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Mobile Activism And Community Development

Fahamu (Oxford)

OPINION

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By Everlyne Nairesiae

Everlyne Nairesiae of GROOTS Kenya reviews the recent three-day workshop of pan-African mobile phone activists, held in Nairobi. She explains how GROOTS has applied mobile phone technology in their work on property rights for rural Kenyan women.

Mobile activists across Africa converged in Nairobi Kenya for a three-day workshop facilitated by Fahamu in conjunction with the Tactical Technology Collective (known as 'Tactical Tech'). The aim of the workshops was to critically examine existing opportunities to enhance the wide use of mobile phone as media of advocacy, networking and collaboration among activists in Africa.

The workshop was a build up to the 'techie' preparation for a two-day workshop geared towards developing a toolkit especially tailored to suit the African context. The launch of the toolkit, which is anticipated to be ready by October 2007, aims to strengthen and facilitate the use of mobile phones as a tool for advocacy in responding to social development needs in Africa. The workshop culminated in the formation of a steering committee mandated by members to champion the development of the Pan-African Mobile Network (PAMONET).

My participation in the workshop was exiting, since it was characterised by the rich experiences of presenters from Africa and around the world on the application of mobile phones in advocacy work. The use of mobile phone technology stands out as a unique and emerging convenient mode of communication for community development across Africa. African countries including Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Kenya among others have recently started using this technology to resolve community needs, and advocate for human rights, among other cross-cutting issues. This is done mainly through use of short messages (SMS), and/or making direct calls via cell phone. During the workshop, activists reported concrete achievements registered with the use of mobile phone across countries in Africa and that their contribution in addressing social and development issues cannot be under estimated.

GROOTS Kenya regional electronic exchange mentorship strategy to address women and orphans property inheritance rights

GROOTS - is a grassroots organisation operating together in sisterhood is a movement of community based organisations and groups of women in Kenya. GROOTS Kenya is a member of GROOTS International and Huairou Commission. Their work is centred around the lives and needs of grassroots women. It is therefore largely non-thematic as it responds to community needs and priorities. The organisation accomplishes its goals through four main programmes: Community Responses to HIV/Aids, Women and Property Program, Women's Leadership and Governance, and Community Resources and Livelihoods.

GROOTS Kenya has mainly used the mobile phone in advocating and addressing women and orphans rights to own and inherit property in four regions in Kenya which include: Kakamega in western province, Kendubay in Nyanza province, and Limuru and Gatundu in Central province of Kenya. In these communities, GROOTS Kenya facilitated the formation of community watchdog groups, which are led by women to safeguard against the grabbing of property from women and orphans, many of who are infected and affected with HIV/Aids.

The watchdog groups work with relevant NGOs, government institutions, opinion/traditional leaders, FBOs as well as the provincial administrators through the office of the chief and assistant chiefs. It is important to mention that chiefs and assistant chiefs are the lowest government administration unit at the community level and are very crucial in determining and safeguarding the rights of marginalized people in any community in Kenya. Unfortunately most of them have limited knowledge, information and capacity to handle and or support property disinheritance cases of women or orphans brought to their attention.

In the four regions only one assistant chief Mr Peter Mutheru; who is sub-chief in Kiamoria sub-location in Gatundu, had ample knowledge and skills. This necessitated a lot of interaction among the chiefs from the four regions to benefit from his significant understanding of the procedures of courts of law in order to support cases of women and orphans right to property inheritance which were being presented to them by the watchdog groups.

The use of mobile phone became a special tool in facilitating electronic mentoring among the chiefs across the region mainly through communicating via messages and making direct call to each other while seeking guidance and or information on succession law and procedures. In addition, this was complemented by the use of community radio listening strategies which created awareness on the right to property of women and orphans. On the other hand, grassroots women and members of watchdog groups also use mobile phone to report cases of property grabbing to the chiefs, and thereby enhance the communication and follow up of cases as well as provide support to victims of the vice.

Increase in knowledge among the chiefs led to the transformation of both their attitude towards women and orphans property rights and influenced their mode of working which in turn facilitated efficiency at administrative and community levels. The use of regional

electronic exchange mentoring strategy by GROOTS Kenya, using the mobile phones have led to the following achievements:

- * enhanced knowledge and skills in addressing women and orphans property rights among the chiefs across the four regions through mentoring and networking
- * increase in resolved cases of women and orphans who had lost property to relatives
- * strengthened the relationship between the provincial administrators and grassroots women in the community through partnership
- * enhanced follow up and support of pending cases in the office of the chief and law courts
- * facilitated a significant reduction in costs for instance on travelling, accommodation and other logistics since the regions were distance away from each other.

Although the above achievements were realised, the following challenges including high poverty levels which hinders communities and chiefs to purchase airtime; illiteracy mainly among grassroots women hence unable to read messages; a limited number of cell phones in the communities thus rely on those who have cell phones to access information; and a lack of formality in communication which makes it difficult to hold any party accountable.

Most groups tried to have parallel meetings in their own different regions and converse in a form of tele-conferencing through mobiles. Unfortunately the telephone sets used by many communities have no features such as speaker phones which would have enabled more than one person to listen to a call and then pass the information on to the rest of the community.

GROOTS Kenya's experience coupled up with experiences from other countries in Africa shared during the mobile activism workshop in Nairobi Kenya highlighted a number of factors. It is evident that the use of cell phones facilitate achievement of tremendous results which are cost effective and efficient.

Thanks to Fahamu and Tactical Tech for providing us an opportunity to share and learn from other partners experiences on the use of cell phones in addressing social and development needs. For more information please contact GROOTS Kenya on the address given below.

** Everlyne Nairesiae is Program Coordinator of GROOTS Kenya P.O.Box, 10320-GPO, Nairobi, Kenya.
E.mail:grootsk@grootskenya.org*

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