IT for Social Activists: A Study of World Social Forum 2006 Organizing Process

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ABSTRACT

There has been little research on how social activists use information technology in carrying out their activities. Most of these activists belong to social organizations and recent literature has highlighted that most civil society organizations lack IT appropriation in their work practices. To better understand IT requirements of this sector, there is a need for longitudinal ethnographic studies. In this paper, the authors examine the organizing process of the World Social Forum 2006 event, held in Karachi Pakistan. World Social Forum is an important gathering of social movements across the globe, and organizing such an event requires extensive communication and effective planning skills. The authors' intention is appropriate technology introduction in the organizing process to improve the organizing process. The objective of this paper is to highlight the need and importance of this research issue.

Keywords: Community Computing, Ethnographic Studies, Human Centred Computing, Information Systems Development, Organizational Practices, Social Forum, Social Movements, System Design, Technology Appropriation

1. INTRODUCTION

Civil society organizations (CSOs) require effective knowledge management methodologies, as knowledge is the prime resource in knowledge society (Lytras & Sicilia, 2005; Stehr, 2007). Information technology is an important enabler for modern knowledge management methodologies but IT adoption in CSOs is not as rapid as is the case in other organizations. There are a number of factors which make IT usage in this field of application very specific. CSOs are very diverse in their operations and compositions. Most CSOs face a significant lack of funding for development, improvement and maintenance of their IT infrastructure. As their activities are mainly run by donations, often it is hard to invest these donations in establishing sustainable IT infrastructure and continuously employing IT professionals. Difference of language, backgrounds, working habits and culture among social activists of organizations operating in different regions adds further complexity in designing an effec-
tive IT infrastructure. Furthermore, as these organizations are mostly run by volunteers so lack of permanent staff and weak hierarchical structure adds further problems in establishing sustainable IT infrastructures (Saeed et al., 2008b). These factors highlight that as there are similarities between conventional organizations and civil society organizations but at the same time considerable differences too. So there is a need to keep in mind these issues as well while designing IT systems for them. These issues advocate for intense research efforts to support these organizations by technological solutions. There has been related work to appropriate technology in voluntary organizations by different researchers. Benston (1990) has described how participatory design methods can be used to help nonprofit organizations. There have been examples of application of technology in regional nonprofit organizations by different researchers’ (cf. McPhail et al., 1998; Trigg, 2000; Rohde, 2003, 2004; Farooq et al., 2005, 2006). There has not been much work carried out on empowering CSOs which operate in transnational context. McIver worked with transnational NGOs to develop a multi-lingual collaborative legislative drafting application (McIver, 2004a, 2004b). There is also analytical work on use of technologies by transnational NGOs (cf. Cogburn, 2004; Curron, 2006). In an earlier version of this paper (Saeed et al., 2008c) we briefly discussed the IT implications for World Social Forum, but in this version we have extended the empirical data.

In order to gain better understanding of issues hindering IT appropriation in civil society organizations, we need empirical evaluation; especially ethnographic studies are required. Keeping this in mind, we turned our focus towards the movement of alternative globalization, which is a counter force against political globalization. This movement gained popularity after the Seattle demonstrations and combines diverse civil society networks, organizations and activists (Kavada, 2006). Non-hierarchical structure, absence of recognizable central leadership and decision making by consensus are the important characteristics of this movement. The World Social Forum (WSF) is the most popular event of these networks which attracts a large number of activists from all over the world (Kavada, 2007). Kavada (2007) has investigated how email lists are helping in the organizing process of the European Social Forum. But in our investigation our focus is to understand work practices with an intention to introduce new technology to facilitate the organizing process. As this event involves international networks of NGOs, labour organizations, social movements and activists so this extensive collaboration among people from different geographical regions, cultures and backgrounds will allow us to better understand organizational practices. An analysis of these work practices will help in development of potential information systems for civil society networks. As the problems are global, this investigation will help in generalizing the IT needs and opportunities for the introduction of new information systems for this specific sector. In this paper we investigate the organizational practices in the organizing process of WSF event in Karachi, Pakistan. In 2006 WSF was organized as a poly-centric event and two other locations were Bamako, Mali and Caracas, Venezuela.

The structure of remaining paper is as follows. Section 2 describes the applied research methods to collect empirical data for this paper and Section 3 describes the background information of social forum and their structure. In Section 4 background activities to organize the Karachi event are described. The organizing process is discussed in Section 5 and Section 6 describes the actual activities as they happened in real time. In Section 7 the available IT infrastructure for this event is described and Section 8 discusses the lessons learned from this case study. The paper concludes with a discussion on the activities which provides direction for further information systems development for this community.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

In order to analyze the WSF event in Karachi, a combination of research methods were used.
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