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Claims to Success: Advocacy for the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa – Solidarity for African Women's Rights and the Use of Information and Communication Technologies

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Abstract

The goal of this particular research has been to examine the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in policy advocacy as applied by civil society. Taking the Solidarity for African Women's Rights coalition and their work towards the ratification of the Protocol on Women's Rights of Women in Africa as a case study, this research has looked at the opportunities and challenges in using *Pambazuka News* as a way of promoting the Protocol. Evaluated according to the theoretical notions of participatory, political and public spaces, this research has utilised concepts related to civil society and representation, policy advocacy and awareness raising as well as ICTs and their particular characteristics. The findings of this research suggest that at the level of civil society communication and network building, using ICTs in fact strengthens the work. With regards to political lobbying, however, the usage of ICTs as a tool remains underutilized. Lobby work is more affected by the relationships held between civil society members and political structures and individuals. At the level of grassroots awareness raising access to ICTs remains a barrier and thus requires a much broader strategy.

About the author

Karoline Kemp recently graduated from the Institute of Social Studies with a MA in Development Studies and a Specialisation in Public Policy and Management. With a background in communications, women's rights and poverty reduction, Karoline has worked in Asia, Africa and North America, and is currently working for the UNDP in Indonesia.

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[1] This working paper is based on the author's research paper written in compliance with the requirements for obtaining the degree of Masters of Arts in Development Studies at the Institute of Social Studies, finalized in December 2008. Her field research was funded by the 2008 Hivos-ISS Civil Society Building Knowledge Programme.

INTRODUCTION

The past fifteen years have seen significant changes in the contexts affecting the relationships between civil society and governmental policymakers. This shift in relationships has resulted in opportunities in the policy arena for an increasing number of actors (Overseas Development Institute 2006). Civil society organisations constitute some of these players, and are embracing a range of methods to assist in their new roles in order to instigate networking, information sharing and capacity building. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are playing a large function in this new environment, and their role in international development is growing, as can be seen in the types of projects that agencies such as the United Nations (UN), World Bank, Ford Foundation and others are supporting, both ideologically and financially.

In the arena of women's rights, a coalition of civil society organisations from across the African continent has capitalised on this policy making space in an attempt to promote the Protocol on Women's Rights to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. The Solidarity for African Women's Rights group, referred to as SOAWR, has been working at the level of the African Union (AU), with Member State governments and in local communities in order to ratify, popularise and implement the Protocol. Their work as a coalition of different organisations engaging with governments has an explicit medium of using ICTs, namely *Pambazuka News*, an electronic newsletter about social justice in Africa. SOAWR provides the basis of a case study for this research due to the fact they have claimed success around the ratification and popularisation of the Protocol, and their usage of ICTs is a significant aspect of this success.

As of November 2005, the Protocol has been ratified by the AU. However, governments have been slow to ratify it, and those which have done so have not generally taken the initiative on their own to begin popularising or implementing this new tool. African civil society organisations, all of which are Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who campaigned for many years around the Protocol, worked alongside the AU starting from the 1990s to draft and promote the adoption of the Protocol; it was adopted in 2003. Civil society from across the continent came together in a different formation in 2004 to form the Solidarity for African Women's Rights coalition in order to work at ratification, popularisation and implementation of the Protocol.

SOAWR, working in a different environment, and requiring a broader strategy in order to influence not only the AU but also its Member States, has needed a completely new approach in order to encourage ratification, and also to popularise the Protocol and begin the work of its implementation. Existing in an age of information and communication technologies, where the internet dominates offices around the globe, SOAWR has had an explicit strategy of capitalising on this means of sharing information and communicating with various players.

This research will therefore offer an illustration of how civil society coalitions can engage in governmental policy processes and the way in which ICTs can be used in their work. The internet, specifically, has contributed to the work of SOAWR in ratifying and popularising the Protocol, namely as a platform for information sharing, but also as a means of networking and coalition building. The role that SOAWR has played, using *Pambazuka News* as a tool, is therefore what this research seeks to examine. The work of SOAWR has

taken place in a complex and elaborate environment; having to reach a wide range of target audiences, from constituencies of rural and urban communities, local and national governments and AU bodies and individuals, implies a variety of different tactics. Being a part of an elaborate and complex group of institutions and players, and requiring different strategies for these various groups and stages of the process, the work of SOAWR raises interesting issues about what those strategies have been, and to what extent ICTs have been relevant at each phase of their work.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Primary data for this research was gained through interviews conducted in Oxford, the United Kingdom, and Nairobi, Kenya, between July 29 and August 14, 2008. These interviews were all semi-structured: an outline of questions to be addressed was provided, but there was time and space for other issues to be raised and likewise, those questions which had been answered elsewhere or were deemed irrelevant were left out. In Oxford, Firoze Manji, director of Fahamu, the organisation which produces *Pambazuka News*, was interviewed. Kenya was chosen as the primary field work location due to the fact that it had the largest concentration of SOAWR members, with seven organisations based there (Fahamu East Africa office, Equality Now, Coalition on Violence Against Women (COVAW), African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), Women Direct, Oxfam Great Britain (Oxfam GB) and the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA)-Kenya). One focus group discussion was held with four out of the seven organisations, and the other three were interviewed separately. Further to the SOAWR members, interviews were held with the East Africa liaison office of Hivos, the Dutch funding NGO, as well as four of the Kenyan Hivos partners in their human rights programme (three were held in person, while another answered a questionnaire by email).

An intergovernmental organisation, the Kenyan Women Parliamentary Association (KEWOPA), charged with promoting women's participation in government was also interviewed. With regards to governmental offices, it was difficult to establish contact with the Gender Ministry and Ministry of Justice, but I had a brief meeting with the State Counsel in the Department of Treaties and Agreements in the Attorney General's office, where I was told I needed clearance to interview them; however, I did manage to elicit some interesting information before leaving. Electronic questionnaires were also answered by two SOAWR funders, including the Global Fund for Women and the Ford Foundation.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are becoming increasingly important in the process of social development. There are a myriad of types of information and communication technologies, but at the same time there is a convergence of broadcasting and publishing (like television, radio, newspaper) with telecommunications (phones, mobile phones, satellite), all of which are overlapping and appearing together online. Therefore, more traditional forms of media – television, radio, print – are excluded from ICTs, until, that is, they come online. The internet is at the core of this field, and while many believe it to be a solution to social, economic and political problems due to its numerous unique features (including their ability to disseminate and share information, as well as the opportunities that can result for decentralised participation and interaction across wide

spaces) there are ongoing debates with regards to its usefulness with respect to development.

The majority of studies examining ICTs in Africa focus on what they can do to Africans, not about what Africans themselves can do with ICTs (van Binsbergen, cited in Njamnjoh 2005: 9). In an article detailing the use of ICT amongst Tanzanian NGOs, Mercer argues that effective participation in political and economic decision-making requires the usage of ICTs in terms of email for communication and network building and internet for information sharing (2004).

Information and communication technologies are being used by civil society, in what Gaventa, Engberg-Pedersen and Webster, and Castells are calling spaces – which refer to both the practical and theoretical realms where people can actively engage in the communities in which they live. Much of this literature overlaps, and I wish to here use Gaventa's concept of participatory spaces as it interacts with the political spaces defined by Engberg-Pedersen and Webster, to look at how governments are increasingly being pushed to be accountable by citizens who feel their needs aren't being met. In the words of Engberg-Pedersen and Webster, these citizens are increasingly exploiting opportunities and political spaces to have their voices heard. Usually used in connection to the role of the poor in poverty reduction, political spaces can also be taken up by other marginalized groups, in the case of this particular research, women are the actors who seek to influence spheres or spaces. Understood as the different ways and possibilities that exist for creating political change, political space is generally engaged with by groups representing their constituents (Engberg-Pedersen and Webster: 2002). To this end, Gaventa offers ideas of participatory spaces that allow for the access of civil society to political spaces. This concept of participatory spaces contains a range, including closed spaces (where decision-making remains out of the hands of citizens), invited spaces (where civil society takes advantage of political opportunities to participate) and claimed/created spaces (where citizens create opportunities to have their voices heard) (2005). Engberg-Pedersen and Webster outline a framework around political space for poverty alleviation. I wish to use their concepts but apply them to issues related to women's rights. Therefore, political/participatory space in this case is characterised by opportunities for citizens to influence institutions where policy formulation and implementation take place. Characterised by relationships between state and citizens, civil society organisations can be seen as strategically working to secure their interests by promoting change in actions and policies. Here, policy advocacy as engaged with by civil society organisations becomes about actors, who use another kind of space to engage with political spaces. In this sense, the usage of ICTs falls into what Castells calls public space – a public sphere between state and society which exists specifically for communication. Castells argues that within this space, which can be either physical or virtual, debates become globalised, and shift from lying solely in the hands of decision makers to a wider space. This "network society" becomes a repository for information to become more widely available and for deliberations about citizen rights to be opened up to allow many more voices and this can potentially have the effect of influencing the state (Castells 2008).

THE PROTOCOL ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Generally referred to as The Maputo Protocol, or simply The Protocol, the AU adopted the Protocol on Women's Rights to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights in

2003; it is the only women's rights instrument originating in Africa and represents many "firsts" in terms of legal protection for women, including the right to abortion in the case of rape, as well as a required principle of equality between men and women in national constitutions and other legislation. In order to take force, the Protocol required signatures and ratifications by 15 African governments. This occurred in November of 2005, breaking historical records with regards to the speed at which it was ratified. Most continental and regional human rights instruments in Africa have taken from eight to ten years to obtain the ratifications needed for them to enter into force, according to SOAWR.

THE SOLIDARITY FOR AFRICAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS GROUP

A concerted push for the Protocol's ratification, popularisation and implementation was taken up by a coalition of civil society organisations in 2004, at which point only one country (The Comoros) had signed and ratified the Protocol. The Solidarity for African Women's Rights group (SOAWR) was established by a small group of African civil society activists (who now mostly comprise the steering committee). About 15 organisations were involved at the outset, though there are now 29 members, which range in size from local organisations to pan-African as well as international organisations. Their goal was universal ratification of the Protocol, and the subsequent popularisation and implementation necessary to make this legislation truly effective. While the structure of SOAWR is loose, there is a Steering Committee which meets every quarter, and sometimes even monthly; it is comprised of FEMNET, Oxfam GB, Fahamu, the African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies, Akina Mama wa Afrika and Inter-African Network for Women, Media, Gender and Development (FAMEDEV). Equality Now, a women's rights advocacy organisation, acts as Secretariat, and the Committee is charged with generating strategy for summits, exploring fund-raising opportunities, approving statements and other materials for publication as well as membership applications and proposals submitted by members for the funding of campaign activities. Membership is open – interested organisations are required to submit an application stating their reasons for wanting to join the campaign.

The coalition has as its main objectives to achieve universal ratification of the Protocol, to popularise the Protocol and to ensure that the Protocol is implemented in all countries as it becomes part of domestic law. To this end, the strategies that it lists to meet these goals include influencing public opinion in favour of the ratification, expanding SOAWR's relationship with the AU, actively engaging with mass media and making use of the internet to popularise the Protocol and strengthening the leadership capability of women's organisations. Their strategies have been broad, and to meet their goals, they have produced advocacy material which has been received at both the level of national governments as well as the AU. A key approach has involved participation in AU Summits and engaging with its various departments, as well as with Member State governments.

PAMBAZUKA NEWS

In Kiswahili, *Pambazuka* means 'to arise.' Created in 2000 by the pan-African social justice network Fahamu, *Pambazuka News* began as an email newsletter that aimed to use ICTs in the struggle against impoverishment and injustice. Manji and Burnett (2006) note four dimensions: to improve access to information and knowledge, to strengthen the voices of people in decisions and processes which affect them, to enable networking amongst people and organisations dedicated to issues of social justice and to assist in the building of a base

of citizens who actively participate in holding policy makers and governments accountable. The name, therefore, links directly to the Pan-Africanist vision of self-determination and self-confidence that *Pambazuka News* is trying to nurture.

To date, over 1200 people have contributed articles of analysis and commentary, news and debates about social justice in Africa to *Pambazuka News*, and currently available statistics show that over 500 000 people access the website weekly to read the newsletter online, while over 15 000 subscribe to receive it to their personal emails (*Pambazuka News*). Both the contributors and readers range from interested citizens, politicians, UN officials, grassroots activists and academics, although the majority of readers come from various civil society organisations. This, in fact, fits with the goal of *Pambazuka News*, which is to build "an innovative and influential web forum for social justice in Africa" (*Pambazuka News*). The organisation which produces *Pambazuka News*, Fahamu, has as its mission to "support the strengthening of human rights and social justice movements by promoting innovative use of information and communication technologies, stimulating debate, discussion and analyses, publishing news and information, and developing and delivering educational courses" (Fahamu). The strategy for the future includes working to "expand the forum for human rights and social justice in Africa, expand public awareness of human rights, strengthen civil society organisations and to root Fahamu in Africa" (Fahamu).

When SOAWR was first created at a meeting in Nairobi, Fahamu, as a member of the coalition, offered the use of *Pambazuka News* to the group. This has resulted in the creation of advocacy material, much of it used at AU summits, as well as with Member States. These advocacy materials have included special issues of *Pambazuka News* dedicated to information about the Protocol, as well as space within *Pambazuka News*' AU Monitor, which provides up to date information for civil society about the AU, including events, issues and debates. This, according to SOAWR members, has been especially useful at the AU Summits themselves. In addition, Fahamu/*Pambazuka News* and SOAWR have published two books about the Protocol, the first entitled *Not Yet a Force for Freedom: The Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa*, and the second called *Grace, Tenacity and Eloquence: The Struggle for Women's Rights in Africa*.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This particular case study offers interesting findings about the relationship between participatory spaces and political spaces. SOAWR, as a coalition, has worked to a large extent with the AU, as well as Member State governments, although my findings detail this work less than is necessary to properly analyse. At the level of the AU, SOAWR was able to participate in some political processes and events, exploiting opportunities. They did so in a variety of ways, but following what Gaventa terms closed, invited and created spaces I will analyse their work according to this framework (2005). Adding on to this framework I will add Castells' idea of public spaces, that is, that communication offers the potential to move decision-making from a political realm to a more public one. Castells argues that when debates become globalised and more voices are heard, the public spaces can act as the means through which policies, discourse and practices can be changed (2008). Of course, while theoretically it may be easy to maintain divisions between closed, invited and created spaces, in reality those are less prominent. In the case of SOAWR's advocacy work at the level of the African Union, there is much overlap.

In the instance of closed spaces, where there is little room for participation, it was repeated in my interviews that despite having policies laying out regulations for civil society engagement with the AU, the roles and responsibilities of the various bodies, institutions and even individuals themselves were difficult to understand. Hence, the AU as a structure was in some ways, a closed space for SOAWR. To counter this, a sister publication to *Pambazuka News*, the African Union Monitor, was created so that civil society might better understand the institution that has such influence over the continent. In this way, civil society is not only better able to understand the institutional policy channels that impact their work, it can also add to the political discourse around the AU by publicizing that the AU is being watched, or "monitored." Further, Member State governments were assisted in understanding the institution, as openly admitted in the case of the South African government. Here is an example of a closed space being transformed into a created space, by way of communication. By putting information into a public space SOAWR is able to interact with the AU in a manner which not only monitors, but allows for interaction between governments and civil society.

Published online, but handed out in print copy at the Summits, the AU Monitor plays a complementary role to *Pambazuka News*, which is also distributed in hard copy at Summits. Special editions of *Pambazuka News* highlighted women's rights issues and the function of the Protocol, linking events, political situations or themes to the issues, the Protocol's relevance and pertinence were shown so that officials came to be convinced to support the Protocol. This may be seen as an invited space, where opportunities for civil society to participate are offered by decision-makers. At AU Summits, which SOAWR has decided to strategically target as a means of accessing decision makers, SOAWR has used their good working relationships with the AU Directorate for Women, Gender and Development as well as other key officials to use that space more effectively. They did this by engaging in joint campaigns and activities, and this has enabled SOAWR to have more access to other AU departments as well as state officials. The process of getting accreditation to participate in the opening and closing ceremonies of these Summits has also been facilitated by these relationships, which SOAWR has nurtured and exploited in order to further the cause of the Protocol. In addition, SOAWR members have used their own reputations to be invited to participate in various AU functions and committees. By engaging with civil society in such an official manner, a clear signal is sent with regards to the fact that they are in fact a part of the process of decision-making and that their input is valued, allowing civil society to hold some sort of legitimacy in terms of their work. Another way in which SOAWR has been able to access invited spaces is perhaps with regards to funding and trends in development. Several people I interviewed mentioned that women's rights were a popular issue, and that it had been quite easy for SOAWR as a coalition to attain funding due to this trend, as well as an increased commitment to good governance, which included supporting a wider variety of actors engaging in political issues.

Created spaces for participation are those opportunities that have been initiated by civil society. In this sense, again, there is much overlap, especially in terms of countering the closed political space of the AU, but the usage of *Pambazuka News* is an area in which discourses are affected. Taking advantage of characteristics of the internet that promote what Tettey lists as interactivity between many different voices, a global network, uncensored speech and the ability to challenge and cross check official views, *Pambazuka News* publishes news that often cannot be found in other places and is a uniquely African

voice around issues faced by communities across the continent. An example of "what Africans are doing with ICTs," (van Binsbergen, cited in Njamnjoh 2005: 9) *Pambazuka News* provides a space for debate and analysis, thus providing discourses about Africa, by Africans, which promote communications between various communities, linking them in a way that fosters a collective movement. By providing lessons learned and best practices, civil society talks with one another, and in using *Pambazuka News* as a platform to share these stories, SOAWR members cited that this collective effort provided support, encouragement, motivation and momentum for their work that they would not otherwise feel. This in a sense has created a community for SOAWR members, where they can update one another about their activities and share experiences. In speaking with a staff member from KEWOPA, an intergovernmental organisation charged with promoting women's participation and representation in Parliament, I was told that *Pambazuka News* was crucial in keeping her up to date with what was going on in order for her to do her job effectively. Civil society members outside of SOAWR were familiar with *Pambazuka News* and most subscribed to receive it weekly. SOAWR members claimed that *Pambazuka News* helped with visibility in terms of the SOAWR campaign, and that having space in a reputable publication like *Pambazuka News* also meant that a certain legitimacy was acquired for their work.

In addition to these created spaces, SOAWR has built in a further aspect of capacity building in their work; through training journalists at AU Summits, and in promoting women bloggers, not only is the potential visibility about women's rights in Africa increased with an online presence, but more importantly the capacity of individual women is targeted, creating not only women who are more aware of their rights, but also engaging these women in a discourse they may not have previously been conscious of. On the level of created participatory spaces, Fahamu and FEMNET have also recently created a series of radio programmes for SOAWR's usage. This is aimed towards the third state of SOAWR's work, which is to popularise the Protocol and create a constituency who is aware of their rights and knows how to claim those rights. This is done on a much more local level. Focal points in various countries spearhead these initiatives, and disseminate, for example, the radio programme, to grassroots organisations and communities. Thus, relationships between communities and SOAWR are mediated through awareness building.

The above analysis demonstrates a number of interesting points which examine spaces for participation. What remains to evaluate are some of the challenges and opportunities that exist for SOAWR, in terms of both the usage of ICTs in their work as a coalition and for policy advocacy.

The usage of information and communication technologies across the African continent has numerous potentials. However, the facilities for and culture of email, obtaining online news and utilising electronic information and research databases is not embedded in Africa in any significant way yet. Internet users remain within certain elite circles. From my limited interviews, it appeared as though *Pambazuka News*, as it exists online, did not reach official or political figures. The intergovernmental organisation, KEWOPA, which works with Parliamentarians, described having to physically go and speak with those officials, because they did not check their emails. At the level of government advocacy print materials seemed to be the most effective means of projecting ideas and recommendations. *Pambazuka News* remains more as a tool for those active in civil society, which is in fact the target of *Pambazuka News*, and these civil society members do in fact see *Pambazuka News*

as strengthening their work as a movement. Providing an online community, lending credibility and exchanging news and information which strengthens their work are some of the characteristics that were cited. At the same time, *Pambazuka News* does not reach those people who are the targets of civil society's work; the awareness raising at the grassroots level is still most effectively carried out via radio. Thus, in terms of using ICTs to promote the Protocol, besides for SOAWR and a small group of civil society members, their usage is limited. However, providing a platform for these civil society members to voice their opinions and debate and analyse social, political and economic issues and policies does serve to create a community that has the potential to result in widening the discourses around these issues, which can then move into a more political realm.

With regards to policy advocacy around the Protocol, SOAWR has faced numerous challenges, most of which have revolved around governmental structures and resistance. At the level of the AU this has been characterised by a lack of understanding of structures, but as the AU itself had already adopted the Protocol and was urging Member States to ratify it quickly, there was less resistance at this level. SOAWR members cited that most resistance was in fact felt at the level of Member States, much of it owing to conservatism, strong religious ties and internal politics. However, SOAWR used some creative campaigning techniques, including a SMS (text messaging) campaign and a Colour Card Campaign, which not only raised attention outside of the usual actors, but also served to name and shame governments into responding to the Protocol. These creative techniques were carried out by SOAWR members for the first time on the continent – they had never been used before, and therefore brought interest from other civil society organisations, funders and governments. Further, that SOAWR members had strong relationships with a number of AU figures has allowed them some degree of support for their work. Further challenges with regards to policy advocacy exist around bringing the policies back to the people. In the case of SOAWR, their initial strategy has been at an elite political level, and in fact the organisations participating in the campaign are, in some cases, quite removed from constituents, existing in a realm of international donors, other global civil society actors and the like. While this has also been a strength of the coalition, because being able to speak the language of politics has indeed been necessary, any real change will need to be carried out at a more grassroots level, which is a real challenge for the organisations involved in SOAWR. The process of implementing the Protocol, for example, will require genuine partnerships between more local actors – governments, service providers, community based organisation, and will need to take place across the whole of the continent. This supports Merry's theory of translating (2006) whereby civil society acts as an intermediary between local and international ideas, institutions and meanings. SOAWR has indeed done this at the level of the AU, but in some ways has been aligned more closely at that level than at the grassroots. Thus, local organisations, and the networks they belong to will become increasingly important.

CONCLUSIONS

This research set out to examine the success of the Solidarity for African Women's Rights coalition in their work around the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. The usage of information and communication technologies, played a central role in their strategy. While the analysis has shown that *Pambazuka News* has indeed played a role in pushing women's rights and the Protocol into a wider arena of discourse, it has also demonstrated

that more factors have resulted in SOAWR's success. Perhaps most significant among these has been the relationships of individual SOAWR members with politicians which gave them access to political spaces not normally opened to civil society. This has proven to be the most effective means of political lobbying that SOAWR has carried out. This means that individuals within SOAWR have used their own reputations, contacts and lobbying skills in order to further their agendas. In addition, the lateral relationships between SOAWR members, as well as the wider communities of non-governmental organizations in which they work, have strengthened their own abilities to network and build relationships with key political bodies and individuals.

As SOAWR members recognise, the ratification of the Protocol by Member States will in fact be the easiest part of their work. Making the Protocol known, respected and practically used means a completely different kind of approach, and requires an even wider range of actors. It also necessitates that women know about the Protocol, and the rights accorded to them under it. This will not come from online debates and emails, but will rather require a more realistic approach of using radio and print media. The potential for utilising mobile phones also exists, but as has been demonstrated by the "Text Now 4 Women's Rights" campaign, must be carefully implemented.

This is not to say that the usage of ICTs is misplaced. African non-governmental organizations, to be effective and integrated into an inevitably globalised civil society, must have access to this important means of communication and network building. Working across wide physical spaces and in varying contexts means that the potentials that exist in creating an online community that can provide support and a sense of cooperation is invaluable.

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Related Websites

Pambazuka News: http://www.Pambazuka.org
Fahamu: http://www.fahamu.org
Solidarity for African Women's Rights: http://www.soawr.org

Contact