STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS THOUGH DISTANCE-LEARNING TRAINING

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Abstract

African civil society organisations face challenges in accessing much needed training to enable them to build a strong civil society.

The purpose of Fahamu's programme is to strengthen the professional competencies of activists and activist organisations in Africa, building organisational capacity through individual training and development, reaching a constituency that would not normally have access to the resources, training and those who may not be able to take time off to attend any extensive training.

Over the last 10 years, Fahamu has developed and successfully field-tested 13 CD Rom based courses for human rights organisations in Africa. The courses are based on the provision of well-designed interactive training materials on CDROM with a tutor facilitating the course through email discussions. Once assignments are completed, participants are brought together in a face-to-face conventional workshop, and in the final phase undertake a practical project. Fahamu developed this mode of training following extensive research in southern Africa amongst grassroots organisations on their training needs and the challenges they face in accessing practical, relevant and high quality training.

Since 2005, over 300 organisations assigned staff to participate in Fahamu's courses, including human rights organisations, churches, grassroots women's organisations, development organisations, Kenyan police and prison officers, the Rwandan military, UN agencies, youth organisations and private sector organisations from 51 countries including Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The experience of running the courses with such a diverse group of individuals and organisations has brought with it many lessons and given insight into the challenges that civil society organisations face in their strive to build their much needed capacity.

This paper seeks to outline the experiences of Fahamu, the challenges, triumphs and the lessons learned.

About Fahamu

Fahamu (a Kiswahili word meaning "*consciousness*") is a Pan-African organization with a vision of the world where people organize to emancipate themselves from all forms of oppression, recognize their social responsibilities, respect each other's differences, and realize their full potential. Fahamu's mission is to contribute to the development of an effective pan-African and international movement for social justice and supports human rights and social justice in Africa by:

• Supporting social justice advocacy through innovative use of information and communications technologies;
• Stimulating debate, discussion and analysis;
• Distributing news and information;
• Developing training materials and running training programmes (both distance-learning and conventional forms of training).

Objective and rationale of the Education for Social Justice Programme

One of Fahamu's key objectives is to contribute to building a broad-based culture of respect for human rights and human dignity through learning. Through our Education for Social Justice programme (*Adilisha*, a Swahili word meaning "*to teach or promote justice*"), we create platforms and material for learning on social justice for an array of African stakeholders. We seek to strengthen civil society organisations to promote and protect human rights and to manage organisations that are effective and sustainable by addressing the training and capacity building needs of these organisations.

The primary mode of training in this programme is the CDROM based, distance-learning format that was developed following extensive research in southern Africa amongst grassroots organisations on their training needs and the challenges they face in accessing practical, relevant and high quality training.

In 1998, Fahamu conducted a survey of over 100 human rights and civil society organisations based in Eastern and Southern Africa, to find out how these organisations used the Internet, the kind of technology they had access to; their staff training needs and priorities as well as how the organisations are led and managed.

The research found that organisations priorities included skills training in fact finding, investigation and monitoring, knowledge and application of international human rights standards, strategies for human rights education. The survey also found that organisations felt that they would benefit from funding and assistance with fundraising as well as financial and institutional management.

The outcome of the survey was the development by Fahamu, of a series of courses aimed at strengthening the campaigning, advocacy and organisational capacities of human rights organisations in the region.

Fahamu currently runs 13 courses including Introduction to Human Rights; investigating, monitoring and reporting on human rights violations; campaigning on Access to information; Action for Change: advocacy and citizen participation; The role of the media in the Rwandan genocide; Conflict prevention; prevention of torture; using the internet for advocacy and research; Leadership and management for change; practical financial management for NGO's; Fundraising and resource mobilisation; JustWrite: a course on effective writing; proposals that make a difference; Gender, violence and conflict.

These courses are developed in partnership with various institutions including the University of Oxford, the United Nations office of the High Commission for Human Rights, UN-affiliated University for Peace, Article 19.

Part of the survey examined the organisations' ICT infrastructure, and access to computers, the internet and telephones and found that though the there was not a great deal of internet access - and where it was available, it was plagued with slow speeds and unreliable access- a large majority of the organisations surveyed had some regular access to computers and email either at work or at internet cafes within close proximity to where they worked or lived. Since that time, internet and telephone access has increased greatly.

Some major constraint to accessing quality training relevant to civil society organisations have been lack of adequate funding, inability to take time off for longer term, advanced training, unavailability of opportunities close-by that people can make use of. Fahamu sought to address these issues by providing good quality, affordable and relevant training, utilising the existing technologies, while understanding the limitations posed by the technologies and responding to the particular needs of organisations.

Methodology

The methodology used in delivering most of the courses was developed in response to the participants need for quality training without having to travel or absent themselves from their work. The distance-learning mode makes use of the technology available to most civil society organisations.   It was evident from the survey conducted by Fahamu that most CBO's (community based organisations) had some access to computers and email either at work or at an Internet café.

Fahamu's methodology combines CD-roms, email based facilitation and group discussion and face-to-face workshops. Every participant receives a full set of learning materials, including a CDROM which covers the entire course content. Each CDROM also contains a resource centre with a range of additional material that can be used by participating institutions to build up their own library of resource materials. These include lists of recommended books, copies of documents that are available from a variety of websites, links to useful websites, and other useful documents and papers. These libraries of materials are an invaluable source of reference for participants during and after the course.

Each course is divided into three parts. The first part involves studying using the CDROM with continuous email contact with a tutor as well as participating in discussions with other participants on the course. Once participants have satisfactorily completed this section, they are invited for a face-to-face workshop which primarily addresses the issues that were not adequately covered on the distance learning course, or specific issues that arose from the course, that are specific to the particular group. The workshop also affords participants face-to-face interaction and networking. The workshops are optional particluarly in cases where arranging a face-to-face workshop is impossible, and their function largely adds value to the distance learning component of the course. After the workshop, participants undertake a practical project that directly benefits their organisation.

In their evaluation of this programme, the external evaluators stated that: "*The materials are genuinely innovative in the field they seek to serve – organisations working in the area of human rights in southern Africa. They provide, taken together, an excellent menu of materials designed to strengthen the functioning of any NGO or CSO organisation, alongside those that contribute more directly to the particular focus of a human rights organisation. The presentation of the materials through CD-ROM is of very high quality and generally found to be user-friendly … it is quite clear that this approach breaks new ground. The evaluators are not aware of any others such comprehensive approach to both personal and organisational professional development. The key word describing the response of individuals to the courses is 'empowerment'… Many participants spoke and wrote of feeling more 'connected' about the current human rights realities across SADC." (Allsop T and Odayan M, 2003)*

Participants on Fahamu's courses come from diverse backgrounds. Some of the participants who have participated in the courses include staff members of National Human Rights institutions, activists, grassroots organisations, members of the armed forces including Rwandese armed forces, policemen, Kenyan army staff, magistrates, international organisations.

Many of the courses combine participants from different backgrounds, different countries and types of institutions, which gives participants opportunities to learn from others, to share experiences and to develop solutions and partnerships with others working on similar issues or in similar circumstances.

Fahamu's trainers are drawn from a pool of practitioners knowledgeable in their field and who are based in different continents. They bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the courses and provide valuable insights into issues. An advantage of the distance learning (non-internet based) is that participants and trainers don't all have to be within the same locality at the same time, nor do they have to be online at the same time.

Fahamu is the first NGO partner in the OpenCourseWare Consortium and has began to offer our courses online, free of charge with extra tutoring available for participants who would like to pay for it. Currently, we have two courses, Introduction to Human Rights and Campaigning for Access to Information available on our website (www.fahamu.org). Fahamu intends to make more courses available through this initiative.

Learning is more than just studying: It is about sharing information and experiences, exploring, researching, reflecting, debating and contributing to discussions. Pambazuka News is Fahamu's authoritative electronic weekly newsletter and platform for social justice in Africa providing cutting edge commentary and in-depth analysis on politics and current affairs, development, human rights, refugees, gender issues and culture in Africa. Pambazuka News plays a key role in the learning, by providing a resource for civil society to engage in issues around social justice in Africa.
To date, over 40,000 articles have been published in Pambazuka News and are available online free of charge. With an estimated readership of close to 500,000 and available in English, French and recently Portuguese, Pambazuka News is published weekly and is available free via email and on a website (www.pambazuka.org).
Fahamu also publishes books dealing with specific issues including 2 books on Womens' rights in Africa, 2 books on China's engagement with Africa, a book on Trade justice, Human rights in Africa, a special issue of Pambazuka News articles and a book on the Role and Future of NGO's in Africa. The books and e-newsletter provide a rich and invaluable source of information, analysis, debate and discussion on social justice issues not just for African civil society organization, but for policy makers and others working on issues of social justice in Africa.

Some Achievements

Over the past 10 years, we have trained over 1000 individuals from more than 300 civil society organisations across Africa and other parts of the world. The main focus of our work is with African civil society organisations. We have been able to reach organisations that would ordinarily not have access to the kind of specialised, relevant training that we provide.

"This is a great opportunity to enable civil society members with no legal background to learn about human rights and integrate what is learnt in their program work; opened my eyes to the world of human rights!" Luci Simiyu, Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2008.

Fahamu has won a number of awards for its courses, including the 2005 Tech Museum Award for its contributions to distance learning for human rights – it was one of five to receive the Microsoft

Education Award and was runners up in the 2004 Stockholm Challenge for development of distance learning courses for human rights organizations.

Working in partnership with some institutions, we have been able to provide training for grassroots organisations and other African civil society organisations that would otherwise have no access to training including providing scholarships to a number of individuals who would otherwise not be able to afford the training.

Fahamu provides affordable, quality training that is relevant to the particular needs of African civil society organisations. We also provide a platform where organisations working on similar issues are able to share learning, knowledge and information on issues that concern them.

Participants on our courses have been able to play a key role in developing policy in their countries. For example after conducting a "campaigning for access to information" course for African organisations, a Kenyan participant on the course became one of the key movers of the freedom of information campaign in Kenya and gave input into the development of the draft Freedom of information bill in Kenya.

Fahamu's distance learning method has widely been adopted by institutions including the University of Oxford, the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, Article 19, UN-affiliated University for Peace among others.

Challenges

The programme has not been without its challenges.

Cost is a major constraint: few people can afford the courses at the current market costs. Moreover, paying for this kind of training is not the norm: most comparable courses are free or subsidised at the point of delivery. This makes courses that require tuition fees accessible primarily to those with sponsorship from a donor or employer. Employers are also more likely to pay for courses that have a clear potential direct return to their organisation, for example financial management, fundraising, leadership and management. Indeed, the most-requested course is the fundraising and resource mobilisation course.

Owing to disparities in wealth and opportunities between the rich and the poor as well as urban and rural based organisations, concentration of computers and the internet in urban centres, Fahamu's distance learning programmes have largely reached urban based organisations and institutions, although through innovation and flexibility we have been able to provide training to rural based, grassroots organisations through a combination of face-to face as well as distance education.

Levels of literacy particularly amongst grassroots organisations therefore interaction with the CDROMS has not been very high. This means that we have to be innovative in providing training- and reducing reliance on ICTs based learning, to more practical face-to face training.

The distance-learning model is less popular in African countries than it may be in the North: people still prefer face-to-face training. Learning via distance learning can sometimes be a very lonely journey for a learner due to the lack of face- to- face interaction and the time delay with regards to interaction and responses from other participants and tutor. Also the fact that due to distance, participants have no or little opportunity to meet and interact. When the going gets tough, it becomes difficult to find the motivation to continue with the programme. It requires a lot of self-discipline, time managment and motivation to be able to complete the programme. Participants who have the support of their organisations and family to make time for the training have higher completion rates than those without.

The courses are all available in English, with some specific courses available in other languages like French, Portuguese and Russian. We hope in future to be able to provide the courses to speakers of other languages in-order to reach other constituencies like those in Francophone Africa.

Lessons learned and next steps

Innovation and flexibility is required particularly when working with grassroots organisations which have limited access to computers, email and the internet and with individuals and organisations whereby the levels of literacy are not very high, as is the case with numerous grassroots organisations, particularly rural or those based in urban informal settlements.

Extra support for participants, particularly those who have difficulty with the distance mode of learning, is essential to ensure that course participants complete the courses.

A combination of distance learning and face-to-face learning works best and completion rates on the courses have been highest where there the participants attended a face-to-face workshop at the beginning of the course as an introduction to the course

Organisations where more than one individual attends a particular course have higher completion rate, as they are able to motivate one another, spur one another on to complete and discuss and share information amongst themselves. Also in the event that the staff member that is trained leaves the organisations, there is some form of continuity if the training is felt to have been an organisational one, rather than an individual one.

Fahamu has become very well known for its portfolio of open and distance learning courses. But after 10 years of conducting distance-learning education, Fahamu intends to valuate the programme- taking stock of the advances we have made over the years, the feedback from participants, the changes and advances in technology and the state of human rights and social justice in Africa, in-order to continue to be relevant and timely in our interventions with regards to training and capacity building for African organisations. Fahamu intends to develop a holistic approach to learning on human rights and social justice. We will adopt a multi-pronged approach, combining distance learning with face-to face training as well as Internet based e-learning techniques.

Fahamu also intends to harness the advances in technology- particularly internet and mobile telephony to overcome the problems caused by lack of access to computers; In the past few years, Africa has to witnessed an explosion in the mobile and internet technology with the numbers of mobile users at the end of 2006 estimated at 188 million, up from 52 million in 2006 (Broadgroup, 2007) from the proliferation of mobiles providing access for communities that were previously disadvantaged make the course materials available in interactive format on hand-held computers with built-in mobile phones or third generation mobile phones with internet access.

Conclusion

The need for quality, affordable and relevant training to meet the needs of African civil society organisations is clearly considerable. Learners however have different needs as they represent diverse types of organisations, with varying resources, learning needs, styles and expectations. The key to remaining relevant while responding to the needs of the organisations is to be innovative, flexible and to use the existing technologies to provide the most effective and efficient learning methods.
It is also important to adopt a multi-pronged approach to training, incorporating both distance-learning and face-to-face learning.

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