

Interview with Highway Africa Executive Director

Interview Conducted by Ashraf **Patel**



HANA

The Highway Africa News Agency (HANA) attended the WSIS PrepCom in Geneva. Can you describe the key issues civil society is facing?

I think there are three main issues here. The first relates to the acceptance of civil society as a key partner in WSIS in particular, and on the development agenda in general. Whereas government representatives make the usual rhetoric on multi-stakeholder partnerships the reality is that governments consider the private sector as a much more natural ally than civil society. Civil society is viewed with deep suspicion, and is mostly cast as moving a Western agenda. The other two challenges relate to Internet governance and the Digital Solidarity Fund. Civil society is keen to ensure that the management of the Internet in the future is truly representative. Here they are calling for the reforming of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) into an autonomous body independent of political and commercial interest. The last challenge relates to what African governments are quite keen on: the Digital Solidarity Fund. The fund seems to be gathering momentum but again the question relates to the effective management and disbursement of these funds. African politicians have a dubious history in the management of financial resources.

The annual Highway Africa conference has mainstreamed information society issues and Africa. Can you describe the achievements and processes of this conference?

Over the last three years (beginning in 2003) we have sought to enable African journalists to do three things in relation to information society issues and ICT:

- understand the concept of Information Society and the impact of technology on the media and society;
- use ICT effectively (mostly Internet and its applications); and
- effectively report on the information society issues.

To achieve these goals we have used five platforms, namely:

- *Research*: we have researched into how journalists cover ICT policy, and also how journalists use the Internet and mobile phones in the newsroom.
- *Training*: every year we run workshops intended to upskill journalists and civil society in the use of ICT. This year (2005) we looked at using cell phones in publishing onto the Web (moblogging), blogging, photojournalism etc.
- *Highway Africa News Agency (HANA)*: we have established a news agency with correspondents across the continent and this service is dedicated to telling the African ICT story.

- *Policy:* We are running a programme in four countries (Angola, Lesotho, Namibia and Zimbabwe) that seeks to use WSIS as a catalyst for moving forward the national ICT policy framework. Here we are bringing together civil society and the media to engage with policymakers in their own countries.
- *Conference:* our annual conference – the largest annual gathering of African journalists in the world – remains our flagship. All our other programmes culminate in this three-day event that covers ICT policy, technology and access.

HANA and its many journalists/ stringers on the ground have made an impact on broadening the debate of ICTs for development and the WSIS process. Can you describe the process and give examples on how this has been done?

HANA's model is simple. We set up a virtual news agency that takes stories from keen ICT journalists from across the continent, and send these stories on a weekly basis to over 162 subscribers (individuals and networks e.g., allafrica.com). Further to this, we enable African journalists to attend key ICT and WSIS events and report from an African perspective. I am proud to say that we are the only media in the world that has consistently tracked the WSIS process (see www.highwayafrica.ru.ac.za/hana/). We are now at the point of taking this project to a higher level by using radio. We intend to partner with AMARC's Radio Simbani and the agreement is now in place – just awaiting signatures.

Africa is still saddled with major challenges and barriers in developing an equitable information society. Our high costs of Internet and dilapidated networks are just some of the challenges we face. How would WSIS and its declarations deal with this?

The Geneva Phase of WSIS in 2003 came out with two critical documents: a declaration of principles and a plan of action. It is this plan of action that seems to carry Africa's hopes that we may finally be able to work at creating an environment that guarantees access for all. One paragraph in the document reads: "Based on internationally agreed development goals, including those in the Millennium Declaration, which are premised on international co-operation, indicative targets may serve as glob-

al references for improving connectivity and access in the use of ICTs in promoting the objectives of the Plan of Action, to be achieved by 2015." But we wait to see how policy will be translated into action.


The Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF) has been one of the more innovative, yet controversial issues at WSIS. Can you describe the motivation and objective of such a fund and some of the progress made at WSIS?

It is the African governments, led by Senegal, which have been quite strong in advocating for the Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF). In Geneva 2003, Western governments opposed this on the grounds that international finance institutions already existed and developing countries could get their funds through these. However, African governments insisted that a separate fund for use in the development of ICT in Africa and the developing world needed to be set up. It would be a voluntary fund that would have President Wade of Senegal as "the Founding Father," and joining governments would be called "founding members." It seems to be gathering steam – check www.dsf-fsn.org

What is HANA planning for WSIS 2 in Tunisia?

In partnership with the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) HANA hopes to produce a daily summit newspaper in Tunis over the three days of the event, and at the same time upload stories to our Website and send same via our subscriber list.

What are your hopes and expectations for Africa at WSIS 2?

I just hope that African governments see this as a unique opportunity to tap into the knowledge and skills resident in civil society. Organisations like APC, AMARC, MISA and others have developed specialist knowledge on ICT issues and governments should use these organisations in the formulation and implementation of related policies. The perennial tragedy of Africa is how we are always reinventing the wheel. Solutions are within us. 

Chris Kabwato is Executive Director of Highway Africa.