

Speaking for Ourselves Southern Africa and the WSIS

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The African Charter on Broadcasting was the initial reason for southern African communication NGO's to become involved in the WSIS.

△ It was developed at a gathering of media practitioners and freedom of expression advocates from throughout Africa at the UNESCO-supported conference called to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration. This was held during May 2001 in Namibia.

The Windhoek Declaration, penned in 1991 was the basis upon which the UN declared May 3rd World Press Freedom Day. The declaration has served as an advocacy tool for auditing the extent to which governments throughout the African continent honour their commitments towards upholding and promoting media freedom, independence and diversity.

Despite this, the region remains an international focal point of media violations.

The right to communicate is almost non-existent for the majority population.

Most African countries do not yet have free and independent broadcast and information environments.

The Windhoek Declaration focussed on promoting independent print media, and was silent on issues such as broadcasting liberalisation and the globalisation of the communications industry which have increasingly come into play in the last decade.

The original Windhoek Declaration was adopted at a time when Africa saw the emergence of multi-party democracy. Namibia had just become independent and apartheid was breaking down in South Africa. The African Charter on Broadcasting has been adopted at a time when the prevailing wind is one of globalisation and the opening of markets to worldwide competition. It argues that Africa needs the space to develop its own cultural industries and local content, a form of market protection.

△ The African Charter on Broadcasting is a sequel to the Windhoek Declaration. It has become a key tool in advocating for enabling information environments in Africa. It serves as a policy blueprint rather than a set of rules to be imposed.

△ The African launch of the Charter took place on May 3rd, 2002 as part of the African Commission Sessions on Human and Peoples' Rights. This is part of the African Union system.

An implementation objective set for the Broadcast Charter was to assert it as an African position in the context of the WSIS. The task of driving this advocacy process was given to five organizations that are based in southern Africa. They are: Δ

MISA
ARTICLE 19
AMARC
APC
SACOD

Δ Our focus is in the southern African region – SADC – Southern African Development Community that includes 14 countries.

The campaign to strengthen the Charter coincided with the holding of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, itself a ten years later follow up to the RIO Earth Summit. There were lessons to be learnt that caused us to approach the WSIS with caution and a degree of skepticism. Δ

- Civil society was excluded from the main arena of negotiations
- Parallel events had limited impact on the main agenda
- Δ Only civil society groups with an extremely pertinent point or a high profile got any media coverage

Our focus in the WSIS was gaining enhanced status for the Charter to strengthen it as an advocacy tool. The more status it has, the more cognoscense will be afforded to it by governments that are reluctant to open the airwaves.

Δ Our first port of call was the African Regional WSIS Meeting held in Bamako, Mali in 2002. There the Charter was adopted as an African position and was named in the declaration.

At that meeting – which was focused mainly on government input, we realised that:

- Most African countries had little idea of what they should be proposing.
- Most African countries have little agreed policy on the Information Society (other than generally thinking it probably is a good thing).
- Many African delegations were able to identify problems and locate them in development contexts, but due to lack of experiential knowledge, few potential solutions were raised.
- We faced serious capacity issues in the official delegations.
- There was no grass roots involvement.
- The issues had to be grounded in a global framework.
- We had to get involved – the African information society could not be developed by governments alone. We had an opportunity and a responsibility to galvanise a broader input to the process.

△ As a partnership of the five organizations we developed a project called 'Speaking for Ourselves'.

The overall intention of the project is to ensure that people who are directly affected by communications issues in the SADC are mobilised, capacitated and have a say in the policy positions that are put by national delegates to the WSIS meetings, be they government, civil society or private sector players.

The principle that informs the project is that people who are directly affected by issues know best what the potential solutions are.

△ Our objectives are:

- To have an impact on the dominant economic drivers of the information society by exposing the reality of the majority of people who are excluded and linking this to the negative effects of globalisation.
- To have an impact on the policy that frames the information society using the African Charter on Broadcasting as the starting point.
- To have people currently excluded from the information society involved in the process and to build a platform in the WSIS for these voices to be heard.
- To assert and endorse the right to communicate as a human right that exists in conformity with Article 19.
- To assert the legitimacy of civil society in shaping the information society at national, regional and international levels.

△ Here is what we have achieved to date:

Capacity development

- ICT policy curriculum developed and piloted– soon to be available on the APC web site;
- ICT Policy workshops conducted in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Johannesburg (South Africa) and Kampala (Uganda). 150 people trained and mobilised to:
 - run workshops in 38 African countries;
 - lobby governments to include 'our people' and 'our input' in the 'official delegations and documents';
 - to be focal points for national mobilisation
- Electronic network established and active in policy development;
- △ Four rural women participated in PrepCom 2 with high profile impact.△

Policy, Position, Perspectives

- Δ Published a booklet for PrepCom 2
- Δ Developed a position paper on the Right to Communicate (ARTICLE 19 publication). This was the basis for input into the Right to Communicate debate held at PrepCom 2.
Δ
- Developed a response on the Draft Declaration and Plan of Action which is currently being debated and refined through the network of mobilisers on the African continent and the people they are working with.
- Δ Developed an Advocacy Tool Kit for civil society campaigns. This includes resources that expand on sections of the African Charter on Broadcasting.

ΔΔΔ We have also made plans to install an African village and telecentre at the Summit itself. Visiting this installation will be an interactive experience designed to bring home the African reality and perspectives on the information society.

Some of the Issues we will raise are:

- International Bandwidth Costs

Δ The current burden of paying for International Internet Bandwidth Costs is unfairly weighted onto countries in Africa. The existence of these reverse subsidies is the single largest factor that is contributing to high bandwidth costs in Africa. The simple fact that it costs 15 times more to make a phone call from Africa to within Africa than from outside Africa to Africa demonstrates the impact of globalisation on Africans.



- Δ Africa has two percent of the world’s phone lines and twelve percent of the population. Fifty percent of these phones lines (and in some counties eighty to ninety percent) are in capital cities where only ten percent of the population lives.
- Teledensity (telephone lines per one hundred inhabitants) is 0.5 in southern Africa – excluding South Africa – compared to 4.5 in emerging economies and 52.6 percent in industrialised counties.
- Δ The cost of renting a phone connection in Africa averages twenty percent of income per capita compared to a world average of nine percent and only one percent in high income countries.
- Δ Literacy – people who are highly literate in their home language often cannot read or write any of the languages that dominate the Internet. Radio remains the most important communication tool in Africa but even this source is compromised by the state monopolization of the airwaves.
- Δ Unequal gender relations – It is not uncommon for women in Africa to not be allowed to use the radio – where there is one in a home – while the man is out. This is considered a waste of batteries. Women in Africa are far more likely to walk on a dirt track than to surf on the electronic super highway.

Δ As Esther Mudlhovo says,

Rural Africans are burdened by survival. Top on our minds are the means by which we can maintain our families. Information that is worth the most is that which contributes to fulfilling our daily needs. None is better than that given by us, about us, for us.

△ These women who work all day to grind enough maize to feed the family each night pointed out that they don't have any spare time to be finding out what is happening in places they can't imagine. It is enough to find out when relatives living in the next village are ill or die.

△ This young woman asked me why she would think of a computer when she lives in a shack made of tin and plastic. Nurumbu who is 14 is one of many girl children who cannot afford to go to school for want of US\$7 a year.

△ Raphael lives with 19 family members and only one of them has employment, as a security guard in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. It is a 7-8 hour journey by donkey cart to the nearest telephone. It is generally not worth taking a sick person that far so they either get better, or die.

But I don't want to portray a continent where there is no hope because against all the odds there are very positive communication projects that do get information to communities.

△ REHO-TV is located in a small town populated by the Baster community which fled from both the English and Afrikaans administrations in the Cape of South Africa over a hundred years ago, to a dry area in Namibia. They defend their right to speak Afrikaans, just as they have defended their right to occupy the land they settled on. They started the station because the national broadcaster is predominantly in English and several indigenous languages.

Two men – one a funeral undertaker the other an auto-electrician started the local TV service, which was broadcasting for three hours each evening until their license was withdrawn for not paying their fees which rose sharply and did not consider the differences between commercial and community operators. The station has been off air for three years. I have recently found a benefactor who has offered them half of the funds required to get back on air if they can raise the rest from within the community. This is a challenge because it is a very poor community, but it is looking like the back shed operation will come back to life.

△ Moutse Community Radio was started by rural women who defied the Chiefs who refused to grant permission for the station to be run by women. It serves as a source of information where there wasn't one during the long years of Apartheid in South Africa. Particular attention is paid to survival issues and programming includes advice on agriculture, primary health care and budgeting.

△ In Kanzinzila village in the Caprivi region of Namibia a 24 year old disabled man who has never attended school repairs the broken radios for his and several other villages. Self taught, a few years ago after hearing of the outside world from his schooling brothers, he convinced the village headman to gather enough money from villagers to buy a car battery, a television set and a solar panel. He then established a TV viewing set up for the village. As time has gone by the efficacy of the battery and the panel have declined and it

now takes two weeks to recharge the battery using the solar panel. This then works for three to four evenings.

△ Postrick told me that the village was surprised to see recently that America was bombing the whole of Iraq because they were after one man. They were incredulous that so many people had to die because of one person. He also said that the TV is an important link between the younger generation who attend school and the older one that has not been educated at all. He has seen an advertisement for large screen televisions and is hoping the village will be able to raise enough capital to buy one some day.

△ Maria Shendembr became the adult literacy teacher for her village after two years of unemployment when she had completed secondary school. She did a three week course to prepare her and now earns a small government income for teaching. She supports the 11 children and her mother who were left when her father died of AIDS.

△ And so to Geneva – one of the world's most expensive cities.....with our depleted currencies.....

In the context of these stories the WSIS has many challenges and with a combination of reality inputs and solution orientated policy positions we in southern Africa – indeed now Africa, for our coalition has grown rapidly – hope that the WSIS will be a point of departure for a more concerted global effort to develop affordable, accessible access to information for those who are on a side of the divide that it will be difficult for many delegates to imagine.

We know that it is possible to have information without development but it is not possible to have development without information.