Case study: Kubatana

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Kubatana was founded in 2001 to strive for equal access to information and the inclusion of the general public in debate and discussion across Zimbabwe. It seeks to do so through providing a database of the contact details and publications of NGOs for citizens to access online and through mobile web. Additionally, it reaches out to its SMS subscribers with updates on news and events, as well as polls and feedback requests. These activities are aided by a select number of key partnerships, including with the NGOs whose details they publish. Kubatana is made up of a small team in Harare who run all aspects of the organisation, including updating and maintaining the NGO database and rolling out numerous promotional campaigns.

1 Background

At the turn of the millennium, the NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) and CSO (Civil Service Organisation) sector in Zimbabwe was very active, comprising a wide variety of organisations. These organisations were producing huge volumes of reports and documents relating to social justice and

development issues in Zimbabwe. However, there was limited distribution. NGOs and CSOs tended to circulate them amongst themselves and like-minded organisations, meaning that the general public were being left out of the loop. Valuable and relevant information was not easily accessible to those for whom it was most applicable. Additionally, mainstream media would rarely feature development-related material because they too were unaware. As a result, there was a clear limitation to the number of people exposed to these valuable NGO/CSO produced resources.

The Kubatana team saw that this information, if unlocked, could contribute to the attainment of equal access to information in the development, governance and human rights sectors. This led to a vision of a platform on which such information could be aggregated and indexed, making it considerably more accessible to the general public.

Objective

Kubatana's aims are built around their belief in equal access to information. This entails starting conversations about subjects that are quite often stifled, and encouraging debate, discussion and critique of the status quo. It recognises and respects the fact that ordinary Zimbabweans have opinions and feedback on current events and development issues, and therefore aims to create a medium through which these can be shared and published.

Results

- As of August 2014, Kubatana has approximately 95,000 followers:
  - 27,000 email subscribers
  - 45,000 SMS subscribers
  - 3,000 WhatsApp subscribers
  - 10,000 Facebook and Twitter followers
- Estimates suggest that each recipient is likely to pass information on 5-8 times, further multiplying the rates of consumption.
- Many of the positive outcomes of the Kubatana service are anecdotal and personal, rather than quantifiable. For example, people securing funding to run social projects using the Kubatana network, or readers securing employment through job vacancies included in the Kubatana newsletter.

Impact

Between the number of people currently using the Kubatana service and the frequency at which these people pass information onto their acquaintances, the organisation claim that the service is rivalling the reach of mainstream newspapers in Zimbabwe. As well as increasing access to valuable information, this is providing Zimbabweans with the opportunity to provide feedback on current events and communicate what is important to them to a wider audience. In many cases, this has led to the launching of campaigns based on issues that have been highlighted through Kubatana's communication with subscribers.

2 Lessons Learned

- **Be patient and consistent.** When Kubatana started, its staff were cold-calling NGOs, knocking on their doors and arranging lots of meetings in order to convince them to agree to be on the website. Now, the scales have tipped in the other direction, with NGOs approaching Kubatana for the same privilege. People see the value of the platform's distribution and reach as a result of the patience and perseverance of the team, as well as consistency and belief in what the organisation does.

- **Focus is key - even if this means losing funding.** As elements of the operation become permanent and institutionalised, they become part of the foundation of the organisation. However, donors may have more interest in what new and exciting projects you can offer. Over the years, Kubatana has seen how a service can become diluted as a result of attempts to meet these donors' desires. Today, the organisation considers it preferable to focus on the impact and value of core operations rather than spreading itself too thin.

3 Approach

One theme underlying everything Kubatana does is ensuring the general public are accessing and benefiting from information on social and political issues. Since the service's launch, a healthy publicity and marketing line has always been included in the service's budget. Early on, significant resources were devoted to running newspaper adverts, handing out flyers and generally raising Kubatana's profile both to NGOs and to the general public. Despite its healthy following, this interest in user acquisition remains today, especially in terms of attracting ordinary people to use the service.

Kubatana uses bulk SMS messaging to send news headlines, poll questions and advocacy materials to subscribers. In terms of its overarching aims, Kubatana actually sees the efficacy of SMS messaging in terms of activism and advocacy as being marginal. However, if used in a strategic way, it recognises that SMS can be used as a bridge to connect other elements of Kubatana's multimedia service. Therefore, in addition to the topical information that has become very popular with SMS subscribers, Kubatana uses SMS as a method for converting online materials to offline materials that can be distributed to people throughout the country.

> ## **Spotlight:** Kubatana and 'Tree of Life'
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> Tree of Life is a DVD about torture rehabilitation for victims of political violence in Zimbabwe. Given its content, this DVD could not be shown in a public forum in Harare without significant security risks. However, Kubatana recognized the importance of the work discussed in the DVD and its potential value for the general public. It therefore initiated a drive for potential viewers to send their address to Kubatana via SMS, who would then distribute copies of these DVDs across the country. Here, SMS was used as a medium to connect this valuable material to thousands more people than would have otherwise been possible; estimates suggest that the number of recipients could have filled the biggest cinema in Harare for two weeks.

Figure 1 - Spotlight on use of SMS with other multimedia approaches

In the past, Kubatana also used mobile technology to pilot an IVR system that it developed called Freedom Fone - an accessible medium for broadcasting audio programmes. In piloting this technology, Kubatana made short dramas available on subjects such as sexual harassment, sexual health and reproductive rights. These could be accessed via a phone number advertised in offline material, through which callers navigated an IVR menu to find programmes. Again, the prevalence of mobile technology here was critical to disseminate information that may otherwise be very hard to come by, or even restricted for the general public.

4 User Centric Attitudes

Kubatana ensures that any packaged information they produce is varied according to what their customers actively want to see or hear - including job opportunities, scholarships, notifications of public debates and meetings, thought-provoking graphics and proverbs, and other content in the everyday interest of Zimbabweans.

Attention to appropriate content and media has also led to a burgeoning use of platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. This is in part a result of the cheap Facebook and WhatsApp bundles offered by Econet, Zimbabwe's leading Mobile Operator by market share, which has allowed for a great increase in their use. Whilst these may not allow for the comprehensiveness of emails or written newsletters might, it has proved to be an effective way of engaging customers in a way convenient for them. One particularly positive outcome of this has been a willingness of users to engage in two-way communication with Kubatana. When the service sends out information and questions, it asks for feedback and local reports in return. The ease and accessibility of platforms like SMS, Facebook and WhatsApp has made users much more eager and able to do this. Kubatana's user base is very interactive, particularly during national events like elections and referenda.

Another element designed around the needs of users is Kubatana's recent changes to its website. The site contains a good deal of information on social, political and developmental issues through its library and database of NGOs. However, in light of the fact that the vast majority of Zimbabweans access the internet through their mobile phones, Kubatana realised the set-up of their information-focused website was not appropriate to its users. It has therefore undertaken a recent effort to optimise the website for mobile access. This is an ongoing effort that is designed to make selecting relevant information more immediately available to Kubatana's users.

5 The Use and Value of Data

Kubatana sees data as a fundamental building block of its operations. Given the communicative nature of the organisation, data collection and retention holds obvious importance. The primary data collected by Kubatana include users' names, gender and location. These enable the organisation to grow a database of its users, put together profiles, and understand male-female and rural-urban splits. Additionally, the polls and requests for feedback that Kubatana sends out allow the team to collect more qualitative information - specifically, trends in popular opinion, again including regional and gender differences therein.

The observations derived from this data collection act as a major determinant of Kubatana's policies and activities. For example, responses to information or a question on a certain issue can be mapped and examined in order to identify the views and priorities of Kubatana users across regions and demographics. This then informs Kubatana's actions on - and reactions to - a given subject. It also allows the organisation to look for information and knowledge gaps across the membership, thereby influencing the more educational side of the service.

However, as much as Kubatana has the desire to make full use of their data, current capacity does not allow it. For example, the basic level of managing and tidying the database of user contact details becomes a very difficult task for a relatively small team. Additionally, the team recognise that current operations could be enhanced through a more streamlined process of integrating feedback into existing databases in a way that would allow them to see trends in what people were saying about certain issues at certain times, across regions and periods. At its current capacity, Kubatana is unable to make use of its data in this way. Should the team become more able to do so, though, it would greatly contribute to developing campaigns further and building the more user-centric services.

6 Success and Scalability

When it comes to measuring its success in a quantifiable way, Kubatana tracks selected indicators. These can include the number of subscribers, the growth rate of subscriber bases, and the number of people reached by an individual project (for example, the number of recipients of the Tree of Life DVD). These act as indicators of the reach of the service, allowing the team to assess their success.

However, properly examining the impact of the service is slightly more complicated, much of this is anecdotal and qualitative. Kubatana bases its impact evaluation on the feedback, reports and actions of its users. Here, information is largely harvested through one-to-one contact with subscribers. Given the importance of this kind of feedback to the service, there is no consistent rate of return or conversion. Instead, it considers it more important and appropriate to seek out instances of success and celebrate it where possible. In addition to this, the organisation understands success, in part, through the size and calibre of partnerships it attracts, such as the United Nations Development Programme and Zimbabwean local government.

Plans to grow and expand the service focus on acquiring new subscribers. This is done regularly through advertising and promotions, which remain a major component of Kubatana's operations. Given Kubatana's relative prominence - and owing in part to increased accessibility through the likes of mobile web and WhatsApp - the organisation is finding that general public awareness and word-of-mouth are proving as effective former marketing efforts. This is being boosted by visual campaigns around Harare - including Participate! - which is garnering a lot of attention and interaction from 'Twimbos' (Zimbabwean Twitter users). Additionally, further DVD distribution drives are being planned to increase the profile of Kubatana across the country. Already, the combination of these various elements are showing results in terms of new audiences engaging with the service.

Picture 2 - Example of *Particpate!* campaign, spotted by a Kubatana Twitter follower

Service scalability will depend on whether these new audiences can be converted into increased income and capacity. Plans are currently being formulated to find ways of turning the service into an income-generating and self-sustaining one. Some form of monthly subscription fee would seem sensible given the service's large membership base, but Kubatana does not currently have mobile money systems in place that would allow for safe and convenient transactions. Additionally, the organisation is wary of creating barriers to the information. As a result, the scalability of the service - and its future in that respect - is as yet unclear.

7 Partnerships

Certain strategic partnerships have aided Kubatana in its growth to this point. However, due to the delicate political situation at Zimbabwe, these are not always easy to establish. Kubatana is explicitly an activist organisation in a nation where the term 'activist' carries negative - even dangerous - associations. One negative outcome of this emerged when the team sought commercial advertising to carry on the website that could act as an income stream. They found that private companies did not want to advertise through an organisation of Kubatana's aims and values when it first launched. This and other similar instances have constrained the success and growth of the service to some degree.

Significantly, it became the first user to pilot the FrontlineSMS software in 2005 in Zimbabwe. Kubatana utilised the platform to send and receive SMS messages en masse for many years. For example, in the lead-up to the 2008 elections, Kubatana used FrontlineSMS to ask its users 'what would you like a free Zimbabwe to look like?' This relationship made Kubatana much more able to engage with its user base in its earlier days.

Today, Kubatana works with Clickatell as its bulk SMS provider. The organisation speaks highly of Clickatell's very active tech support. This relationship came under strain when, approaching the 2013 elections, bulk SMS gateways were ordered to be blocked. Kubatana considered looking elsewhere for sources of this service which could have bypassed the order. However, it remained with Clickatell due to the lower cost and security that they offered their members, despite the fact that the bulk SMS that it sends out now cannot feature a local sender ID. This problem is mitigated somewhat by the inclusion within the messages of a number to which recipients should send responses. As a result, this partnership and the benefits that it brings have withstood this strain for the most part.

NGOs have acted as key partners of Kubatana, indeed they are integral to the organisation's premise.

Organisations are incentivised to be included in Kubatana's database given that it increases their status, presence and ability to be contacted. Many leaders in the Zimbabwean NGO sector would likely name Kubatana as their most influential technical and media partner. Today, organisations wanting to be on the Kubatana database must be in some way verified to ensure that they are sufficiently productive and valuable to merit inclusion. For the most part, this comes in the form of references of other organisations working in the same specific area. This way, the database remains of a certain quality, and Kubatana remains discerning about the kind of organisations with which they choose to partner.

*arrows represent direction of value-add
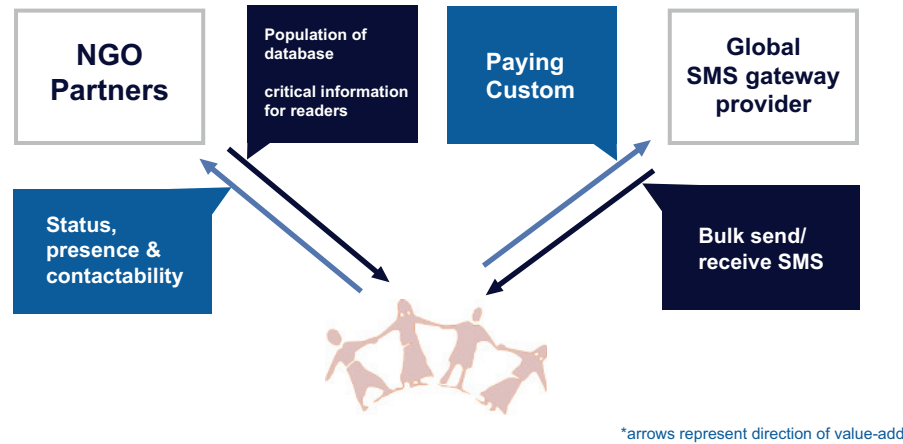
Figure 3 - Partnerships diagram

8 Challenges

Unsurprisingly, Kubatana has faced a number of challenges since its launch, relating primarily to the political landscape in which it operates. In the context of the current regime, the mobile/SMS space is seen as particularly threatening to the status quo - significantly more so than web and email-based activities. Additionally, broadcasting material is subject to considerable sensitivity and regulation. As a result, Kubatana's dissemination of news headlines and short audio programmes using SMS and IVR respectively have faced restrictions. With regards to each, Kubatana has had phone lines suspended. The problems were eventually overcome. However, whilst they have been resolved in the past, such challenges remain threats to Kubatana.

Another challenge that Kubatana faces relates to donors. The organisation has found that it goes through cycles of interest from the donor community. As an election or referendum approaches, global interest in Zimbabwe rights and development issues spikes. At these times, financial support for Kubatana is quite forthcoming. However, income diminishes at other points of these cycles. The organisation does not currently have the capacity to dedicate too much time to seeking out new sources of funding. As a result, one of Kubatana's current challenges is to implement a more balanced system for acquiring funding.

9 Future Plans

Looking forward, Kubatana's immediate plans centre around continuing with their current activities, but with greater emphasis on citizen participation to solve community issues and to keep government accountable. The growing popularity of social media and pervasiveness of mobile phones are making citizens more energetic and audible in how they provide feedback and report on issues. Kubatana will

harness this to identify areas that require more attention and to inform future campaigns, including an expansion into issues around local environmental degradation.

Beyond this, the organisation feels that the Kubatana model of sharing NGO information and publications could bring great benefit to Africa if replicated in other nations across the continent. The team consider the model to be simple, sophisticated and extremely fruitful in bringing the general public into human rights debates and discussions.

About

GSMA Mobile for Development Impact supports the digital empowerment of people in emerging markets through its Mobile for Development resource. It is a central platform of data, analysis and insight used to inform investment and design decisions for mobile services. Our work is freely accessible through support from Omidyar Network and in partnership with The MasterCard Foundation at gsmaintelligence.com/m4d