

# The Role of Community Communication Systems in Catalysing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Media Campaign.

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in Tanzania

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## **Abstract**

The Open Knowledge Network (OKN), launched during the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva in December 2003, is a human network that collects and disseminates local knowledge<sup>[1]</sup> supported by flexible Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). OKN is funded by the Institute of International Communication and Development (IICD) and implemented by community initiatives in Kenya (coordinated by AfriAfya), Uganda (coordinated by I-Network), Tanzania (coordinated by AMREF), Zambia (coordinated by StepOut) and Mali (coordinated by ToguNet).

In Tanzania, OKN is a six-month pilot project that has a unique character and is locally known as the Tuwasiliane Project, meaning “Let’s Communicate” in Kiswahili. The project is aligned to AMREF’s mission of improving the health of disadvantaged people in Africa as a means for them to escape poverty and improve the quality of their lives. The project is a network of 10 local organisations whose goal is to ensure that poor people are able to express and communicate locally relevant knowledge in their local languages via ICTs, so as to shape the decisions that affect their livelihoods. The project uses print, television, radio, d-group and community forums, to engage in debate revolving around poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

## **Introduction**

The Tuwasiliane Project which is hosted by the Lake Zone Programme of AMREF Tanzania involves 10 implementing partner organisations. Each local organisation won a grant of up to Tsh3, 300,000 under the Open Knowledge Network -Small Grants Fund (OKN-SGF) to support innovative activity in the creation and exchange of local content through ICTs for a period of 6 months.

Local content refers to the expression of the locally owned and adapted knowledge of a community, where the community is defined by its location, culture or language.

This competitive fund provides an opportunity for local communities/organisations, to learn how to budget and manage limited resources to enhance sustainable development.

The project draws synergy from a Technical Advisors Committee picked from a cross-section of actors from the local government, media and civil society.

Project Management recognised the fact that most local content is “invisible”, especially to decision-makers at national level and to international audiences who see Africa only through censored digital connections. Project Management decided that the road to visibility begins at the local level. One of the factors that hinder the visibility of local content to other communities is language. Luckily, Tanzania has Kiswahili as the national language, which makes sharing developmental information effortless.

A major challenge though, is to download global knowledge vital for poverty alleviation at the local level. This ties in well with one of the project’s objectives, which is to set up an open knowledge network to assist local people and communities in the Lake Zone to widely communicate, exchange, and broadcast their local knowledge, in a variety of new and traditional media, and adapt global knowledge for their own local use.

The other objects are:

- To strengthen the capacities of local communities and organisations in the Lake Zone to create, communicate and exchange their knowledge through the use of ICT-based systems
- To reinforce the creation, communication and exchange of local knowledge and communities in the Lake Zone

The significance of making local knowledge visible is to ensure that individuals and communities are aware that their knowledge is valuable and useful. The process of making local content visible aims at ensuring that indigenous knowledge is not sidelined or lost, nor is it exploited without acknowledging the local owners. Many communities depend on traditional communication processes, such as drama, story telling and singing, to express their knowledge. It is for this reason, that the project took a step higher in harnessing these traditional community communications systems with an ICT loop to impact on the community’s livelihoods through storytelling in newspapers and community forums, and through songs and drama on radio.

The project took into account the fact that the needs vary from community to community. Therefore, through participatory planning, the Project was able to identify a core reservoir of talent and build on the entrepreneurship skills of the local organisations to initiate change. The 10 partner organisations designed a joint implementation plan with the purpose of strengthening the capacities of the partner organisations to use of ICTs to create, exchange and obtain knowledge so as to support their efforts to improve livelihoods and eradicate poverty.

### Policy background

All national, regional, district and community programmes and projects in Tanzania are governed by the National Strategy for Growth and Reduction in Poverty (NSGRP) referred to as MKUKUTA, which is the Kiswahili acronym for *Mkakati wa Kukuza Uchumi na Kuondoa Umaskini Taifa*.<sup>[2]</sup> MKUKUTA is a second national framework for poverty reduction and promotion of social inclusion, which was endorsed by the government in February 2005. It places growth and poverty reduction at the heart of the country's development agenda and represents a new, more comprehensive approach to poverty reduction.

It builds on the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), which was linked to debt relief under the Highly Indebted Poor Countries initiative (HIPC).<sup>[3]</sup> It also recognizes the contribution of every sector and addresses cross-sectoral issues such as governance and communications. MKUKUTA recognises every stakeholder as the active agent in fighting poverty in his or her own life, family community or village.

The African Medical Research Foundation (AMREF) operations in Tanzania governed by the National Health Policy<sup>[4]</sup> by targeting improved the health through a Community Based Health Care (CBHC) complaint approach that aims at fighting poverty and improving livelihoods.

Likewise, the National Multi-sectoral Strategic Framework (NMSF) on HIV/AIDS governs AMREF's foremost priority intervention being HIV/AIDS. The framework translates the National Policy on HIV/AIDS<sup>[5]</sup> into action by providing strategic guidance to the planning of programs, projects and interventions by various stakeholders in the fight against HIV/AIDS. It identifies goals, objectives and strategies in line with international commitments by the Government of Tanzania. The framework also attempts to address the national aspirations with respect to Vision 2025<sup>[6]</sup>, poverty eradication as outlined in the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS). Bound by law, the Tuwasiliane Project mainstreamed HIV/AIDS through all its activities. The Tuwasiliane Project has also involved local government in planning and implementing its activities.

MKUKUTA differs from the earlier World Bank/IMF driven PRS that was under pressure to reach the HIPC completion point in 2001.<sup>[7]</sup> It had limited stakeholder involved in Marco-policy issues. The point of departure is that MKUKUTA aims at involving stakeholders below the Meso-level(Grassroots.) in dialogue about fighting poverty. This tenet of the growth and poverty reduction policy cushions the goal of Tuwasiliane Project.

AMREF's mission to improve health of disadvantaged people in Africa, as a means for them to fight poverty and improve the quality of their lives, is that aligned to MKUKUTA. AMREF works from the premise that it is only a healthy nation that can lead to economic growth.

The National Environmental Policy<sup>[8]</sup> regulates all partner organisations since the communities they serve rely on the environment for their livelihood. The Project whose goal is to enhance the creation and exchange of local content for local people through ICTs also adheres to the Tanzania National ICT policy<sup>[9]</sup> whose mission is to enhance nation-wide economic growth and social progress by encouraging beneficial ICT activities in all sectors.

### **Case/process description**

Launched on April 1<sup>st</sup> 2005, the Tuwasiliane Project set out to support the efforts of communities to improve livelihoods and eradicate poverty after a rigorous exercise, which involved dialogue with local government and civil society representatives in the selection of local organisations for the pilot.

The Technical Advisers also came up with a user-friendly name for the project 'Tuwasiliane' which means 'lets communicate,' that replaced the ambiguous OKN-CCELC acronym, which stood for Open Knowledge Network/Catalysing the Creation and Exchange of Local Content.

Prior to the launch of the project, the 10 local organisations went through a one-week long proposal development and grants management course, which resulted into one joint -implementation plan and 10 proposals for funding.

Currently, the project hinges upon two categories namely Creators and Disseminators of local content/knowledge. The process of creating and exchanging of local knowledge among the 10 partners pivots on the three thematic groups of Agriculture, Environment and Health. It aims at ensuring that the Creators in each thematic group are able to disseminate relevant knowledge to their communities.

The next step of the process involves the twining of Creators and Disseminators to ensure mobility of the local knowledge within the communities.

The twining process ensures that each thematic group is able to disseminate information through an ICT avenue. The communication tools the Tuwasiliane Project is using are leaflets, newsletters, newspapers, radio, video, websites, d-group and community forums.

One of the partners called SWOPnet Mwanza Chapter, whose acronym SWOPnet stands for 'Sharing With Other People Network' plays the unique role of threading the three thematic groups together through three face-face forums and online-discussions.

While each of the 10 local organisations carry out activities separately, the Tuwasiliane coordinating office links all partners through a newsletter called the Tuwasiliane Update.

**Below is the Project Design of the Tuwasiliane Project**



**Link with Government**

The project involved local government in planning and implementing the project at advisory level. A major benchmark is that the project got the blessing of the Mwanza City Director during its launch. Thirdly, two District local governments were involved in discussing the possibility of a collaboration between traditional healers and conventional therapy in the two districts. This was at an information exchange forum that brought together local government and traditional healers through the facilitation of the Tuwasiliane Project. This dialogue was a landmark in the sense that it showed government's recognition of the role of traditional medical practice in improving the health of the majority disadvantaged poor.

The Regional Medical Officer, representing central government, endorsed this process, which will be piloted in two districts in Mwanza Region. This process has the support of the President of Tanzania, who has pledged government support to encourage traditional medical practice. The President also recognised the Tuwasiliane Project's role in community communication, when in May he congratulated The Crop Marketing Bureau Ltd (CROMABU), for promoting rural communication through ICTs, during the launch of Tanzania Social Action Fund (TSAF) in Magu District.

**Community voices**

CROMABU has innovatively combined local means of transport and the computer to generate weekly competitive prices for farmers. Three youth volunteers go to the markets in four wards in Magu District to record the market prices of produce. The list is fed into a computer database and then printed out for three youth volunteers who ride bicycles to distribute them to the farmers groups. The groups meet once a week to find out what the competitive prices are from the volunteers. The prices are read out aloud for the benefit of those who cannot read the printed price lists. The farmers are able to sell their crops fortnightly at a profit. Four months after this initiative was supported by the Tuwasiliane project this is what the farmers has to say.

**Lazaro Busumba from Salon'we village –Choroko farmer**

"I didn't have a bed before, but now I have a bed and I was able to buy my mother saucepans out of my profit. Long live Tuwasiliane!"

**Deborah Zephania, Mwamabanza ward –Choroko farmer**

"With my savings, I was able to buy a mattress for my children. Now they don't have to lie on the floor."

**William Kuloma (Bubinza village) –Rice farmer**

"I used to have a grass thatched house, now I have bought iron sheets. I'll soon be roofing my house."

The CROMABU farmers, as well as the farmers linked to two other Tuwasiliane partners have been given a voice through participating in dramas, interviews and songs that have been aired on radio. These communication genres have been a conduit for them to air their success stories and challenges.

CROMABU farmers through a peer group exchange visit have expounded their knowledge on food security, rejuvenating local methods on food storage like granaries as a cheaper alternative to environmental unfriendly nylon sacks, packaging and marketing. The CROMABU community forums have been hosted by the churches, which have the enhanced the process of knowledge sharing.

The Community Forums have provided farmers the opportunity to share their experiences through storytelling, which are captured by the community reporters for local and national papers. The community reporters mostly use the anecdotal style of reporting, to ensure that the local voices are not lost. The community reporters thus interconnect the oral tradition of communication and modern means of communication through the printed word in form of orature<sup>[10]</sup>. Most Africans today, as in the past, are primarily oral peoples, and their art forms are oral rather than literary. However, in order to prolong the lifeline of the oral word, orature is the 'word granary'. These stories are also disseminated through the Tuwasiliane websites, [www.cromabul.com](http://www.cromabul.com) and [www.Mwanzacommunity.org](http://www.Mwanzacommunity.org). This process aims at ensuring that more individuals and communities outside the Tuwasiliane Network able to learn about the local initiatives aimed at fighting poverty.

**Dialogue processes**

SWOPnet Mwanza Chapter provides the forum for the Tuwasiliane partners to share the knowledge through face-to-face forums as well as further their discussions on an online forum hosted by [www.mwanzacommunity.org](http://www.mwanzacommunity.org). So far two dialogues have taken place. The third forum will initiate dialogue with local government about the proposed MKUKUTA Communications Strategy, which aims at using media outlets in the fight against poverty.

The Tuwasiliane Project will produce a special issue of the Tuwasiliane <sup>update</sup> to coincide with SWOPnet Mwanza Forum on the MKUKUTA Communications Strategy, as part of the process of consolidating dialogue with local government about using media outlets in fight against poverty.

### **MDG relevance**

The Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) Third Progress Report 2002/03<sup>[11]</sup> defines the PRS as a means to achieve Tanzania's long-term goals set out in strategies, visions and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). MKUKUTA is a second national framework for poverty reduction, after the PRS with a focus on involving all layers of social in the fight against poverty. Likewise this national strategy only adopted this year, shows the commitment of the Government of Tanzania's to the Millennium Declaration of September 2000.

While MKUKUTA came into existence in February this year, AMREF's principle foundation of Community Based Health Care (CBHC) supported the Tuwasiliane Project design. This principle foundation directs the Tuwasiliane agenda towards the improvements of the lives of disadvantaged people, by improving their health with the aim of fulfilling government commitment of fighting poverty, combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases and ensuring environmental sustainability, which tie in with the MDGs.

Language is the catalyst that allows people to understand and share their locally owned and adapted knowledge. Through participatory planning with communities, partner organizations and the technical advisors, a consensus was reached about the best means of transmitting local knowledge to broad cross-section rural people. Kiswahili was selected as the language of dialogue in online discussions, newspapers and leaflets and rural community tele-centres. Likewise, the songs and dramas on radio and the stories captured by the community reporters used Kiswahili as the language of instruction.

While radio plays a pivotal role in dissemination of local knowledge to the communities, emphasis is placed on the language as a medium of communication, people as the hands to enhance change and local resources to facilitate development. It is for this reason that drama and song were used to package the local knowledge, as part of the practice of valuing traditional communication systems. By using community communication systems that are part of people's culture, the process of localising the MDGs will become part and parcel of the people's lifestyle.

However, in some instances where Kiswahili is not the medium of instruction, the local people are encouraged to use the local language of the locality as a medium of instruction, so as to preserve the people's cultural heritage. For example, the video documentary of Nyanza Folklore Institute's research on traditional medical practice will have English/Kiswahili subtitles so that a wider audience can be reached. This will facilitate the process of broadcasting the community's local knowledge on the global scene, where English subtitles will be used. However, for MDGs achievement to take root, the social-cultural context of a people must not be lost through translation, if the government and donor community are to respond accurately to community needs.

Community forums like the AMREF facilitated meeting between Nyanza Folklore Institute (1995) and the District local governments of Kwimba and Misungwi districts, hope to facilitate the process of networking between Traditional Medicine and Conventional Therapy, so that the majority of the rural communities who rely on traditional medicine can be able access accurate health information on health issues, such as HIV/AIDS. It is against this background that some of the healers who were interviewed by NFRI acknowledged the fact that they did not have the technology to establish if a patient has HIV/AIDS. The Tanga Aids Working Group<sup>[12]</sup> is successfully applying the interaction of modern and traditional therapy in treating opportunistic diseases brought on by HIV/AIDS. The Tuwasiliane Project hopes to adopt a similar model to enhance the networking process in the effort of improving the health of rural communities. This process will catalyse the MDG achievement in the area of health.

The existence of community tele-centres in rural areas such as Sengerema Multipurpose Tele-centre and CROMABU have interconnected traditional and modern means of communication systems. Through the affordable telephone hire charges, the rural people are able to communicate across the vast country and save the time by travelling by bicycle or money by using public means of transport. The use of the computer, also captures the spirit of orature, where by communication still bears the African art of communication through storytelling. For those who cannot write, volunteer youth capture the message as narrated to them and forward it to the receiver. The telephone and computer have eased the labour-intensive lifestyles of the rural poor. These tele-centres are a contact point for rural communities to gather developmental news downloaded from the Internet or local newspapers that is posted on the tele-centre notice boards. The tele-centres therefore are media outlets that can facilitate the MDG media campaign at the grassroots.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

- For community communication systems to effect community response to MDG achievement, there must be participatory planning. This calls for information flow to start at grassroots, capturing individual and community input, responses from district service delivery systems, and action from District councils and central government. This will necessitate designing flexible development tool-kits that can be applied at different levels of the national development process.
- There is need to interconnect modern Information Communication Technologies and Traditional Communication



Systems in knowledge sharing to enhance the community response to MDG achievement in rural areas. This calls for the need to take into account the process of cross-cultural communication, since communities differ in character and culture. The CROMABU case study worked best, because it meets demands from both communication systems half way. This approach to rural communication for development is viable because it encourages the use of cheaper sustainable alternatives to fighting poverty in rural areas. The opportunity for the farmers to share their stories on radio while utilising the song and storytelling genres that are part and parcel of the African tradition was an innovation way of knowledge sharing. This is a welcome response to globalisation, for developing countries need not lose their traditional communication systems, but should modify them to suit the changing times.

- There is need to demystify development concepts that are shrouded in foreign languages by translating them into the language of communities. This process will encourage the growth of indigenous languages which part of the process of connecting with a people's tradition. The use of local languages in championing development issues will advance the cause for the MDG achievement.
- There is need to encourage the communication between traditional medicine and conventional therapy at community level as a process aimed at improving the quality of health care the majority of the rural poor who depend on herbal treatment access. This calls for African governments to respond by investing in research in Traditional Medicine, so as to encourage the speedy patenting of traditional medicine so that traditional healers can enjoy a world market like their Chinese counterparts.
- Finally, there is need to utilise community reporters as resource persons at the grassroots, as the alternative tracking system to document the progress made at the grassroots towards achieving the MDGs. The advantage of using resource persons from the community is that they are able to interpret achievements and challenges based on their social-cultural context. This will catalyse the monitoring process on the performance of government's commitment towards achieving the MDGs.

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