mainly because of its cost, but often because of the monopolization by the State and the political parties. The press is starting to bear fruit in certain African countries like the Congo and the DRC whereby the civil society uses it to attract the attention of governors and international organizations in key sectors. But, this press effects remains limited because of the poor audience.

In general, the lack of freedom of expression in the media constitutes a blockage in the mobilization.

The traditional Medias on the Net

Traditional Medias currently accessible via the Net represent an asset for on-line publishing for African Civil society organizations in terms of cost and readership. Even though the Medias are dominated by the North, there are more than 120 an African Medias online.

Some of them are managed by organizations, as it is the case for Pazambuka News, a service of Sangonet. It has 11.000 subscribers which are mostly NGOs (34%). Pazambuka News gives an outlook on African events. It is accessible by email or in a web site. There is also an increasing number of African news portals such as newafrica.com and africa2000. As well as, web search engines specializing on Africa like Woyaa, Africa online and allafrica.com

In general, the editorial line and the freedom of speech for these Medias make them accessible to African Civil society organizations.

The Web Sites

In the field of contents and applications of the internet, the African web space continues to expand to many countries.

African Civil society organizations usually use web sites as a window to their activities. A few will publish their activities and annual reports. These also serve for advocacy and fund raising. Using images, texts and sounds, the Web sites are a sort of evolution of advertisements and commercials. A few transnational NGOs like African Regional Youth Initiative have web sites on which they give information and various resources to their members.

The main difficulties that these African CSOs are having with the start-up of their Web sites refer to:

- **Web hosting** which is expensive, although some “social tech organizations” will offer it free of charge or at a very low cost.
- **Human resources skills** are lacking for the design. Volunteers are in great demand, as it is the case for Inter Connection which offers free web sites design.
- **The software** used is expensive.
- **The languages**, the predominance of the English language raises problems in the translation of the contents, therefore causes a funding problem.
- **The promotion:** for the web sites to be visible by a large audience, they need to be on search engines, web portals, to which certain African NGOs still don't have access. Some North organizations offer free web presence like Idealist.org.

On line petitions

Before the Internet, African civil society organizations used petitions to pressure the authorities. With the Internet, it was possible to rally thousands of people for a cause as was the case with Amina Lawal where the inhabitants of Asia would have never heard of it had it not been for the Medias, but mostly because of the Internet. On-line petitions were initiated by the African and international NGOs like Women's Right Watch of Nigeria and Amnesty International of Australia.

This sufficiently proves that on-line petitions will become one of the principal mean of advocacy and mobilization for the African CSOs.

Emails, broadcasting lists and discussion groups

Emails are more often used than regular postal mail because of their speed and cost. There are approximately 300 mailing lists in Yahoo that discuss issues relating to Africa. About 40 mailing lists are moderated by African organizations and hosted by Kabissa.

Discussion groups are numerous and address various subjects like gender, AIDS, etc. For example, SN Announcements, managed by SANGONeT, has 1750 subscribers. This list is a way to disseminate information and is an advocacy tool used by African CSOs.

Indeed “African women choose mail/ mailing lists as first choice application to retrieve electronic information, as well as to disseminate it. At great distance follow websites as second choice for information retrieval. In Francophone Africa, dissemination through newsgroups/discussion groups/Bulletin Board Systems is far more popular than using websites⁴ » as argues Ellen Kole in a research study on African Women organizations use of the Internet.

Teleconferences

Teleconferences are seldom used by the African CSOs because of problems associated with infrastructure and access to the internet. At this time, they can not be considered as a way to efficient mobilization.

III- Audience: what impact on what public? The audience of the civil society on-line

It is important to make a critical analysis of potential use of Internet as a tool for mobilization and documents publishing for African civil society and to determine the impact on stake holders, policy decision-makers and users.

The North public

Internet users are mostly people who live in developed countries where access conditions are favourable to a greater number of individuals. This is why the most important on-line targeted group is the Western public and the African Diaspora.

⁴ Ellen S.Kole (May 2000) - African Women Speak on the Internet, Women Action et APC Africa women

Hence, the on line mobilization and publishing are proven to be effective to rally international organizations, the Diaspora and the North public in general for social causes. This is therefore a way to develop partnerships. In fact, North public has knowledge of the crucial problems existing in Africa because of the data produced by African and international organizations available from the electronic Medias, discussion groups and web sites.

The impact on this audience affects human resources and financial support as well as the international cooperation. By connecting North and South activists, African civil society organizations are building a strong collaboration.

The African public

Out of approximately 816 million people in Africa in 2001, it is estimated that: 1 in 130 have a personal computer (5.9m) and 1 in 160 use the internet (5 m).

This sufficiently proves that African internet users are not as numerous, although the use of the internet is growing rapidly. These are, in majority, the urban population who have living conditions that allow them to have access to the internet. There is approximately 1 user out of 250-400 people, compared to the world average of about one user for every 15 people, and the North American and European average of about one user in every 2 people.

On the one hand, from the population's point of view, in part, there is a lack of influence on the African population living in Africa, and a smaller impact on the rural community and grassroots. A problem that is generated by the poor African audience is the marginalization of some groups in policy-making.

On the other hand, this constitutes an asset to further exploit because the African public on the net is in majority made up of workers from the private sector, people from higher social levels, personnel from international organizations who are all susceptible to influence policies at one level or another.

As a general fact, the interest of African audience for African contents is significant as shows results of the study made for Pazambuka News. On 11.000 subscribers, 60% are located in Africa.

However, the African public which is susceptible to react to the African problems is primarily involved in civil society organizations. This is evident from the on-line discussion groups. This produces an interaction which could lead to cohesion between organizations and could result in a more effective collaboration and a better understanding of the issues. It is therefore the responsibility of the

organizations to serve as intermediates for their communities, because the Internet could then serve as a bridging rather than an end to itself.

The donors

The donors in Africa are primarily organizations from colonized countries, United Nations organizations, international NGOs, private companies and religious organizations.

On the one hand, African networking has led to positive results in identifying priorities and development action plans at the international level. This is the case of the African Civil society in the preparation of the World Summit of Information Society. Networking enables African NGOs and groups to work together without making higher expenses (communication and transport reduction costs).

On the other hand, North and South transnational advocacy networks action could influence donors' agendas. This kind of international cooperation that uses Internet as the main mean of communication had much effect during the World Trade Organization meeting in Cancun in 2003.

However, a question that arises is the one of the visibility of African civil society in these international or global campaigns, because there's always a risk that North organizations play a leader and coordination role of actions.

The governments

A few African countries have official web pages, like the Republic of Congo. Certain regional organizations like [ACMAD](#) , [ADB](#) , [CEDEAO](#) and [COMESA](#) , have built their web sites with information on their activities and member states.

Not having any specific data on the use of the internet by the African government, we will analyze the socioeconomic and political environments in which the telecommunication sector progresses.

Outside of North Africa and more specifically in Sub-Saharan Africa, investments in the telecommunication infrastructure remain insignificant. The State structural equipment for telephones and computers is a very slow process. How many government ministries have web sites and how many of their employees uses emails, mailing lists and on line groups of discussions?

It must be recognized that the public service employees of African countries cannot be mobilized by the Internet, whatever the means (emails, discussion groups, mailing lists). They can be mobilized by traditional means mentioned above, like radio and television. African governments have weakly appropriated

the Internet. Indeed, only 6.7 % of subscribers to Pazambuka News come from Governments against 34.5% from NGOs. In 1750 subscribers to SN-Announcements, 75% are members of civil society while only 13% come for governments' officials.

On line fundraising

Online fundraising for African civil society is always a new experience. Though the Internet offers access to a larger audience of donors beyond African boundaries.

According to a recent study conducted in South Africa, the success of on line fundraising for African organizations is based on these conditions: have a name awareness similar to the business concept of the "brand name", develop an active marketing through Medias, promote causes with public appeals, communicate efficiently the impact of the NGO work, publish annual reports on line, design a dynamic, interactive and informative web site, register in web portals, use special software to prevent fraud of credit cards, among others.

It is clear that most African NGOs will not meet these conditions. There are problems of software costs, languages and highly skilled human resources, credit cards that are not accessible to some African people as there is a poor bank system in their countries. Then, other solutions might be explored to assist African NGOs in on line fundraising.

Conclusion

The Internet is becoming an advocacy powerful tool that African civil society organizations have begun to appropriate but with serious difficulties. The stakes are numerous and they relate mostly to the funding of the infrastructure and the reduction of the digital divide between social layers and urban and rural zones. It's all a question of accessing the internet which is not yet a reality for most Africans who live in poverty, are unemployed and are confronted with a pandemic of HIV/AIDS.

However, civil society organizations could increase the use of the Internet to handle and resolve issues that consume this continent. On line mobilization and publishing has a real impact on different audiences: the North public, the African Diaspora, the African and international organizations. However, impact on governments' officials is difficult to certify.

Thanks to Internet, they are building partnership and establishing collaboration with similar organizations in Africa and worldwide.

Indeed “The rise of new technologies, increasing pressure on nongovernmental actors to fill in the social service vacuum left by the state, and the historical accumulation of models and spaces for transnational collective action have combined to create a unique "opportunity" for the development of new forms of effective transnational nongovernmental contestation”⁵ as Karen Mundy and Lynn Murphy concluded in their study on Transnational Advocacy.

That’s the reason why strategies for mobilization and political action should take into account disparities of audiences on the Internet. It will be absolutely necessary to work jointly with traditional media and new ones, to pursue physical contacts with Governments officials, but also to advocate for better community development politics to enable access of most African to ICTs.

African civil society organizations networking is an innovating solution which should be further explored. It enables them to participate in policy making at a regional and international level and they can play an intermediate role between donors and grassroots. North organization will play a supportive role to empower African civil society organizations for this purpose.

References

Mark Surman and Katherine Reilly (2003) - Appropriating the Internet for Social Change: Towards the Strategic Use of Networked Technologies by Transitional Civil Society Organizations, Social Science Research Council
http://www.ssrc.org/programs/itic/civ_soc_report/index.page

Transnational Advocacy, Global Civil Society? Emerging Evidence from the Field of Education, Karen Mundy and Lynn Murphy.
www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/activities_transnational.html

Fazila Farouk, Michael Prytz (July 2003) - The Pulse of On line Fundraising in SA, CAF, SANGONet, Thusanang

Mike Jensen (July 2002) - The African Internet, Status Report
<http://www3.sn.apc.org/africa>

⁵ Transnational Advocacy, Global Civil Society? Emerging Evidence from the Field of Education, Karen Mundy and Lynn Murphy. www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/activities_transnational.html

Ellen S.Kole (May 2000) - African Women Speak on the Internet, Women Action et APC Africa women. http://www.iiav.nl/eng/ic/enawa/enawa_onderzoek-inh.html

Kabissa, Space of Change, www.kabissa.org

Interviews with:

- Patrick Burnett, Pazambuka News, Fahamu, <http://www.pambazuka.org/>

- Sakhiwo Tehana, SN Announcements Moderator, Thusanang Information Coordinator, SANGONeT, www.thusanang.org.za

- Mahlet Yifru, Idealist.org, Actions without Borders, www.idealists.org