OMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY AND TRAINING NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF AFRICAN DIGITAL RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS

DECEMBER 2020





INTRODUCTION

The Africa Digital Rights Fund (ADRF) was launched in April 2019 to offer flexible and rapid response grants to select initiatives in Africa to implement activities that advance digital rights, including advocacy, litigation, research, policy analysis, digital literacy and digital security skills building. It is aimed at growing the number of individuals and organisations that work to advance digital rights in Africa, amidst rising digital rights violations such as arrests and intimidation of internet users, network disruptions, and a proliferation of laws and regulations that hamper internet access and affordability and undermine the potential of digital technologies to catalyse free expression, civic participation and innovation.

The managers of the ADRF thus far indicate that organisations working in the digital rights arena have inadequate skills to effectively and proactively engage the media and to conduct effective public communications. As a consequence, digital rights issues are poorly covered (if at all), commonly with limited depth and sensitivity. Many of these organisations lack skills to develop effective communication products, cultivate sustainable media partnerships, and to generally stay visible and relevant to the media. Besides the media, the digital rights organisations need to be more effective at public communications and at capturing and communicating the impact of their work.

Effective advocacy requires effective communication. In order to raise visibility of the importance of changing any given policy, it is necessary to tell stories and show how that policy impacts real people's lives, and why that matters - in this case digital rights.

Whereas journalists on the one hand and corporate executives, civil society actors, public officials, as well as politicians on the other could do with some continuing training on how to maximise their potential through the media, only the former have been the targets of such training on a meaningful scale. Digital rights being a fairly new area of interest, it is prudent that civil society organisations (CSOs) are skilled in pitching appropriate messages in clear language and framing concrete calls to action, especially given that the media is not well versed and is often not keen on this subject.

Conventional thinking on the role of the media in governance, democracy and the delivery of public services, as well as public debate, appears to be based on the assumption that key civil society actors such as digital rights activists know how to, and do, engage with the media. It is also assumed that these actors understand the place and role of the media in society. Evidence on the ground suggests this is usually not the case.

Accordingly, CIPESA partnered with the African Centre for Media Excellence (ACME) to provide technical and institutional capacity building to 15 ADRF grantees in impact communication. Under the partnership, a capacity and needs assessment was conducted by ACME to inform the development of a training curriculum for digital rights organisations and the delivery of a blended training programme comprising.

The 15 grantees were implementing various digital rights interventions including on digital accessibility for persons with disability; civic engagement and data journalism; digital financial consumer protection; hate speech, disinformation and harassment in online spaces; digital safety and security; online abuse and harassment against journalist; data rights; coalition building with the legal fraternity; grassroots media and information literacy. A summary about these organisations is annexed to this report.

This report summarises the findings of an assessment of the media relations capacity and communication training needs of these ADRF grantees. The findings will inform the development of a curriculum and training resources on impactful communication, remote support and training during 2021 and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

The findings were captured through an online self-administered questionnaire targeting all 15 grantee organisations under the second round of ADRF. Ultimately, 34 individuals from 12 organisations participated in the survey. The survey was conducted between 16 March and 22 April 2020 and ACME was on hand to guide and clarify on the questions raised by the participating organisations. The survey covered the following questions:

- 1. On a case-by-case basis, what are the specific needs of the ADRF grantees?
- 2. Which staff members can be molded into communication champions in their organisations?
- 3. What kind of support would best suit the different stakeholders?
- **4.** What is the current communication capacity among the ADRF grantees?
- 5. What types of communication activities have they been involved in?
- 6. What are the communications challenges facing the ADRF grantees and individual staff?
- 7. What are the communications challenges hampering digital rights advocacy in general?
- 8. What are the most preferred areas of training/support on impact communication?

FINDINGS

Communication Tools Used

| Websites | 1009 | % |
|-----------------------|---|----|
| Digital Communication | $^{ m n}$ (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn) $^{ m 90\%}$ $^{ m 10}$ |)% |
| Annual reports | 87% 13% |) |
| Brochures | 80% 20% | |
| ☐ Flyers | 80% 20% | |
| Posters | 73% 27% | |
| Press releases | 73% 27% | |
| Briefing papers | 73% 27% | |
| Newsletter | 50% 50% | |
| FAQs 23% 27% | | |

The top four communications tools used by the grantees were websites, annual reports, brochures, and Websites are used by all respondents to communicate to different stakeholders. Other popular tools include media social platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn), briefing papers, press releases, and posters.

The Organisations' Target Audiences

Half of the respondent organisations reported that they did not communicate regularly about their work. In some cases, the instances of the communication were not intended to promote their work but rather the obligatory requirement to report to donors or other partners. For many respondents the repeated use of generalisations in reference to the target audiences of communication attested to the fact that the communications and the messages were not specifically targeted for purposes of achieving some set objectives.

Regarding the target audience, the responses shared included the following: "mostly partners who support us in project implementation and the audience we serve as we are an online platform"; "Anyone I meet who is interested to know about my work and activities"; "Whenever I travel to attend conferences, meetings, I always have my business cards with me." According to another respondent, "We communicate with users of our platform, mainly journalists, citizens, researchers and other organisations that are in the same field." Another respondent listed "partners and the entire public" and added other stakeholders such as the media and development partners. Commonly cited targets for communication included policy makers, civil society organisations, national and global partners, academics, technology companies, and other organisations that work in the same field.

Involvement in Communication Actions

Communicating on social media (93%) and drafting press releases (87%) were the most common actions undertaken by respondents, while writing of op-eds (27%) was the least popular action, followed by appearances on radio talk shows (53%).



Communication on social media



Writing press release



Designing communications



Writing articles in newspapers



Giving interviews related to your work



Articles in Newsletters (Internally generated publications)



Writing a blog



Implementing a communication strategy



Appearance on Television talk shows



Hosting or addressing a press conference



Appearance on radio talk shows



Writing Op Eds

Previous Communication-Related Training

Over 50% of the 34 respondents indicated having previously benefited from communications-related training. Others involved in communication activities at their organisations have learnt on the job. Nine out of the 12 organisations had a communication strategy in place.

Communication Challenges

At individual level, challenges generally fell in the following categories

Pitching Messages

There was general lack of clarity among the respondents on the development of appropriate messages for key targets. "How do I identify the most important information to share with a particular audience and ensure that information is clear, meaningful and engaging?" a respondent wondered. This is most apparent in relation to dissemination of research findings - which may be technical and contained in big reports. Related to this weakness was the limited success by different individuals in these organisations in attracting media to cover their events.

Lack of Technical Skills

Across board, fielding winning media interviews (one-on-one or during press conferences) was a missing link. One respondent attributed this to the lack of public speaking skills. However, it also appeared to be due to a lack of clarity on pitching the right messages during such engagements, thus rambling on and failing to provide sharp and punchy quotes/sound bites that media feed off. Media interviews are a great source of news, so in a way this may explain why there is limited media coverage of digital rights issues.

Leveraging Social and Online Media Tools

The growing influence of new media calls for individuals and organisations to adapt. The survey revealed a lack of key skills in this regard. Blogging, use of info graphics, well designed digital flyers or posters, and thoughtful and punchy social media posts, which would appeal to a wide spectrum of audiences, were missing skills. As one respondent said, "We would like to explore digital communication more, and have a person that has skills to manage modern communication tools."

Designing Promotional Material

Skills to develop and design traditional communication products such as brochures, posters, and flyers were also limited. This frustration was summed up by a respondent thus: "I mainly focus on ensuring that the laid down plan goes accordingly and at times you pay people responsible for coming up with communication materials and they do not deliver in the specified timeline and this is my major challenge as deadlines are not met." This lack of in-house technical skills means that very few organisations are able to simultaneously manage different media platforms.

At organisation level, communication planning was the biggest challenge, with 75% of organisations indicating that it was not undertaken. Consequently, communication was ad hoc, irregular and unfocussed. As one respondent noted, "there is inadequate time to implement strategically focused communications". The lack of organisation communication strategies was the reason several respondents expressed difficulties with message development, identifying target audiences, and selection of the best platforms/channels (in terms of audiences that connected to it, cost, features and flexibilities it offers). As noted by a respondent, "our key challenge is "designing a communications strategy that speaks to the ever-changing information and digital age so that we enhance our visibility and at the same time share content effectively with our stakeholders, partners and our diverse constituency some of which is offline and not connected."

Other institutional challenges raised were offshoots of the absence of communication planning. Among them, insufficient equipment for the communication department, and limited resource allocation for promotions and reaching target audiences. Moreover, comments such as "there is limited expertise for the communication channels and different kinds of media by the staff", and "we lack time for communication work as most staff are part-time and don't have enough time to work on communication tasks", were further affirmation to the absence of communication planning at these organisations. A good communication plan or strategy would guide the organisations in providing the elements pointed out that are currently missing, and thus enhance the strategic communication of these groups.

Challenges Related to Digital Rights Advocacy

Advocacy for digital rights appears to be rife with hiccups. It was revealed that legal regimes in the different countries continue to play a significant role in shrinking civic space and civil liberties thus stifling access to, and the exercise of these rights. "In some instances, social media accounts of prominent journalists, and websites considered critical of their home governments have been closed, while other advocates for social media face threats and detention," said one respondent. Another noted: "This is partly fueled by a perception by some governments and some citizens that digital rights are not important." In the words of yet another respondent, "the people/groups that need digital advocacy as an empowering tool cannot afford to use the digital spaces as they fear the government systems and fear victimisation for using these spaces for the betterment of their communities."

Internal shortcomings played a part especially with regards to lack of adequate capacity to develop and execute effective advocacy campaigns. Consequently, there have not been enough digital rights campaigns to drive the message and generate digital rights advocacy traction. As one respondent noted, "[we have the challenge of] finding the best outreach approaches of raising public awareness towards digital rights because most of our communities have no understanding about digital rights". Some of the specific internal capacity related factors included "the lack of training that is specific to this group [digital rights advocacy organisations], lack of resources, and shortage of knowledge to evaluate communication effectiveness." Also mentioned were improper structuring of content, not engaging with the right audience, not understanding the audience needs, unclear/unsustainable communication strategy and messages in advocating digital rights.

There were also community related constraints. As noted by a respondent, "Many people do not have a smart phone or computers through which to access the key information." Another respondent decried "the lack of inclusive technologies and the lack of communication strategies, policies, training and monitoring and operating in communities where ICTs are not accessible due to barriers related to disability, costs, literacy."

Communications Champions

To establish perceptions on the importance and role of a communications function within their organisations for successful implementation of projects and achievement of organisational goals and objectives, respondents were asked to propose communications champions. The champions would benefit from strategic communications training and support delivered by ACME.

On the whole, the staff categories suggested for championship indicated a good appreciation of communication in programme implementation as they included programme and communication teams, the IT department, policy officers and organisation directors. Those proposed included the communication manager, communication intern, social media editors, advocacy and campaigns manager, digital security manager, administrative officer, head of social media department, programmes officer, director, coordinator, and president. One respondent said: "We are a small team that share most communication tasks", highlighting the need for small digital rights organisations to have more than one member of staff trained in communications and advocacy, regardless of whether this was their designated area of work.

Training Needs

The assessment established grantee training needs as: using social media as a tool of influence; communicating research and hard-to sell-subjects; lobbying, advocacy and campaigns; and development of media advocacy strategies. The findings of the assessment will inform the development of a curriculum and training resources on impactful communication, remote support and training.



INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANISATIONAL **CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT NEEDS**

In this section we discuss the specific findings and needs at each individual organisation.

Jamii Forums had benefitted from some training in communication, although they do not employ a communication officer. The main challenge at the individual level was developing and pitching key messages, while at the organisational level, there were "limited communication skills among some members in the team and a lack of clarity on the difference between what constitutes informal and formal communication." According to the Jamii team, legal constraints limiting the type of content that can be shared and the lack of specific training had hampered the traction of digital rights advocacy in Africa. Up to five staff including those directly involved in advocacy and campaigns, digital security, programmes, administration and social media were nominated for training and support.

To build their capacity, the Jamii team requested for training that helps them to better understand media as an influencing tool, skills in lobbying, advocacy and campaigns by digital rights CSOs in Africa, pitching messages, using social media as a tool of influence, developing and building sustainable partnerships with the media, giving winning media interviews, tips on communicating research and hard-to-sell subjects and tips on how to develop a media advocacy strategy.

Digital Shelter did not employ a dedicated communication officer. Instead, two programme officers were tasked with handling the communication docket. Among the individual challenges was how to design communication strategies, selecting the best platform/channel, managing media platforms simultaneously, finding the most appropriate and less costly channel to reach wider audiences including illiterate communities, and designing and sticking to effective media and communication strategies. As one staff commented: "My main challenge is how to effectively get my message across to my audience without confusing them, poor audience engagement, and grasping the audience attention." At the organisational level, budget limitation, and poor/late feedback from service providers such as designers were key challenges.

According to the team at Digital Shelter, digital rights advocacy groups in Somalia continued to grapple with finding the best outreach approaches of raising public awareness in a context where there is little-to-no understanding about digital rights. This was compounded by unclear/unsustainable communication strategies and messages in advocating for digital rights in Somalia. Moreover, digital rights advocacy groups were also faulted with lacking some technical capacity in evaluating communication effectiveness, properly structuring of content, engaging with the right audience, and understanding audience needs.

The training and support needs of the team included training that helps them to better understand media as an influencing tool, lobbying, advocacy and campaigns by digital rights CSOs in Africa, pitching messages, using social media as a tool of influence, developing and building sustainable partnerships with the media, giving winning media interviews, tips on communicating research and hard-to-sell subjects, and tips on how to develop a media advocacy strategy. The two staff members in charge of the communication docket were nominated to attend the training on impact communication. However, any other staff members that will be available at the time of the training will be encouraged to participate.

Somaliland Journalist Association (SOLJA) had fairly limited communication capacity. They had not benefitted from any communication related training and their communication portfolio was handled by the Information Technology (IT) Officer. At individual level, limited expertise in the use of the different communication channels, and different kinds of media, was the key challenge. As an organisation, there was insufficient equipment for the communication department, coupled with limited resources for the promotion of the organisation's brand. According to SOLJA, digital rights groups have been shackled by the closing of the social media accounts of prominent journalists, threats and detention of freelance journalists and advocates of social media, and the closure of websites deemed critical of government.

In turn, SOLJA identified their training needs as: skilling to better understand media as an influencing tool, lobbying, advocacy and campaigns by digital rights CSOs in Africa, pitching messages, using social media as a tool of influence, developing and building sustainable partnerships with the media, giving winning media interviews, tips on communicating research and hard-to-sell subjects and tips on how to develop a media advocacy strategy.

ADISI-Cameroun had previously benefited from communications training but nominated the communication manager and communication intern to attend the proposed support and skills building. Individual communication challenges included developing communication strategies, and reaching target audiences. According to the organisation, digital rights advocacy groups have been inefficient at reaching a critical target of people on social media.

ADISI-Cameroun identified the following as their training needs: training to better understand media as an influencing tool, skills in lobbying, advocacy and campaigns by digital rights CSOs in Africa, pitching messages, using social media as a tool of influence, developing and building sustainable partnerships with the media, giving winning media interviews, tips on communicating research and hard-to-sell subjects and tips on how to develop a media advocacy strategy.

Rudi International had probably the most solid communication capacity among the participating groups. Apart from undertaking a number of mixed media/communications related trainings, they had provided related trainings to some of their beneficiaries. However, owing to limited resources, the Executive Director did most of the communication tasks in the organisation, supported by their President. The lack of a dedicated communications staff and having the ED handle communications was admittedly time-consuming.

Rudi's key area interest in the proposed strategic communication support was understanding the mechanics of public communication, media as an influencing tool, lobbying, advocacy and campaigns by digital rights CSOs in Africa, pitching messages, using social media as a tool of influence, developing and building sustainable partnerships with the media, giving winning media interviews, tips on communicating research and hard-to-sell subjects and tips on how to develop a media advocacy strategy. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, where Rudi is based, digital rights campaigns have been curtailed by lack of resources and shortage of training for the different organisations engaged in this work.

Forum de Associações Moçambicanas de Deficientes (FOMOD) had not benefitted from any communication-related training and neither did they employ a communication staff. Given the lack of individual skills to use social media, design communication strategies, among others, the coordinator noted that impact communications support was required for all staff.

According to FOMOD, digital rights advocacy groups operate in communities where ICTs are not accessible due to barriers related to disability, costs, literacy, coupled with some restrictions from governments which had affected the effectiveness of these groups. There was also the lack of inclusive technologies and the lack of communication strategies, policies, training and monitoring. Accordingly, FOMOD underscored the need for support and training in using the media as an influencing tool, pitching messages, using social media as a tool of influence, giving winning media interviews, tips on communicating research and hard-to-sell subjects, and tips on how to develop a media advocacy strategy.

The Centre for International Trade, Economics and Environment (CUTS) did not employ a communications officer but had benefitted from communications training offered by some of their funders for purposes of disseminating project information. According to the organisation, defining and reaching out to a targeted audience, i.e. the audience that will most appreciate/benefit from the communication was a key shortcoming among many digital rights campaigners. Up to five programme staff were nominated to benefit from the communications training and support towards formatting press releases, understanding the media landscape in Africa, using the media to influence their work, getting skills to lobby and campaign for digital rights, pitching messages, leveraging social media, communicating research and hard-to-sell subjects, and understanding the mechanics of public communication.

The team at Sobanukirwa had some communication-related training. Being a small team of only three (some of whom are part-time), communication tasks were not prioritised. Capacity building and support could benefit all the staff, they said. According to Sobanukirwa, a major setback for digital rights advocacy groups in general was that some governments and some citizens do not consider digital rights to be important. The priorities for Sobanukirwa were grasping the media landscape in Africa, using the media as an influencing tool, lobbying, campaigning and advocating for digital rights, leveraging social media, developing and building sustainable relationships with the media, communicating research and other hard-to-sell subjects, and tips on developing media advocacy strategies.

At iWatch Africa, some of their staff members had previously benefitted from communication training. The communications officer, policy and news director, alongside the social media manager and communication director were identified as the target beneficiaries for impact communications support. According to iWatch, the digital rights advocacy has lacked adequate digital campaigns to drive the message.

The Zimbabwe Centre for Media and Information Literacy (ZCMIL) proposed that all permanent members of staff (four) and some volunteers (also four) benefit from the communications training and support. At individual level, the failure to blog consistently was a major drawback. With regard to the shackles on digital rights advocacy, there was concern that the shrinking of online space and backlash by totalitarian and authoritarian states and governments was greatly affecting these efforts.

Their preferences for support included skilling that helps them to better understand media as an influencing tool, appreciating the lobbying, advocacy and campaigns by digital rights CSOs in Africa, pitching messages, using social media as a tool of influence, developing and building sustainable partnerships with the media, giving winning media interviews, tips on communicating research and hard-to-sell subjects, tips on how to develop a media advocacy strategy, and communicating strategically.

Mzalendo Trust employed a communication officer and the organisation had strong communication capacity, having benefitted from a couple of communication trainings organised by their development partners. The organisation was well-equipped in building a strong and consistent visual identity, as well as communication strategy development and implementation. A respondent flagged the communication challenges that they face as such: "Proactively engaging media during interviews related to my work and opinion pieces on newspaper articles, and entrenching proactive communication – whether writing newspaper articles and blogs and also granting media opportunities for our work." At organisational level, enhanced engagement with media to grow brand visibility remained a problem.

According to Mzalendo, shrinking civic spaces, competing interests leading to messaging losing focus, and having less impact were the key obstacles to effective digital rights advocacy. This had been compounded by increase in fake news, misinformation and disinformation; and the proliferation of social media outlets that weakened the credibility of established institutions.

The preferred areas of support for the organisation included skilling that helps them to better understand media as an influencing tool, appreciating the lobbying, advocacy and campaigns by digital rights CSOs in Africa, pitching messages, developing and building sustainable partnerships with the media, giving winning media interviews, tips on how to develop a media advocacy strategy, and communicating strategically. Programme and communication teams were recommended for participation in the strategic communications training and support.

Global Voices is a media organisation with many staff members equipped with communication skills. At individual level, their key challenge was inadequate time to implement strategically focused communications, while as an organisation they continued to grapple with "resisting sensation-driven stories when we know that's what is often successful in campaigns." According to Gobal Voices, the main failing of digital rights advocacy organisations was their failure to make their work relatable and relevant to non-specialist communities with a stake in the digital rights agenda. Those recommended for participation were social media editors and team editors and the areas of interest included lobbying and campaigning for digital rights, pitching messages, communicating research and hard-to-sell subjects.

Annex - Profile of grantees that participated in the survey

ADISI – Cameroon

Promoting social accountability and citizen-duty bearer interactions beyond Cameroon's economic capital Douala through civic engagement and data journalism initiatives, and capacity building

- Paul- Joel Kamtchang
- TJADE UM Marguerite Natacha

Centre for International Trade, Economics and Environment (CUTS) - Kenya

protection in Kenya through research, policy analysis and online campaigns

Collins Owegi

Digital Shelter – Somalia

defenders, activists, journalists and bloggers.

Forum de Organizacoes de Pessoas com Deficiencia (Disabled Persons Organisations Forum) – Mozambique

Conducting ICT accessibility and compliance assessments of Mozambique and build the capacity of disability rights organizations to advocate for accessible ICT for persons with disabilities through the G3ict Digital

- Carolina Francisco Chiáu Lumbandali
- Bernadete Dima
- Clodoaldo Castiano

Global Voices-Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East and North Africa

Cameroon, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sudan, Tunisia and Uganda. Further, collaborative workshops, multilingual and ethnicity affect digital spaces in the seven focus countries during politically charged periods.

iWatch Africa – Ghana

covering political and societal issues in Ghana.

Jamii Forums – Tanzania

Enhancing the digital security of 100 activists, journalists, lawyers, bloggers and human rights defenders, including raising awareness on digital vulnerabilities. Furthermore, stakeholder engagements on data protection and privacy, targeting law enforcement authorities and the communications regulator.

- Alice Mbegalo

- Francis Nyonzo

- Maulid Suleiman
- Mweha Msemo
- Patricia Richard
- Zawadi Mkweru
- Ziada Seukindo

JP Media and Sobanukirwa – Rwanda

Researching challenges to implementation of the law and uptake of the platform respectively, so as to

• Jean Pierre Afadhali

Mzalendo Trust – Kenya

Conduct research on the impact and perceptions of the Huduma Namba initiative in Kenya. Also, public

- Caroline Gaita

Rudi International – Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo)

in the DR Congo's fast-evolving but challenging telecommunications landscape.

Somaliland Journalists Association (SOLJA) – Somaliland

Working with media practitioners and law enforcement authorities to strengthen media freedom and (KAPs) survey, design thinking workshop, digital literacy training, and roundtable engagements on digital

Zimbabwe Centre for Media and Information Literacy (ZCMIL) National University of Science and Technology (NUST) – Zimbabwe

Empowering 120 grassroots-based citizen journalists in media and information literacy.

- Through covering a range of topics, including ethical standards, information and news verification and
 - Thomas Sithole



Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)

Tel: +256 414 289 502

Twitter: @cipesaug

www.cipesa.org

Email: programmes@cipesa.org

Facebook: facebook.com/cipesaug