

Conversation

Joanne Henry speaks to Dorothy Okello, Coordinator of the Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) and member of APC-Africa-Women, about WOUGNET.

Joanne Henry: Dorothy, I know you are involved in the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) Africa-Women and you are the coordinator of the Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET), but could you tell us in your own words about the networking activities you are currently involved in?

Dorothy Okello: Since 1997, I have been involved with APC-Africa-Women, the Africa regional programme of the APC Women's Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP). APC-Africa-Women [1] is a network of organisations and individuals that work to empower African women's organisations to access and use information and communication technologies (ICTs) for equality and development. Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET), [2] which I coordinate, was initiated in May 2000 by several women's organisations in Uganda to promote the use of ICTs among women as tools to share information and address issues collectively.

JH: How did WOUGNET come into being? What were the motivating factors for establishing the network?

DO: For eighteen months prior to the formation of WOUGNET, I maintained an email mailing list through which women's organisations in Uganda would share news and announcements, as well as tips on computer and Internet usage. As interest in the list grew, it became apparent that structures and mechanisms were needed to maintain and facilitate this communication. Consultations were held with several well-known women's organisations, and there was clear need for:

- a list that would facilitate exchange of ideas and information between women's organisations;
- a companion website that would profile women's organisations and use the web to provide additional exposure for their activities; and
- information and support on how to maximise the potential of ICTs within women's organisations.

In response to the above, the WOUGNET mailing list and website were set up. The WOUGNET website and mailing lists are hosted by Kabissa - Space for Change in Africa.[3] By the end of 2000, the WOUGNET mailing list had fifty subscribers, including 18 women's organisations, while the website profiled 25 women's organisations and women-related projects.

It is widely recognised that women in Africa need increased access to ICTs in order to address local problems of sustainable development and economic empowerment effectively. In line with this, WOUGNET's goal is to promote and support the use of ICTs to empower women and women's organisations through access to information and opportunities for exchange and empowerment. We define ICTs to include email, the web, radio, television and print media. However, our emphasis is directed towards email and the web, and how these technologies can be integrated with traditional means of information exchange and dissemination for maximum outreach.

Today, the WOUGNET website and mailing lists have become key sources of information about and for women's organisations in Uganda, and have become valued resources for members and other interested partners.

JH: What process did you undertake for establishing an ICT infrastructure within which the network could operate?

DO: WOUGNET operates primarily online - so all our members (or their representatives) need to have at least email access. For women's organisations, membership involves subscription to the mailing list as well as providing a profile for the website. Due to varying degrees of access to the Internet across the country and among potential members, organisations do have the option of subscribing to the low-volume, monthly WOUGNET Update Newsletter instead of the WOUGNET mailing list.

JH: What considerations did you take into account when deciding on an infrastructure?

DO: WOUGNET's goal is to promote and support the use of ICTs, and so it was important to have ICTs as a key element of our own operation.

JH: What challenges, if any, did the resulting infrastructure pose for your network members?

DO: Our current operation largely limits our outreach to members (or their representatives) in Kampala with Internet access. Like many developing countries, Uganda's communication infrastructure is mainly based in urban areas. For example, by February 2002 there were 17 licensed Internet Service Providers (ISPs) but with most providing Internet access only in Kampala. But even for those members with Internet access, time online is a costly business. Because of this, we endeavour to do as much as possible via email. This is because one can download email and then respond to or otherwise act upon the email offline. Our website too is deliberately low in graphics to allow for quick download times. This minimises the time required to remain online. In addition, we are continuously exploring various options of networking that do not need ready access to the Internet.

JH: How has the use of ICTs enhanced the work of the network?

DO: The work of our network is to promote the use of ICTs and so indeed the growth of our network has been due to more individuals and organisations wanting to use WOUGNET's services to share ideas and to disseminate information locally and abroad.

JH: Would you mind sharing with us the successes and challenges of your network from an ICT perspective?

DO: A major success has been the growth of WOUGNET itself. Today, we have over 130 subscribers to the WOUGNET mailing list, and the website profiles about 40 women's organisations in Uganda. In addition, we have a number of activities, including:

- A monthly WOUGNET Update Newsletter that provides details on activities of women's organisations in Uganda, upcoming conferences, workshops, training programmes, funding opportunities and tips on computer/Internet usage. The newsletter is sent out to the members of the WOUGNET mailing list, an additional 230 newsletter subscribers, and mailing lists with an ICT and/or gender focus.
- A TechTips programme was started in January 2001, to address computer or IT-related queries or issues members may have. The TechTips team also prepares tips on topical issues of interest, for example, keeping your computer virus free, using Acrobat Reader, and so on.
- A web design programme was started in April 2001, in collaboration with InterConnection.org to develop websites for members of WOUGNET, free of charge. To date, completed websites include that for SOS Sudan Association (SOSSA),

Uganda Media Women's Association (UMWA), and the Association of Uganda Women Medical Doctors (AUWMD).

- Identifying and soliciting training and conference opportunities for WOUGNET members. For example, in June 2002, two WOUGNET members participated in the Horn of Africa Regional Conference on Women and ICTs. The conference aimed at raising awareness of ICTs among women in the Horn of Africa region and exploring opportunities for harnessing the technology to work as a tool for their development.
- In June 2002, WOUGNET hosted a 3-week email-based conference, "Information Access for Rural Women", to facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences on enhancing access to information for rural women, and to contribute to the deliberations on Rural Women and Telecentres during the July 2002 Kampala Know How conference, an international conference of specialists in the collection and dissemination of information relevant to women.

WOUGNET members have also benefited from information obtained via the WOUGNET mailing list and website as well as the opportunity to widely disseminate information about the work. Feedback from a number of the members reveals that the information shared and exchanged has been beneficial to their projects and/or research programmes. For example:

- Lungujja Women's Association (LWA) responded to an email about Keys to Information Technology and Education (KITE), a US-based organisation providing computer grants, including one-year Internet access to organisations in developing countries. LWA became the first international KITE partner receiving its computer grant in March 2002.
- In August 2002, a WOUGNET member was selected as a finalist for BITSAfrica, a programme sponsored by the World Economic Forum Global Leaders for Tomorrow and the Africa Technology Forum. The purpose of the BITSAfrica initiative is to assist African technology entrepreneurs in building and growing a sustainable venture that will have an impact on the society around them. The member learnt of this programme via the WOUGNET mailing list.

Major challenges faced by WOUGNET, from an ICT perspective, include:

- limited outreach because we currently operate primarily online;
- limited access to and availability of relevant information (content) for members' development needs;
- creating awareness about the potential of ICTs as viable tools for information exchange and dissemination that produce results; and
- the need to provide training and hands-on demonstrations on the usage and application of ICTs, and the need for members to have more face-to-face collaboration in addition to online networking.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.apcafricawomen.org>

[2] <http://www.wougnet.org>

[3] <http://www.kabissa.org>

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