

Claiming Ground in ICT policy

Zimbabwe CSOs Experiences

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“What is it to enable, so right and make possible, so fair and make true.....” (Anonymous, 1957)

The need to position the Civil Society Organisation (CSO) communication concerns within the broader scope of the national ICT and media policy domain in Zimbabwe initiated an innovative project: E-nable. The niche identified by CSO stakeholders was to create a way in which the sector could influence the national processes and make sure that the voice of the sector resonates within the ICT policy choices. This article highlights some of the lessons learnt from this initiative, which others in the region could learn from.

E-nable project background

The E-nable project initiative was conceptualised in May 2004 when civil society organisations in Harare held a discussion forum on understanding key policy issues, laws and regulations affecting the right to communicate and the right to information. CSOs represented at the meeting were particularly interested in understanding their role in driving the communication agenda against the backdrop of social deliverables articulated within the MDGs and the Geneva WSIS plan of action. At the same time the local communication and



media context was assuming a different role in the wake of a new media bill called the Access to Information Privacy Protection Act (AIPPA) and the Public Order Security Act (POSA) that were going to legislate for accreditation demands on scribes in the media fraternity. CSO actors shared their institutional and personal opinion on the way forward in light of the apparent opportunities and perceived threats coming from both these local and global contexts.

The need for converged ICT policy

An outcome of the deliberations was the recognition that the ICT arena in Zimbabwe was extremely fragmented from a policy and legislative perspective. The sheer idea that media policy was being considered for change as a single domain and in isolation suggested that there was no national ICT policy that covered media itself, broadcasting, technology and the ICT industry. Each of the areas was managed by different line ministries and as such there was a deeply incoherent ICT regulatory environment making it particularly difficult for players in the sector to decipher their roles and responsibilities.

The CSOs recommended that networking should be continued through face-to-face and electronic discussion forums, that resources for advocacy and lobbying

for the adoption of a Zimbabwean ICT policy embracing the opinions of all stakeholders should be raised, and that any work in organising a consultative ICT policy platform should include an introductory research component that clearly articulates technology issues and identifies how policy should be shaped for it to benefit CSOs and the communities they serve.

Around the same time, the government and UNDP started a consultative process on ICT policy in the country and CSOs were not well organised to effectively make an input into this process. The government simply invited those organisations they knew worked within the sector to come and give opinion from their own organisational perspective. Without a platform to feed back and communicate discussions, those CSO invited to represent their views could not extend their deliberations into the wider CSO community. It became increasingly apparent that without an organised response from the CSO sector, the process of a broad national consultation on ICT policy would invariably leave the sector out of the process. Hence, the birth of E-nable.

The E-nable project strategy

The strategy was to organise CSOs that were directly involved in ICT-based projects on the ground, to get buy-in from these partners and to develop a common agenda on how to advocate and influence the greater ICT policy debate. This constituted the “Core Group” consisting of six CSOs active in the ICT for development and social justice arena. This was important to make sure there was no duplication of effort in the sector.

The E-nable project has five complimentary strategy pillars: namely;

Establishing an ICT consultative forum

This is the key deliverable of the E-nable project – to establish a platform from which CSOs can organise and engage in ICT discussion, debate and consensus building around key issues that feed the national ICT policy process.

Establish and commission an open research and primer documentation initiative

The process of policy formulation depends, to a large

extent, on research and comparative analysis. The purpose of this component is to engage in a structured gathering of information that surrounds the issues for policy consideration ensuring that any recommendations that are preferred are grounded on thoroughly researched empirical and anecdotal evidence. The CSO sector can only construct a policy opinion if they themselves have a sound grasp of the various intertwining elements that lead to a particular position. The E-nable project would thus take on the challenges of researching on ICT policy based thematic issues and preparing primer reports and policy alerts that inform the CSO sector on the choices that are available.

Engage in Information Society processes at national, regional and international fora

The idea is to create a networking platform for Zimbabwean-based CSOs to take on the issues emerging from WSIS and other Information Society agendas, and apply them within their own local context. The absence of CSO capacity to organise sufficiently around these global issues has meant that the voice of Zimbabwean CSO's from a collective perspective has been missing from these agendas, for example, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

Develop an ICT-driven project communication and networking channel that includes a policy monitor Website, an e-newsletter publication, a collaborative Wiki space, Webblogging capability and an e-discussion community of practice

This speaks to the awareness-raising and communication component of the project, to ensure that CSOs and other stakeholders in the national ICT policy process and Information Society processes appreciated it.

Mobilise four communities in creating and disseminating local content in local languages using several ICT tools.

The main activities in this task are to identify four communities, two in a rural setting and the others in an urban environment, facilitating communities on the ground to experience and appreciate how ICTs can influence and create opportunities for them to share their knowledge and learn from other experiences. In

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particular, is the need to focus and test whether ICT policy choices are relevant to the livelihoods (education, health, commerce, knowledge access) of communities.

Some successes

Since its inception and launch in 2005, the project has scored considerable successes including primer researches and reports being produced on FOSS, refurbished computers and Voice over Internet protocol (VoIP), as well as establishing four open knowledge network (OKN) centres, in addition to participating in the national e-period ICT policy consultative process in the country. The debate on VoIP for instance, took the telephone industry by storm and created a real opportunity that will make a long distance voice call more affordable.

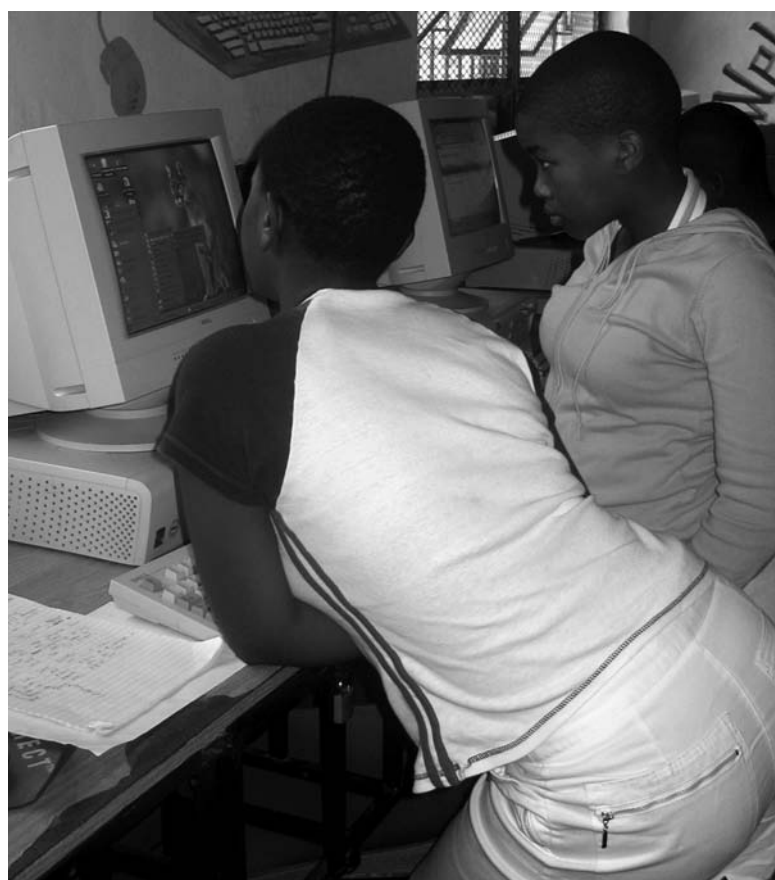
Challenges and lessons learnt

There are a number of challenges faced, which others might learn from.

- The economic difficulties in the country are making it very difficult to achieve any targets. For instance, the purchasing power of the resources have been degraded by over 300 percent which is indicative of the inflationary pressures pushing costs up.
- Participation of CSOs at the forums especially the workshop sessions has been rather disappointing, and this is affecting the CSO sector broadly due to lack of fuel and a depressed working environment.
- The national ICT policy consultative process in the country is being rushed. It had been stated that by the 19th of October 2005, all sector deliberations should have been completed and a draft ICT policy ready for adoption. Stakeholders have complained of insufficient time to prepare for the workshop and the concern is that the document will not reflect the true will of the Zimbabwean citizenry.

Lessons learnt

- Do not start such a process with insufficient financial resources. Seek co-funding of the work early in the project.
- A Core group of organisations should backstop the strategy formulation process.
- Know what the government is planning to do in the ICT policy environment to ensure you are onboard in the process.
- Different locations in the country may require different means in establishing presence. It should



not be assumed that what happened in location A is the same as what will be required for location B. Seek to understand the socio-political dynamics within the community.

Conclusion

The Zimbabwean experience shows that CSOs must establish a co-ordinated and networked platform, if at all they want to avoid a fragmented approach to ICT policy advocacy and influence. Carry out a careful stakeholder analysis of the sector, for consensus-building. Buy-in is important for the collective to have legitimacy and to garner that critical mass of support required to make the initiative gain traction and move forward.

There is not one policy process that is complete without the genuine and active participation of the CSO sector. A process that tends to ignore the CSOs cannot be considered a fair representation of the will of the people. CSOs must ensure that they are included in all deliberations on ICT policy and practice. ■

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