Empowering local people and communities to monitor districts services delivery through ICTs

Results & Lessons Learned

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Executive Summary

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET), concentrates on helping women in the country develop the use of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) as "tools to share information and address issues collectively". WOUGNET works with all women regardless of "their political inclination, religion and tribe[1]" because irrespective of their other attributes women's relationship with ICT is often complex and challenged (Primo, 2003). At the same time, the process of addressing issues is empowering as it can challenge the power structures in place.

When monitoring the provision of local government services and specifically amplifying women's voices and participation in democratic transactions, the complexity increases significantly. Women have struggled to participate in democratic processes in Uganda, be it as leaders (Tamale, 1999), or as active citizens (Tamale, 2004). Conflating this process with the use of technology, an arena that is itself convoluted for women, requires strategic but conciliatory methods of application.

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Research on the Project: "People's Voices: Developing Cross Media Services to Promote Citizens Participation in Local Government Activities": Linnaeus University, Sweden – Prof Marcelo Milrad, Dr Aris Alissandrakis in Collaboration with Makerere University, Uganda – Dr Rehema Baguma and Dr Jude Lubega.

Spider Network Affiliation: East Africa ICT4Democracy Network

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In their project, *Empowering local people and communities to monitor districts services delivery through ICTs*, WOUGNET tackled these two complex realms at once through the formation of community structures. The approach was to firstly build their advocacy skills and knowledge on good governance and then their ICT capacities in using these tools to monitor as well as report bad/poor service delivery in their communities. At the close of the project, 30 Voluntary Social Accountability Committees (VSACs) had been established in five districts in Northern Uganda. Each VSAC is made up of 15 members, 11 women and 4 men. There is increased civic awareness among the local people as more than 450 VSACs have acquired skills to monitor local government services, identify corruption and mismanagement of local public resources. The VSACs have further acquired ICT skills such as digital photography, and have been active in restoring neglected boreholes, run down schools, mismanaged health centers and badly constructed public service buildings as well as roads. The overall outcome is "empowered communities that actively engage with their leaders to change the face of service delivery in their respective communities[2]".

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[1] www.wougnet.org
[2] WOUGNET Final Report, P. 1

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1. Background

Uganda's decentralized system of government was conceived in 1995 with the aim of bringing government services closer to Ugandans. Transferring financial and human resources from the central government to lower administrative structures was meant to improve on and bring service delivery closer to the population. Soon after President Museveni assumed power (1986), the northern region was engulfed in a brutal civil war that lasted for more than two decades, further delaying the development of the region in comparison to the rest of the country. Efforts to rebuild the region since the war ended have been hampered by mismanagement of funds, corruption, and poor/bad service delivery. The situation has been exacerbated by the fact that most communities in this region are "uninformed about government functions and systems" which has created an "environment in which poor service delivery and corruption thrive[3]".

It is in this context that Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) conceptualized the project *Empowering local people and communities to monitor districts services delivery through ICTs*. Five districts in Northern Uganda where WOUGNET had an established presence namely Apac, Kole, Oyam, Gulu and Amuru, would form the basis for this pilot project. WOUGNET had worked with various women's organizations in the region, and the focus on women was also in relation to the fact that women in rural areas "are highly marginalized owing to the traditional and cultural practices[4]" and yet they bear the brunt of poor service delivery in all sectors. WOUGNET was also working towards increasing "women's participation in decision making, policy making and influencing policy to be gender sensitive."[5] Targeting community based organizations and women's groups, the project would mobilize them into Voluntary Social Accountability Committees (VSACs) for their respective areas.

A number of technical platforms were applied at different levels in the project. However with specific reference to the project beneficiaries, the use of ICTs in the project presented the VSACs with a number of challenges, such as an underdeveloped communication infrastructure. WOUGNET successfully carried out training sessions with the VSACs on how to use mobile phones, Internet platforms as well as digital cameras for social accountability. Majority of the VSACs did not own or have access to the ICT tools in question which made the continued use of these technologies after the training somewhat difficult. There was no electricity in some communities and mobile telephony network is unstable in some places. During the rainy seasons, electricity outages can last for days, and the mobile and radio signals are disrupted. Besides these technical challenges, social difficulties such as high levels of illiteracy added to the complexity of using ICTs in the project. But where challenges present themselves, often opportunities appear, such as underserved communities' being made visible in this project, which has resulted in negotiations towards addressing lack of basic necessities such as bringing electricity and roads to the communities. Although the social and technical applications to the project were difficult to harmonize as shown above, an engaged, active, and aware community that continues to claim their rights was realized.

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[3] WOUGNET – Project Proposal, 2011 P. 2
[4] WOUGNET – Project Proposal, 2011 P. 2
[5] Citation from the documentary film *"Empowering local people and communities to monitor districts services delivery through ICTs"* at min 3:23

2. Results (Outcomes)

The overall goal was to have an empowered, democratically engaged northern region that would make sure the development efforts geared towards the northern districts of Uganda bear fruit. In their proposal WOUGNET mentioned how communities that are ignorant of their rights are breeding grounds for corruption. Through the blogs[6], the Facebook updates[7], Spider stories[8], the WOUGNET newsletters[9], the organization website[10], reports of communities holding their leaders accountable are widespread[11]. There is the example of Betty Otim, who spearheaded the construction of a borehole in her community after the leaders had redirected the construction of this technology away from the designated location[12]. In other cases the communities have taken matters into their own hands. When the parents of a primary school discovered that the teachers were living in abject conditions, they came together to construct houses for the teachers, which ultimately means better service to their children in that school. All efforts point to the advocacy training by WOUGNET that has encouraged the communities that they have a right to demand for better service delivery across sectors. The communities have also been made to realize that they need not always wait on their leaders to effect change.

The process of advocacy involved mobilizing the VSACs by training them on leadership accountability and empowering them with information regarding their rights. The district leaders were involved throughout this process so as to avoid resistance and friction towards the project, the VSACs and WOUGNET. That a forum was created where the leaders and their constituents could sit down and dialogue is an important highlight in this project. Yet despite WOUGNET's role in bridging this gap, the distance between the leaders and the communities they were responsible for remains. The VSACs took to reporting bad service delivery, and all manner of corruption to WOUGNET staff. What this led to was an insistence on quarterly briefing meetings that the VSACs instituted during which reports of occurrences in their communities were submitted and discussed. As such WOUGNET appears to have assumed the role of mediator between these two camps, which was an unprecedented outcome. This point is revisited subsequently.

Alongside the civic engagement trainings; the VSACs and WOUGNET staff in the field offices were introduced to various web 2.0 platforms. A web based Ushahidi platform mapping incidences of poor services was created[13] and content was uploaded on a monthly basis. Citizen journalism skills were a specific focus for the field staff and the VSACs. The VSACs through SMS send information to the regional office and to WOUGNET staff who make postings on their behalf on the web platforms. The field staff also received

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[6] http://wougnet.org/category/blog/

[7] https://www.facebook.com/#!/wougnet

[8] Spider Stories 2011

[9] http://www.apc.org/en/news/women-mobiles-and-rural-uganda

[10] www.wougnet.org

[11] http://indigotrust.org.uk/2013/09/09/communities-to-monitor-and-improve-health-service-delivery-by-reporting-wrongdoings/

[12]

http://kic.wougnet.org/new/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&catid=1%3Anews&id=242%3Acommunity-empowerment-in-practice-lessons-from-wougnet-vsac-member-in-amuru-town-council--joice-at&Itemid=3&lang=en

[13] www.wougnet.org/ushahidi

training on blog writing skills[14] and digital photography training was provided to the VSACs. Through the use of these platforms the idea was to "promote awareness, accountability and democratic practices at grass-root levels of society"[15]. Facebook updates on the field office's page [16] as well as WOUGNET's graphically communicated the situations faced by the people in these regions, and sparked debates and comments from beyond the region and the country.

Fig1. VSACs During a monthly meeting with WOUGNET field staff – Photo by WOUGNET

While these platforms have successfully communicated the project beyond the northern region[17], a pertinent question is to what extent the communities in question succeeded in amplifying local voices through these ICTs. Mapping social issues on crowd sourcing platforms for example, has come under scrutiny with an underlying question "what's in it for the crowd"?[18] Similarly the Face book updates[19], the blogs and the Twitter feeds[20] have not been placed there by the affected individuals. The medium of discussion on all these platforms has been English, which is itself exclusionary to the "crowd" that is contributing the content. This brings the discussion towards what is meant by ICT for development? Whose development does ICT4D consider?

Critically intuitive to the "crowd", WOUGNET has employed a number of useful strategies that are important to consider for all ICT4D practitioners. Traditional media has been effectively applied such as the use of radio to broadcast the project to the districts.

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[14] http://kic.wougnet.org/new/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=1&lang=en
[15] WOUGNET proposal Page 12.
[16] https://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/KIC-APAC/154936601204574
[17] An article from CNN by Indigo Trust, who were co-funders in the project; A written piece on the project by Global Information Systems 2012 to name a few,
[18] Prof Björn Perhsson asked this question during the IST-Africa conference in Nairobi 2013.
[19] WOUGNET has more than 1300 likes on their face book page
[20] Twitter followers are more than 250

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Radio is especially effective as it allows for communication in one's language. Some of the VSACs took part in the radio talk shows. The same technology enabled for public dialogue, call back sessions for the grass root communities to air their views and have them responded to. Also as part of its disseminating activities WOUGNET produced newsletters in English and in Luo. The newsletters in Luo have allowed other communities also in the north to be inspired and follow the changes happening in the five districts. It is within these traditional forums that direct impact for the communities was realized.

If one is to layer the technical implementation to this project, the digital platforms while still largely inaccessible to 80% Ugandans were important to publicize the project beyond the northern region. The benefits of this can be found in areas such as Amuru district where some communities that did not have access to electricity are now being considered for this development. But it is important to also keep in mind what is accessible in terms of ICT tools for majority of the world's developing population. A convergence of tools can have an all-powerful impact particularly as traditional media are still more effective in reaching grass root communities (Girard, 2003, P.5). Thus the second layer to this project is the use of radio, and community meetings where flip charts, and ink pens have been effective mediums for collecting issues from the villages, and bringing them to the municipal offices for attention.

Important to also note are the benefits the research carried out on the project have brought to the target group[21]. Linnaeus University partnered with Makerere University in this research and during their first field trip immediately identified a definite lack of ICT use in the project among the VSACs. A number of reasons already mentioned in this brief were identified by the researchers and Linnaeus University actively involved a number of masters-level students in Sweden to develop a communication application through the mobile phone that could be employed in the project. Since illiteracy was hindering the use of SMS features on the mobile phone, the researchers set out to identify a better use of the ubiquitous mobile phone for the VSACs.

Additionally based on the findings from the first field trip, WOUGNET submitted a proposal to Indigo Trust[22] requesting funds to purchase and distribute a number of ICTs to the VSACs. This was a successful application that saw a number of digital cameras, mobile phones. WOUGNET has plans to also distribute badges and/T-Shirts identifying the VSACs because every time the VSACs made contact with district leaders they were asked if they were questioned with what authority the authority with which these individuals communicated with them. Perhaps not accustomed to the constituents challenging the leaders, a number of VSACs were turned away from the offices of those in council if they could not produce proof that they belong to a formal or structured body.

This formal belonging helps negotiate power structures. A woman from a small village walking into a formal office to discuss challenges in her area defies this power structure from a gender, class and cultural perspective because social relations are subjected to a number of "axes of differentiations" (Moser, 2006) power being one of them. These differences are made during interactions and it is important to challenge and establish what

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[21] As part of its knowledge brokering pursuit, Spider supports research on on-going Spider supported projects. The research is carried out by senior researchers from Spider's partner universities in Sweden, and is done in collaboration with local researchers and the development partner in question.
[22] http://indigotrust.org.uk/

reinforces these structures if initiatives such as this one are to succeed. Hence the demand for some formal belonging can be read in two ways. Structure goes with structure, and specific protocols need to be met if community challenges are to be brought to those in office. If every citizen is allowed to walk into these offices, political mayhem is inevitable. Alternatively the patriarchal structures in place that enable some men to control other men and women are resolutely sustained by those in power. In other words a leader questioning the authority of ordinary people is an effective silencing method. What can be extracted from this project is that community organizing such as the VSACs is a strong power negotiating tool that can have an empowering effect if formalized.

3. Analysis and Lessons Learned (Outputs)

3.1 Project Implementation

Three specific objectives were outlined in the proposal:

1. "To create awareness on the need to have good governance and service delivery among the grass root communities and vocal community based organizations (CBOs) in five districts of Northern Uganda
2. To build capacity in ICT skills among the communities and CBOs to enable them collect, package and disseminate information on corruption and poor service delivery in their localities
3. To document and disseminate voices of the grass-root communities so as to raise awareness on corruption and poor service delivery in the five districts"[23]

The main activity for objective one was raising awareness on the need to have good governance and effective service delivery. This was a successful activity as it brought the concept of responsible active citizens that hold their leaders accountable to the community level. As many as 450 VSACs took part in the focus group workshops and seminars that provided this training. The assumption that WOUGNET held in this process was that upon the VSACs grasping the concepts of leadership accountability and service mindedness, the VSACs would be in a position to dialogue and even challenge their leaders where questionable behaviour was identified, or services were found wanting. What transpired instead was the VSACs reporting directly to WOUGNET field staff. It was then left up to WOUGNET to submit these reports to those in charge. As mentioned by WOUGNET in their proposal, the idea of questioning those in leadership positions is foreign as it is not natural to question authority in different African cultures (Dralega, 2009). Alternatively power structures as mentioned already are sustained through the creation of social boundaries of what is acceptable behavior among and within categories of people.

Categories such as class, age and gender sometimes work together or individually to create social differences with some having power over others (Crenshaw, 1991). As such a man or a woman from the community taking their leaders to task may be subdued in their pursuit if their age, class and even gender are in opposition to the one holding a power position. WOUGNET being placed in the mediator role could also be linked back to the feedback mechanism, a gnawing problem with digitalizing democratic processes. ICT encourages instant feedback, and using these platforms creates this impression, and where instant feedback cannot be actualized lack of trust in the ICT will flourish or as in the case of the VSACs alternative routes to this feedback is to skip the technology and engage directly with people, who can be held accountable, i.e. WOUGNET field staff. This was an additional responsibility placed on WOUGNET, and what can be picked up from these events is the understanding that information and technology are crucial for empowering communities, but communication between leaders and their constituents remains a challenge and may require a different approach.

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[23] WOUGNET Project Proposal

Fulfilling the underlined second objective of building the capacity in ICT skills for the VSACs, was similarly carried out with success. The VSACs had to share the computers that WOUGNET used in the training. WOUGNET also trained the VSACs how to use mobile phones in civic engagement. The use of SMS, and taking pictures with basic feature phones were among the skills the VSACs acquired. Traditional media such as the radio and the newspapers were also utilized. Radio shows where the community could call in and ask specific questions or present on radio were extremely popular in disseminating the cause, and engaging with a wider community beyond the VSACs. However, physical access to these technologies remains a challenge, where very few VSACs owned personal mobile phones, or had access to a computer beyond the ones WOUGNET used in the training. The developing infrastructure presented various challenges in the use of these technologies.

Perhaps in response to the challenges associated with using ICT in monitoring service delivery, the VSACs opted to report to WOUGNET, and successfully instituted quarterly briefing meetings that would give them the platform to report and follow up on reported cases. Majority of these VSACs had long distances to travel to these meetings, and often requested transport remuneration from WOUGNET. As mentioned in the discussion within the first objective, WOUGNET set out to empower these communities with information and knowledge about good governance. This they did with the cooperation of the district leaders. That the community then placed WOUGNET in this intermediary position could in addition to the previous suggestions, be explained by the challenges identified with using ICT in the region.

Objective 3 had a number of mediums that WOUGNET would use to disseminate and raise awareness. At one level this dissemination would have direct impact and benefit to the communities and on another level, the dissemination was to the national and international audiences. Disseminating information about the project and engaging the communities in the north, WOUGNET conducted district information sharing meetings, relied on the use of radio, newsletters, and even digital technologies such as mobile phones and Internet technologies such as the Ushahidi platform discussed earlier, that were used in conjunction with the traditional media. At the close of the project the WOUGNET Facebook page had over 1300 likes, and the regional project Facebook page had 33 likes[24] WOUGNET also has over 1500 Twitter followers. WOUGNET also produced a video documentary with a short version that appears on their home page[25]. Yearly newsletters have been published in hard and soft copies, and the soft versions have found their way beyond the Ugandan borders[26]. Two national conferences inviting government officials have been held. These occasions allowed WOUGNET and other partners in Uganda who are in the East Africa ICT4Democracy Network to share project results and experiences.

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[24] https://www.facebook.com/wougnet?ref=br_tf#!/pages/KIC-APAC/154936601204574?directed_target_id=0
[25] www.wougnet.org
[26] Such as their August 2012 newsletter that was also published on the APC webpage http://www.apc.org/en/news/women-mobiles-and-rural-uganda

3.2 Risks and risk management

WOUGNET identified the following risks as likely to affect the project and its sustainability:

- "There is a wide desire by local communities to demand for creation of local government status for counties. Whereas the project is interested in serving five districts, these districts might break up in the course of implementing the project and this might lead to higher operational costs in the process of trying to liaise with new political leaders".

This risk did not materialize during the life time of the project. None the less liaising with the district leaders in the five districts where the project was implemented was challenging. During the awareness raising campaigns and the subsequent follow up meetings, political leaders would fail to show up. WOUGNET took the opportunity to share these challenges at the national conferences where members of parliament responsible for the said regions were made aware of what was happening in their communities.

- "There is a potential for resistance to the project objectives and anticipated results by the political leaders within the districts".

Even though WOUGNET made sure to establish contact and work with the leaders on the project, some were still resistant towards working with the VSACs and WOUGNET field staff. The VSACs were asked with what authority they dared to question those in office and many were turned away because they did not belong to a recognized organization. Some of the leaders did not act on some issues that were presented to them by WOUGNET staff and the VSACs. Formal belonging carries social capital, and helps negotiate social relationships. Without this belonging the VSACs may have been forced to, in addition to reasons discussed earlier to submit all reports to WOUGNET. In response to this WOUGNET is preparing badges and other forms of identifications that might help legitimate the VSACs. If this process is not successful it could affect the VSACs continued resilience in leadership accountability.

- "The use of web based platform to monitor district service delivery is a new approach in Uganda. Coupled with high levels of illiteracy among the rural populations and limited ICT sills, there might be delays in equipping grass-root women and CBOs with adequate ICT skills"

The high levels of illiteracy did affect the training process and in particular the use of web based platforms for the grass root women. The Ushahidi platform as a case in point is being updated by WOUGNET field staff. As the project moves to other regions, sustaining the gains of a web presence may prove to be a challenge without the financial resources. But as a strategy for sustaining this process, WOUGNET focused on developing the skills of the core project beneficiaries, the fruits of which can only be realised in due course.

3.3 Sustainability

Ensuring ownership of the project among the VSACs was paramount to warranting the VSACs continuance to monitor service delivery after WOUGNET had moved to other regions. However in the course of the project, the VSACs took to reporting to WOUGNET as mentioned earlier, and physically coming to the quarterly meetings also instituted by the VSACs similarly required WOUGNET to assist the VSACs with transport costs. Other VSAC members failed to realize the "connection between districts leadership performance and their welfare or lives" and lost interest in being members. Others VSACs wanted to be paid for being members and like the first group also failed to make the connection between improved service delivery and their welfare and left.

The use of ICT is a recurring challenge where the infrastructure and low literacy levels complicate the relationship the VSACs have with mobile phones, and the computer. The U-Call system developed by Linnaeus masters students to help address the literacy challenges was a welcome alternative. Through the use of a toll-free number, VSACs can call in and report issues in their communities. However toll-free call systems just like telecenters have a short life span after project funding runs out. Even though the system works very well, the commands and all use instructions are in English and not Luo the language the VSACs use for communication.

The encouraging fact is that the VSACs are empowered with knowledge about their leadership accountability and the role they can play in this process. A number of the VSACs continue to be active. In some communities, the VSACs are often up dated on what is happening for instance when drugs are dispatched to the health centres, some VSACs are often called upon to witness the process.

3.4 Partnerships

Under the research project "People's voices" Linnaeus University has developed for WOUGNET a call system (U-Call) which relies on a toll free calling system that provides the VSACs and other community members an avenue for reporting issues on service delivery. The provision of this service helps to address the challenge of low levels of illiteracy. This was an unanticipated outcome that has provided WOUGNET with another avenue to work with in their outreach programs. Additionally partnerships with local radio stations, and other organizations such as the Apac anti-corruption coalition located in the district of Apac has helped further anchor the project regionally.

3.5 Network Analysis

WOUGNET is a member of the ICT4Democracy network, and has worked with the other six partners in providing experiences and lessons learned on how to mainstream gender into policy discussions as well as in the use of ICT. Through this network WOUGNET similarly has sought the assistance of the other partners in areas such as anti-corruption drives. WOUGNET also shared the use of technical platforms such as the Ushahidi platform that they use together with Toro Development Network who have their activities in Western Uganda. Advice on how to verify the reports being uploaded on the Ushahidi platform has similarly come from partners in the network with experience of using crowdsourcing platforms. When national conferences and press releases have been organized by WOUGNET or other partners in the network, there has been cooperation among the partners where it is not just the resources that are shared, but the public stage.

Finally the network is regionally facilitated on a 6 monthly rotational schedule. WOUGNET is the current facilitator and they are working hard to publicize the results and products from the different projects in the network to the world.

3.6 Monitoring and Evaluation

One of the benefits of being in a network is that partners hold each other accountable. The East African ICT4Democrayc partners with monthly Skype meetings have been updating each other on progress and challenges in the projects. These Skype meetings were borne out of a desire to update the network website on a monthly basis with project updates. But this forum provided Spider project officer with opportunities to monitor and evaluate project progress on a regular basis.

4. Conclusions

Empowering marginalized communities to demand for better service delivery through the use of ICT requires a multimedia approach in ensuring impact on different levels. What the WOUGNET project illustrates is that empowering the communities with information has to precede any ICT4D initiative. The challenges with infrastructure can be overcome but the knowledge acquired has an empowering effect that can effect change as shown by this project.

Even though WOUGNET worked together with the leaders of the communities in which the project was anchored, the distance between them and the people was maintained. Alternative methods may need to be employed in approaching leaders. As majority of the democratic processes seem to focus on the citizens, it may very well be that empowering the leaders to handle an increasingly engaged citizenry may help this process along.

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Annex III - Publicity

(Project media publications, e.g. blog posts, YouTube uploads)

https://www.facebook.com/pages/KIC-APAC/154936601204574

https://www.facebook.com/pages/KIC-APAC/154936601204574#!/wougnet

http://wougnet.org/

https://twitter.com/wougnet

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wFidJDDJbA&feature=player_embedded

http://indigotrust.org.uk/2013/09/09/communities-to-monitor-and-improve-health-service-delivery-by-reporting-wrongdoings/

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http://kic.wougnet.org/new/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=1&lang=en

http://wougnet.org/ushahidi/

http://wougnet.org/category/blog/

Documentary by WOUGNET – *Empowering local people and communities to monitor districts services delivery through ICTs*