

# Harnessing ICTs for social justice

Pambazuka News was the serendipitous offspring of a programme established to harness ICTs for strengthening the human rights movement in Africa.



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Three years back, if someone would have told me that a new electronic newsletter on social justice in Africa would reach a readership three years later of more than 70,000 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 insane. Yet that is exactly what 'Pambazuka News' 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.

## 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 set out to examine how developments in ICTs 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. The current estimates of the total number of African Internet users is at around 5-8 million, with about 1.5-2.5 million outside North and South Africa. This is about one user for every 250-400 people, compared to a world average of about one user for every 15 people.

## Understanding needs

In 1998, we undertook surveys involving more than 100 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. Although most organisations had access to email, access to the web was found to be much more problematic because of low bandwidth. 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 these charges, \$60 is higher than the average African monthly salary.

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 institutions. Most training undertaken by human rights and civil society organisations in the region were 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 their viability.

Our survey confirmed the findings of previous studies on the training needs of human rights organisations in the region. 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 access, relatively few organisations at the time had much experience in using the Internet for systematic research except for investigations using the most common search engines and collecting and sending e-mails. Few had experience of using the Internet in their advocacy work.

### Developing interactive course materials using ICTs

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.

In the third phase of the course, participants are required to carry out a practical project, putting into practice what they have learned during the first two phases. They prepare a written report on their project that is then formally assessed.

There were a number of challenges in developing appropriate learning materials. The first challenge we faced was to work out how 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 as it gave us the flexibility for producing the range of exercises and interactivity that we knew would be required. 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!

The courses we have developed include: (a) Introduction to human rights, (b) Investigating, monitoring and reporting on human rights violations, (c) Action for change: advocacy and citizen participation, (d) Leadership and management for change, (e) Practical financial management for NGOs, (f) Fundraising and resource mobilisation, (g) Using the Internet for advocacy and research, (h) Campaigning for access to information, (i) The role of the media in the Rwandan genocide, (j) JustWrite: an online course on effective writing.

We are currently in the process of developing courses on the prevention of torture and conflict prevention in association with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Systems Staff College, and the Association for the Prevention of Torture. 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



Credit: [www.un.org](http://www.un.org)

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. Many participants spoke and wrote of feeling more 'connected' about the current human rights realities across Southern African Development Community (SADC).

### Pambazuka is born

People often speak of the 'digital divide' as if this were simply a technical divide. It is deeper than that. It is also a social division 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.

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. Initially, we responded on a case-by-case basis, but once the demand became overwhelming, we decided to compile the information in the form of a newsletter, with a number of categories that reflected the subjects that appeared to be of concern to the constituency and also 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. By forming strategic alliances with other organisations, we were able to expand the reach of the newsletter. In December 2001, it 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 to nearly 17,000 subscribers at time of writing, and a readership estimated at 80,000. The newsletter is also reproduced in its entirety at *allAfrica.com*, with a potential readership probably in the hundreds of thousands.

The significant growth of *Pambazuka News* over the last 12 months has been associated with the extent to which the newsletter



Credit: [www.textually.org](http://www.textually.org) Using mobile phone to support the campaign

has been used as a tool for advocacy in the region. We have supported the campaign for the ratification of the protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, a coalition of some 17 regional organisations, producing two special issues profiling important aspects of the protocol. These have been successfully used as campaigning tools at meetings of the African Union. In July 2004, an edition of Pambazuka News was delivered to parliamentarians of the inaugural Pan-African parliament in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This edition was also produced as a pamphlet and in PDF version and entitled 'Not Yet a Force for Freedom'. We also developed and hosted a petition on the Pambazuka News website in support of women's rights. In addition, Pambazuka News has supported the campaign for the Remembrance of the 10th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide by producing a special issue that profiled the genocide through a series of ten editorials. Pambazuka News also acted as a forum for the distribution of news and information on the commemorations.

In 2005, Fahamu joined the Africa leg of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP). The main objectives of the GCAP campaign are trade justice, debt cancellation, a major increase in the quantity and quality of aid, and national efforts to eliminate poverty and achieve the Millennium Development Goals that are sustainable and developed and implemented in a way that is democratic, transparent, and accountable to citizens.

In order to support this campaign, Pambazuka News has established a section in Pambazuka News headed the 'Global Call to Action Against Poverty' which is intended to reflect the news of organisations that form part of the campaign and raise awareness around the key aims of the campaign. Pambazuka News is also committed to carrying editorials from members of organisations that are part of the campaign in order to articulate the key issues around which the campaign is mobilising.

### New forms of information delivery: SMS for social justice

During 2004 it became apparent that the explosion of the mobile phone market in Africa offered potentials for us to explore how to bridge this divide and use the potential of mobile phones in order to further the use of this technology for social change. Fahamu was motivated by statistics indicating that the mobile telephone market

has experienced phenomenal growth in Africa. Within this context, Fahamu believed that an opportunity existed, to test the extent to which this army of mobile phone users could be mobilised in support of the campaign for the ratification of the protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa.

Using the existing Internet platform that was provided by Pambazuka News, the aim was to develop a system that would enable mobile phone users anywhere in Africa - and the world - to sign a petition in support of the campaign and have their signature reflected on an online petition page. An SMS service would also be developed to send key snippets of information on the protocol on the Rights of Women to people who wanted to subscribe to this service. Fahamu subsequently developed this system, which has resulted in over 500 people signing the petition by SMS and over 1000 people signing up for SMS alerts about the campaign.

Fahamu is establishing a website ([www.gcapsms.org](http://www.gcapsms.org)) to act as a central forum for news about the campaign. A service will also be made available that will enable people to subscribe to SMS alerts, that will send them key information about the GCAP campaign, as it develops throughout 2005. In addition to this work, Fahamu is in the process of making mobile phone technologies available for use by rural women in KwaZulu, Natal, in South Africa, for networking and information purposes.

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

The revolution in information and communications technologies (ICTs), and in particular the Internet, has potentially transformed the way people can organise, 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, 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.

Unfortunately, like many other not-for-profit organisations, our greatest weakness has been what in commerce would be called as sales and marketing. While we think we know what the end-user wants and needs, and while we have developed methodologies for producing what is needed, we have not been good about selling: that is, 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. Of these, it would not be unreasonable to consider that potential subscribers to Pambazuka would constitute about 5 per cent. If that were correct, then our potential subscriber base is between 250,000 and 400,000. Currently, we reach less than 0.2 per cent of that. We have, therefore, a long way to go.

Often, the impact of information dissemination may not be immediately apparent. In the case of Pambazuka News, which as an email based information tool lacks the flashiness of some ICT projects, raising funds to continue the project has been difficult. From the early stages, it was clear to Fahamu that Pambazuka News was a valuable tool and yet somehow it proved to be extraordinarily difficult to convince funders that this was the case. Perhaps the lesson here is that often ICT projects of this nature require a long term commitment that are not covered by the life span of traditional funding patterns. ■