

# **Using ICTs for social justice in Africa**

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## **Summary**

This paper seeks to draw out the potentials of information and communications technologies for supporting the cause of social justice in Africa. The paper draws on Fahamu's experiences of using ICTs for delivering distance learning programmes for human rights organisations using a mixture of CDROM, email moderation and workshop based learning. The potentials for delivering similar courses using handheld computers with built-in mobile phones are explored. The paper describes the development of Pambazuka News, a weekly electronic news and discussion forum for social justice that has grown in three years from a subscriber base of 300 to reaching today more than 70,000 people each week. Pambazuka News has been used as an advocacy tool in a number of forums, notably at the first meeting of the Pan African Parliament and at AU meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in July 2004, where it was the principal instrument for calling on African states to adopt the protocol for the rights of women in Africa. The paper discusses how SMS/text messaging from mobile phones has been used to enable people in Africa to sign online petitions. The paper argues that technology is a manifestation of social relations, reflecting the power and values of those who use it. ICTs should not be left to those who want to make profits, but should be grasped as a powerful tool for social justice.

## Using ICTs for Social Justice in Africa

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If someone had said to me three years ago that a new electronic newsletter on social justice in Africa would reach a readership three years later of more than 60,000 people every week, most of them in Africa, and that this could be done without forming an alliance with media magnates or multinationals, I would have told them they were crazy.

And yet that is exactly what *Pambazuka News*<sup>ii</sup> has succeeded in doing. Almost without realising, Fahamu has become a publisher of news and with a constituency that not only consumes what we produce, but also actively feeds information to the newsletter on a regular basis.

How did this come about? What were the features that led to this modest success? And are there lessons for others from these experiences? This paper seeks to draw out the potentials of information and communications technologies for supporting the cause of social justice in Africa. The paper draws on Fahamu's experiences of using ICTs for delivering distance learning programmes for human rights organisations using a mixture of CDROM, email moderation and workshop based learning. The potentials for delivering similar courses using handheld computers with built-in mobile phones are explored. The paper describes the development of *Pambazuka News*, a weekly electronic news and discussion forum for social justice that has grown in three years from a subscriber base of 300 to reaching today more than 70,000 people each week. *Pambazuka News* has been used as an advocacy tool in a number of forums, notably at the first meeting of the Pan African Parliament and at AU meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in July 2004, where it was the principal instrument for calling on African states to adopt the protocol for the rights of women in Africa. The paper discusses how SMS/text messaging from mobile phones has been used to enable people in Africa to sign online petitions. The paper argues that technology is a manifestation of social relations, reflecting the power and values of those who use it. ICTs should not be left to those who want to make profits, but should be grasped as a powerful tool for social justice.

### The context

*Pambazuka News* was the serendipitous offspring of a programme established to harness ICTs for strengthening the human rights movement in Africa. Its birth was intimately intertwined with an attempt to develop distance learning materials for civil society organisations in Africa.

In 1997, Fahamu<sup>iii</sup> set out to examine how developments in information and communications technologies can be harnessed to support the growth of human rights and civil society organisations in Africa. Like many others, we saw the potentials opening up with the growth in access to the Internet.

Although less well developed than in the industrialised world, access to the Internet has spread rapidly in Africa. In 1996 only 16 countries had access to the Internet; by 1998, 49 of the 54 countries were online, with most African capitals having more than one Internet service provider. By 2001, all African countries were online. According to Mike Jensen, the number of computers permanently connected to the Internet extended beyond 10,000 in 1999, but this probably grossly underestimated the actual numbers, given the widespread use of .com and .net addresses.

As of mid 2002, the number of dialup Internet subscribers was close to 1.7 million, 20% up from last year, mainly bolstered by growth in a few of the larger countries such as Egypt, South Africa, Morocco and Nigeria. Of the total subscribers, North Africa and South Africa are responsible for about 1.2 million, leaving about 500 000 for the remaining 49 Sub-Saharan African countries. In Africa, each computer with an Internet or email connection usually supports a range of three to five users. This puts current estimates of the total number of African Internet users at around 5-8 million, with about 1.5-2.5 million outside of North and South Africa. This is about 1 user for every 250-400 people, compared to a world average of about one user for every 15 people, and a North American and European average of about one in every 2 people.<sup>iv</sup>

Since the early 1990s, Africa has witnessed a flourishing of numerous organisations of civil society, including non-governmental organisations, membership organisations, professional associations, religious groups and movements. The period has also seen a significant growth in the number of organisations concerned with promoting and protecting human rights. Human rights activism is not, of course, new to Africa. It has been a feature of all democratic struggles in the region both during and since colonial times. However, it has largely been during the last decade that there has been a proliferation of self-proclaimed human rights organisations whose explicit purpose is to investigate, monitor and report on violations or abuses of human rights and to campaign, lobby and advocate for human rights. Our view was that the ability of the African human rights movement to open, maintain and expand an environment in which basic freedoms are respected will depend largely on the establishment of a critical mass of organisations that have the necessary skills both to promote and protect human rights.

Could the new technologies be harnessed to strengthen this movement?

When we first started, the idea seemed simple enough (if rather naive): given the development of the worldwide web, we should be able to produce web-based distance learning materials and establish a web-portal to bring together relevant information resources for this constituency. Human rights organisations would then, we thought, be able to access the material as they needed. But before we

could launch such a website, we needed to know what kind of training such organisations needed.

## **Understanding needs**

In 1998, we undertook surveys involving more than a hundred human rights and civil society organisations in eastern and southern Africa. We wanted to know how such organisations used the internet, what kind of technology they had access to, what their training priorities were, and the way they managed their organisations. We were able to visit the offices of about 60% of the organisations interviewed, enabling us to inspect their ICT infrastructure and to test out the problems of accessing the Internet.<sup>v</sup>

Although most organisations had access to email, access to the web was found to be much more problematic: organisations expressed frustration with how long it took to download web pages because of low bandwidth, and irritation with the number of times they had to dial in to re-establish connections over the telephone lines. One of the biggest constraints to accessing the Internet was found to be the cost of going online: the average cost of using a local dialup Internet account for 20 hours a month in Africa is about \$60 (including call charges). To understand the relative scale of such charges, \$60 is higher than the average African monthly salary.

We found that many of these organisations had difficulties accessing training. In part, this was due to the relatively high cost of course fees. In addition, faced as they are by the day-to-day demands of activism in a frequently hostile political environment, with deteriorating economic conditions, and ever increasing public demands on a small number of committed and experienced staff, many of these organisations have difficulties in giving priority to capacity building either within or beyond their own organisations. We found that most training undertaken by human rights and civil society organisations in the region was in the form of short workshops. In-depth training was rarely possible without long absences from work, and therefore relatively few have attended longer, residential courses. Given the fragility of many of these organisations, many said that prolonged absences of key staff threatened the viability of their organisations.

Our survey confirmed the findings of previous surveys on the training needs of human rights organisations in the region<sup>vi,vii</sup>. Their priorities included: skills training in fact-finding, investigation and monitoring; knowledge and application of international and regional standards and mechanisms, especially in the field of social and economic rights; strategies for human rights litigation, reporting complaints and adjudication; provision of paralegal services; campaigning and lobbying; documentation techniques and uses of documentation; monitoring of elections and trials; popular education and human rights education.

Because of the problems of accessing the Internet, relatively few organisations at

the time had much experience in using the Internet for systematic research beyond searches using the most common search engines. Few had experience of using the internet in their advocacy work. However, most organisations did have computers with a modem, which they used mainly to collect and send emails. Most organisations had at least one computer with a CDROM drive, with 32-64MB RAM capacity as the norm. Except in South Africa, the ratio of computers to staff was about 1:4. The operating systems that were common at the time were Windows 95 and Windows 98. Few computers had sound or video cards.

Most organisations stated that they would be interested in participating in distance learning courses, provided that they did not have to rely on the web. Our research pointed out clearly what kind of training was required. But how could that be delivered using ICTs?

### **Developing interactive course materials using ICTs**

Any strategy based on offering courses via the worldwide web was doomed to failure, given the difficulties of using what one wag called the 'worldwide wait'. Furthermore, any technologies we developed were going to have to be workable on what were, even then, low specification machines. If the web was not going to be practical, then we would need to develop materials that provided the same kind of interactivity offline. Using some kind of interactive programme stored on CDROM seemed the obvious solution.

If we were to develop distance learning course materials, how would we enable interactions between course participants? How would they communicate with each other and with their course tutor if online discussion via the web was not a practical route? Given the ubiquity of email, it was clear that we would have to design our courses to use that as the principal means of communications.

We designed our courses with three phases. In the first phase (usually lasting about 10 weeks), participants are provided with carefully designed interactive CDROM that helps them to learn the subject at their own pace. They are connected to each other and to the course tutor via an email list where they discuss issues arising in the course of their studies, and where they hold asynchronous discussions on topics set by the tutor. During this phase, they are required to complete and submit via email as attachments a series of assignments. Their work is formally assessed by the course tutor.

In the second phase, those who have completed the first phase satisfactorily are invited to attend a 3-4 day workshop held at a convenient location. As a result of what participants had learned in the first phase, there was a considerable homogeneity in the participants' knowledge and understanding of the subject. The depth to which the subject can be treated was therefore much greater than would otherwise be the case.

In the third phase of the course, participants were required to carry out a practical project, putting into practice what they have learned during the first two phases. They were mentored through this work by their course tutors. They prepared a written report on their project that was then formally assessed.

There were a number of challenges in developing appropriate learning materials. We commissioned authors to write the materials based on an agreed framework of learning objectives and outcomes. Authors were provided with guidelines on, and examples of, the range of interactive exercises and 'tricks' that they could use as part of their courses. Authors produced their manuscripts electronically in Word or other similar formats. The manuscripts, based as they were on extensive courses that spanned several months, were always substantial in length. The first challenge we faced was to work out how such large quantities of material could be transferred to an interactive medium that could be stored and delivered on CDROM.

After extensive research, we had decided that we would use Macromedia Director as the medium for delivering the course materials. Although this required a fair amount of programming, and although other software programmes are available for this purpose, we chose Director principally because it gave us the flexibility for producing the range of exercises and interactivity that we knew would be required. However, we were also concerned that we should not be imprisoned by the choice of software or platform: what if tomorrow the web became a practical route for delivering our course materials – would that mean we would have to start all over again? What if tomorrow we wanted to move the material onto another platform – for example, on to palmtop computers (PDAs)? How could we “future-proof” our developments?

The route we eventually pursued was to separate the content of the learning materials from the formatting: we did this by parsing the word documents into XML. The XML was then fed into Director dynamically. This allowed us to work on the manuscript whenever we needed to using word processing software to edit and revise the manuscripts as required. With a library of interactive exercises developed over time, it became a relatively straightforward procedure to call these up as and when required. The process resulted in a considerable speeding up of the process of production: whereas the first course materials took nearly a year to produce from manuscript to interactive CDROM, subsequent CDROMs were produced at a rate of one a month!

Our guiding principles in developing these materials were that they should:

- be fully interactive, providing creative ways for the user to learn;
- provide feedback to users to enhance their learning;
- enable a range of exercises to be incorporated, and the code for these exercises to be reused across the different courses;

- allow for stand-alone learning;
- allow for the content to be reused with ease;
- enable ease of editing and updating;
- enable faster production.

At the same time, we felt that any technology we used should enable us to maintain Fahamu's essential design principles, namely: strong designs which run through our publications; inspiration from African art; simplicity; usability; focus on learning/content; use of space; clean; minimal text; consistency; and ease of navigation. We applied this approach to a series of courses that we made available, in the first instance, to southern African organisations.

In their evaluation of this programme, the external evaluators stated that the

materials are genuinely innovative in the field they seek to serve – organisations working in the area of human rights in southern Africa. They provide, taken together, an excellent menu of materials designed to strengthen the functioning of any NGO or CSO organisation, alongside those that contribute more directly to the particular focus of a human rights organisation. The presentation of the materials through CD-ROM is of very high quality and generally found to be user-friendly . . . it is quite clear that this approach breaks new ground. The evaluators are not aware of any others [sic] such comprehensive approach to both personal and organisational professional development The key word describing the response of individuals to the courses is 'empowerment'... Many participants spoke and wrote of feeling more 'connected' about the current human rights realities across SADC.<sup>viii</sup>

### **Pambazuka is born**

But learning is more than about studying. It is also about reading, reflecting, commenting on, and contributing to a discourse on issues that matter. It is about sharing ones own experiences, and about gaining an authority of those experiences. One of the most powerful mediums – at least potentially – for that is of course the Internet. There are numerous sources of information; there are numerous opportunities for dialogue and engaging in discussion. But what happens to a community that is unable to access these? People often speak of the 'digital divide' as if this is a technical divide. It is deeper than that. It is also a social divide that prevents the experiences of the greater part of humanity from being heard, and which, therefore, under-nourishes the discourse of those who do have access to the technology.

If the constituency with whom we have worked doesn't have access to the web, would it not be possible to bring the web to them? Would it not be possible to provide them the means with which they can share their own experiences and information with others on the Internet? One of the outcomes of the initiative described above was that we began receiving requests from human rights and other civil society organisations for assistance in finding information on the web, and with disseminating information about their own work. To begin with, we responded on a case-by-case basis, sending off the results of searches or disseminating by email information we had received from others to those on our

modest contacts list. But soon the demand became overwhelming. We simply could not respond to all the requests we received.

To make the process of response more manageable, we compiled the information in the form of a newsletter, with a number of categories that reflected the subjects that the constituency appeared to be interested in. To make the newsletter more interesting, we included editorial commentary and opinion pieces from activists in the region and elsewhere.

The newsletter is sent out as an email, with text only format so that even those without HTML enabled email programs can read the content with ease. Each section contains a five line summary of the item, with a URL pointing to the relevant website. Stories or information announcements sent to us directly are stored on the Pambazuka online database (there are currently some 20,000 such news items and editorials available free online). The newsletter receives more than 200 postings each week from which we draw for the different sections. And each week, there is a vibrant debate on critical issues related to social justice in the region and in response to editorial materials.

Through forming strategic alliances with other organisations<sup>ix</sup>, we were able to expand the reach of the newsletter. In December 2001, the newsletter was named *Pambazuka News* (*pambazuka* in Kiswahili means to awaken or arise – as in the breaking dawn). From an initial base of a few hundred subscribers, *Pambazuka News* has grown today to nearly 12,000 subscribers and a readership estimated at 60,000. The newsletter is also reproduced in its entirety at allAfrica.com, with a potential readership probably in the hundreds of thousands.

According to our recent reader survey, approximately 35% of our 13,000 subscribers work in the NGO sector, 18% in Universities, 11% in international agencies, 7% in government. About 20% of our readers are directors or senior managers, 15% programme staff, and 11% work in the media; one in five subscribers use *Pambazuka* to disseminate their own information. The newsletter is long – usually between 20-30 pages of printed text. On average, readers spend 40 minutes reading the newsletter every week, and distribute their copy to on average 5-6 other people. More than 80% of readers follow up on the URL links to stories and news items, and 10% of subscribers use *Pambazuka* as the sole source of news on Africa. And each week our editorials are reproduced on numerous websites and mailing lists.

Since its origins, we have stored each news and editorial item on an online database, mainly because this provided an effective resource for production. Over time, we had accumulated so much valuable information that we decided to make the full content of the database available online. The new website was launched in July 2003. The database and the newsletter archives are fully searchable, and access is free. We are as yet unclear what the impact of this has

been: we know that our primary constituency in Africa still has difficulty accessing the web. Making the database available means that it is those with easy web access who benefit most.

Content from Pambazuka News has been republished in national newspapers and other independent publications. A community radio station in Dar es Salaam has informed us that they now have a 15-minute feature in Kiswahili each week based on editorial and other content in Pambazuka News. Content is also extensively reproduced by NGO websites and newsletters to keep their audiences updated on events related to Africa. For example, in our 2003 survey of Pambazuka News, one subscriber said: "I use it so that I can keep the PeaceWomen website updated on what is happening on women, peace and security issues across the African continent." Another explained: "I am building a web portal on women and armed conflict for UNIFEM (to be launched in June) and in the process have found your resources incredible. Last year I was writing a book for UNIFEM on Women, War and Peace and constantly bounced items to those working on various thematic chapters from your service."

We know that in many countries Pambazuka News is circulated in printed form by activists to various grassroots organisations. However, we have been unable to document how widespread this phenomenon is.

Evidence suggests that subscribers and readers are people who have a strong focus on social justice and human rights issues. And while problems related to access to email and internet means that there are many people who don't have direct access, there are encouraging examples of how Pambazuka News reaches and impacts on grassroots audiences directly through print or radio and indirectly through networking and advocacy efforts. For example, our reader survey in 2003 revealed that the AGENDA Feminist Media Project in South Africa used information from Pambazuka News pertaining to gender and women's issues to provide information to 27 community radio stations.

### **Pambazuka News as a forum for debate**

Since its origins, we have intended that the newsletter does not simply act as an information source or distributor, but should seek to stimulate debate, discussion and give voice to viewpoints that are rarely expressed in the 'mainstream' media. Each week we carry editorials, commentary and analyses on key issues in Africa, and there is a lively letters 'page' from the readership. To make this work, we give space to a range of opinions and viewpoints, being careful that it serves as a tool for intervention without taking a 'hard line' about particular political positions.

Over the last year, we have consciously used Pambazuka News as a campaigning tool. Fahamu has supported the collection of petition signatures petition on media freedom presented to AU in Maputo. This petition was provided

online and attracted signatories from both Africa and around the world. A special issue of Pambazuka News was produced for the first meeting of the Pan African Parliament in Addis, and 260 copies of the a printed version of this issue was distributed to pan African MPs and AU staff.

### **Using ICTs for campaigns**

More recently Pambazuka News has been involved in a campaign to have African countries to ratify the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa that was adopted in July 2003. A coalition of human rights groups, spearheaded by women's rights organizations Equality Now and FEMNET, together with Oxfam, CREDO for Freedom of Expression and Associated Rights and Fahamu, is campaigning to promote the ratification and popularisation of the Protocol. As part of this campaign, Fahamu is running a petition to collect signatures in support of the ratification of the Protocol.

In addition to setting up an online petition, we have developed the facility for people to send text (SMS) messages from mobile phones in order to sign their names to the online petition. Why did we choose to go this route?

The question that this campaign faced was: what can be done to increase the number of organisations and people who can sign the online petition. Whereas there are currently between 5-8 million email users in Africa, as of January 2004, there were approximately 52 million mobile phone subscribers in Africa, and with a projected 67 million by the end of 2005 .it is the world's fastest growing mobile market. The potential of the increase in mobile usage is not only limited to voice communication. Each mobile handset contains SMS functionality that enables the delivery of text-based messages. Figures indicate that Africa is not immune to the global SMS fad, with 450 million SMS messages sent in December 2002, compared to 350 million for December 2001.

Within this context, we realised that an opportunity exists to test the extent to which information can be sent to this army of "texters" in order to inform them about issues associated with a specific campaign – and to mobilise them in support of this campaign.

Thus far, more than a thousand signatures to the petition have been obtained, with more than a quarter coming via SMS.

This campaign, still ongoing, also involved the production of a special issue of Pambazuka News, and a printed version was widely distributed at the African Union meeting of Ministers in Addis.

### **Making civil society literature available online**

While academia continues to generate the products of intellectual pursuit, there is a vast and growing literature produced both within academia and by civil

society organisations that are more focused on policy engagement. While some of these get archived in some libraries, the internet has of course potentially transformed the availability and accessibility of this literature which otherwise would fall in to that 'grey literature' zone that seems to be responsible for the loss of so much of the product of intellectual labour.

Perhaps the most interesting initiative that has sought to make such literature available, accessible and searchable in relation to refugee studies has been Forced Migration Online<sup>x</sup>. It contains approximately 3,000 full-text documents in electronic format which can be searched, read online and printed as required. The documents include both recent and historical grey (unpublished) literature and research materials. The digital library also contains full-text articles from back issues of key journals in the field.

Fahamu has been involved in a number of initiatives to assist organisations to make such literature more widely available. This includes:

- *Annotated bibliography of selected research on civil society and health* developed on behalf of the World Health Organisation and the Zimbabwean Training and Research Support Centre. <http://www.tarsc.org/WHOCSI/index.php>
- The *Zimciv website* developed to enable people and institutions to access information produced by and about civil society in Zimbabwe to raise the profile, voice of and engagement with civil society in Zimbabwe; to strengthen the dissemination, analysis of and debate on issues and positions taken up by civil society. <http://www.zimciv.org/>
- *Annotated bibliography and publications database on equity in health* developed for EQUINET, the Network for Equity in Health in Southern Africa. <http://www.equinetafrica.org/bibl/>
- Pambazuka News online database containing more than 20,000 news, information and editorial materials collected over the last three years.

### **Are there lessons from Fahamu's experiences?**

We are reluctant to offer our experiences as a 'model'. We have not been 'successful' in the sense that the term is often used today: we haven't made millions, we haven't reached millions, and still less, we have not (yet) managed to transform the lives of millions. But we believe that there are certain features of our approach that others may find useful.

The revolution in information and communications technologies (ICTs), and in particular the internet, has potentially transformed the way people can organize, relate, discuss or debate with each other, and the way they exchange, find, retrieve, and disseminate information - even the way in which information itself is produced. Our work has been driven by a purpose outside of and beyond technology. We have sought to contribute to the building of a movement for

social justice. ICTs are, we believe, only one means to that end.

We publish not because we are or want to become publishers: publishing is only the means for supporting a particular movement. Although we have devoted much energy to developing the technology that we needed, we aren't a technology company. We see technology as a manifestation of social relations, rather than an end in itself. Our work has been guided by the desire to help a particular movement. As with the products of all previous technological revolutions, the technology itself is not 'neutral'. It serves the interests of those who exercise control. All technological developments have the potential for either contributing to the emancipation of humankind, or serving the self-interest of a minority (often with socially destructive consequences). The extent to which the technology may be used for either purpose depends both upon the power of those who control it and the extent to which organized civil society concedes that control or itself harnesses the technology. Our work has essentially been an exploration of how the movement for social justice can harness that technology.

If the materials we have produced have been well received, then this is a reflection of the quality of inputs we receive from users. The development of Fahamu's work has been grounded in building on responding to expressed needs, on involving the end user in defining the problem, in encouraging their participation in what is developed and how it can be delivered. In commercial terms, our strongest card has been 'market research'.

Unfortunately, like many other not-for-profit organisations, our greatest weakness has been in what in commerce would be called *sales and marketing*. While we think we know what the end-user wants and needs, while we have developed methodologies for producing what is needed, we have not been good about selling: in reaching a significant portion of the potential market. For example, the current number of Internet users in Africa is estimated to be around 5-8 million<sup>xi</sup>. Of these, I would suggest that it would not be unreasonable to consider that potential subscribers to Pambazuka would constitute about 5%. If that were correct, then our potential subscriber base is between 250,000 and 400,000. Currently, we reach less than 0.2% of that. We have, therefore, a long way to go.

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<sup>i</sup> 14 Standingford House, Cave Street, Oxford OX4 1BA, UK

<sup>ii</sup> See <http://www.pambazuka.org/>

<sup>iii</sup> Fahamu is a not-for-profit organisation with offices in the UK and South Africa. <http://www.fahamu.org/>

<sup>iv</sup> Mike Jensen: <http://www3.sn.apc.org>

<sup>v</sup> Manji F, Njuguna E and Jaffer M: Enhancing the capacity of human rights and advocacy organisations in southern Africa. Report to the International Development Research Centre (IDRC: Centre file: 97-5924-00), December 1998

<sup>vi</sup> International Human Rights Internship Program & The Swedish NGO Foundation for Human Rights: *The Status of Human Rights Organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Stockholm 1994

<sup>vii</sup> Martin JP & Cobham, K: Human Rights NGOs in Africa: the Emerging Agenda. Centre for the Study of Human Rights, University of Columbia, 1997 (personal communication).

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<sup>viii</sup> Allsop, T and Odayan, M: Adiiisha Evaluation Report, 2003. Copies of the report are available from info@fahamu.org

<sup>ix</sup> With Kabissa (<http://www.kabissa.org>) and SANGONeT (<http://www.sn.apc.org>)

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.forcedmigration.org/>

<sup>xi</sup> Jensen, M: op cit