

While communication as a concept has been, for quite some time now, recognised as a fundamental human right that is central and key to development, it is only relatively recently that we have witnessed increasing debates on the centrality of the various technologies that enable it. While there seems to be clarity on the need to develop and equitably distribute these technologies, debates are still rife about whether these should be free and if so, for whom and for what purposes. We have therefore seen ICTs drawn into discourses around human rights, economic justice and governance, giving birth to new discourses that have placed ICTs onto the highest global agendas such as World Trade Organisation (WTO) – where the major WTO-related Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) actions have focused on copyright related issues, focusing primarily upon the entertainment goods such as music or movies, thus focusing attention on copyright issues.

However, the IPR and copyright debates have increased against the backdrop of an emerging discourse and a whole movement advocating for open content, open access and open knowledge, among other “opens”, discussed in this Issue of *OpenSpace*. Thus, while it used to be a simple concept, “today ‘openness’ has come to consist of a complex set of relationships between what knowledge one chooses to share or distribute and how, ownership of that knowledge, what ‘ownership’ really means with regard to tacit and explicit value, and what rights (derivatives, commercial etc) the community should have to the knowledge for it to be considered ‘open’”, as argued in Heather Ford’s article: “Why Creative Commons makes Sense for Development.”

This “opens” movement has also entailed a wave of free open software; creating, sharing and distributing new applications that can be accessed and used freely by all. Bill Thompson, Todd Benson and others in this Issue, explore whether FOSS is indeed a blessing for the development world. The advocacy for the “opens” has been framed around enhancing access to knowledge and Achal Prabhala and Manon Röss emphasise the need for such a debate on access to knowledge, using key development sectors such as education, as cases in point. They share the sentiments that the ongoing expansion of intellectual property law and exclusive rights to content are a real threat to access to knowledge and they argue that this is reflective of the importance of this debate especially in our region, where the copyright law system doesn’t seem to be working, especially for students and teachers in the education sector in Southern Africa. These debates are at the forefront of global economic debates that straddle a myriad of key issues including:

- The relationship between infrastructure and copyrights on access to knowledge;
- Impacts of patents, copyright and IPR on innovation in Africa; and
- The challenges of the existing legal, policy, organisational, infrastructural environments within Africa and their implications for the African commons.

And while all these debates are raging, a sub-movement has also taken shape – bringing the women’s and gender dimensions of ICTs into play. This dimension focuses on the differential way in which women in the region interact with ICTs, compared to their male counterparts; where history, culture and societal structures have been factors in women’s lagging behind in this ICT revolution.

Thus, while social justice advocates have welcomed developments such as FOSS, there is need to consciously promote women's engagement with it, as both developers and users, as Kathambi Kinoti argues. We have begun to see in Southern Africa, organisations like Women'sNet and, of late, LinuxChix Africa taking on the challenge of bringing women in the region on board, as indicated in the articles by Natasha Primo and Anna Badimo respectively. Badimo decries that "there is currently just under two percent of women within FOSS development, and even when looking at ICT in general, there are few women, with only 10 percent of Computer Science graduates being women."

Not only has there been interesting interfaces between ICTs and issues of access to information and knowledge, but there has also been interesting nexuses with developments in governance and global economies. There are real prospects for ICTs on the improvement of good governance and participatory democracy on the African continent, as illustrated in Oyomno's article "Electronic Governance and service delivery: Prospects and challenges for Africa." It is not surprising that there has also been increased advocacy for ICT policy development in some countries in the region, with stakeholders such as civil society organisations ensuring that they are part of the process. Case studies such as the E-nable project in Zimbabwe share experiences in this process and provide lessons for others on how this could be done.

However, much as they present real opportunities for development in the region, the impact of ICTs will be limited if there is no real investment in ICT literacy: the ability to select, apply and interpret available information, using the appropriate technologies in making decisions that transform lives. For instance, while ICTs may provide developing countries with opportunities to in poverty alleviation, health care and provision, education among other MDGs, the skills base is not that well developed to effectively interpret and apply these technologies in a way that changes lives. There is therefore need for capacity-building initiatives in this regard; with ICT literacy courses and training of trainers programmes being part of the movement to improve access and infrastructural development in the ICT sector. OSISA and partners have started addressing this gap – through supporting a regional ICT project in seven countries in the region.


This edition of *OpenSpace* focuses on these issues – highlighting the unique intersection and reality of the

global net economy, IPR and citizens, consumers, academics, user groups in civil society who are slowly and successfully introducing "open access" in their daily work – thus catalysing the profound new movement of the "knowledge commons" for Africa.

It is thus aimed at users, teachers, university academics, policy makers, consumers, NGOs and civil society citizens generally. It is a mix of resources – from high level academic articles, position papers to practical ICT supported projects, practical toolkits, user guides and an array of useful web resources – all geared to equip you to navigate the new and challenging area of activism in this new frontier of social justice.

The "policy-practice" nexus is particularly important for OSISA as the projects we support in the info commons, such as support for Access to Knowledge project (www.access.org), WomensNet, SchoolNet Namibia, NGOcc, cc-Africa and a myriad of free and open source projects from LinuxChix (www.linuxchix-africa.org) to Africa Source 2 (www.ngointhebox.org) is a beginning to development, to come on board in shaping and defining the contours of this new knowledge commons for Southern Africa. Each project has its context, challenges, and outputs and through monitoring, evaluation and ongoing capacity development we continuously refine our strategy and interventions to develop the info/knowledge for Africa.

It is a power packed, comprehensive edition that covers, in-depth policy and advocacy issues facing IPR, information economy and society within a development paradigm and the specific challenges for Africa. It also covers a practical dimension that profiles a series of OSISA supported *projects and initiatives* in Open source and open content. There is a toolkit section profiling *NGO-in-a-box*. Finally, it contains a dedicated web-resources section which covers some of the very best web resources to provide you with detailed information on everything, from developers, users and projects using and advocating for open knowledge and information commons.

Do join us on this exciting and incredible journey that straddles the policy advocacy and practical nexus that navigate the exciting contours of the knowledge and information commons! 

Alice Kanengoni is the Editor of OPENSPACE and Ashraf Patel is the Policy and Advocacy Advisor and ICT Programme Manager at OSISA. Their contacts are alicek@osisa.org and ashrafp@osisa.org, respectively.