



Kubatana.net

Box GD 376, Greendale, Harare ♦ Tel: 776 008 Fax: 746 418 ♦ email: admin@kubatana.org.zw

Kubatana.net: Using mobile technologies for social development

Position paper for W3C Workshop

April 16, 2008

Background

Established in 2001 by Bev Clark and Brenda Burrell, Kubatana.net is an online community for Zimbabwean human rights activists. Kubatana strengthens electronic communications in Zimbabwean NGOs and civil society organisations, and makes human rights and civic education information accessible from a centralised, electronic source.

Kubatana.net archives over 12,000 documents about Zimbabwe, with an emphasis on documents produced by Zimbabwean civil society.

Kubatana manages an electronic network of over 250 NGOs and CSOs, maintaining current contact details on a "fact sheet" for each organisation in the online directory. The Kubatana project has given many NGOs an Internet presence without them having to spend resources on a fully-fledged web site. Documents authored by each organisation are associated with their individual fact sheets.

Regular electronic activism campaigns encourage Zimbabweans to mobilise, lobby and advocate. Kubatana's email listserv and regular email newsletters keep thousands of Zimbabweans and regional and international subscribers informed.

Past use of mobile technologies

Whilst the core of Kubatana is our online archive of information, we recognise that many Zimbabweans do not have access to the Internet. Thus we regularly publish print newspapers highlighting content featured on our website. Last year, we also began an SMS outreach initiative, providing information to Zimbabweans on their mobile phones.

Over the past year, our SMS service has informed Zimbabweans about public meetings and events, shared inspirational quotations, asked for feedback about pressing issues such as price controls and HIV/AIDS, and offered materials such as DVD's for people to share amongst their colleagues.

Wherever possible, Kubatana has used SMS as a two-way communications tool, and encouraged response to our local Zimbabwean number. We use the SMS gateway Clickatell to send out our text messages, as using a local SIM card to deliver text messages to hundreds of subscribers using Frontline can be very slow, particularly in Zimbabwe where network congestion is a persistent challenge.

Clickatell offer a useful sender ID facility that enables us to use our Zimbabwean mobile number as the 'reply to' number associated with messages we send out. SMS responses to our messages are then downloaded from our local SIM card using FrontlineSMS.

You can read some SMS feedback from various initiatives here:

- ♦ ZBC's Penga Poll: <http://kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/?p=264>
- ♦ ZCTU Stay Away: <http://kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/?p=201>
- ♦ Vision and Imagination: <http://kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/?p=186>

In addition, we have provided an SMS communications service on behalf of Zimbabwean organisations such as the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) and The Women's Trust, to assist them with informing members of events, and soliciting feedback from their members on issues such as salary negotiations and election violence.

Current use of mobile technologies

Zimbabwe held "Harmonised" Elections (Presidential, House of Assembly, Senate and Local Government) on March 29, 2008.

Before the election, Kubatana used adverts in local news papers, our email newsletter, on our website and in our own Kubatana election newspaper to invite Zimbabweans to subscribe to our SMS election information service. We collected over 1,000 subscribers in this manner and sent them regular updates before and during the election, with messages such as:

*- If we want to climb out of the hole that we are in, it is a job for all the people. -Chinua Achebe.
<VOTE!>*

- Don't ask for change. Be the change. See the list of polling stations on www.kubatana.net

- CNN refused permission to cover elections. Thousands attend Simba Makoni in Bindura and Rusape. List of polling stations available on www.kubatana.net

We also invited subscribers to send us text messages with their election experiences, some of which we compiled here: <http://kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/?p=417>

We then kept subscribers informed about the election results as they were very slowly made public. Many subscribers wrote in to thank us for this service, as if you didn't have electricity or access to a television or radio, there was no other way to quickly get informed about election results. These announcements also boosted Kubatana's subscriber list via word of mouth - one person would get a text message from us with results and share it with a friend or colleague. This new person would then text in to our local number and ask to be subscribed as well. In this way, our subscriber list has doubled in the weeks following the elections.

In keeping with our interest in a two-way communications service, we also invited subscribers to share their dreams for a new Zimbabwe.

We sent out this message:

"Kubatana! No senate results as at 5.20 pm. What changes do YOU want in a free Zim? Lets inspire each other. Want to know what others say? SMS us your email addr"

And were overwhelmed by the response! Over 175 people responded with their hopes for a new Zimbabwe, and over 100 sent in their email address and asked us to send them what other subscribers were suggesting. Many of these email recipients then signed up for our email newsletter, further integrating our communications tools.

Read some of the dreams for a new Zimbabwe which we received via SMS here:
<http://kubatanablogs.net/kubatana/?p=474>

Read Ken Bank's write up on the initiative and the use of Frontline SMS here:
<http://www.blogspot.kiwanja.net/2008/04/kubatana-reaches-out-with-frontlinesms.html>

We have been so inspired by the feedback from this initiative that we are planning a print publication that incorporates our favourite suggestions for a new Zimbabwe with graphics and a compelling lay out - *a people's publication of the people's voices.*

Future use of mobile technologies

Looking ahead, Kubatana plans to continue our use of SMS as a communications and outreach tool.

We are also very excited about Freedom Fone: Dialup Radio, a new service we have been developing with assistance from Tad Hirsch at MIT's Media Lab. Freedom Fone is still in its early stages of development, but our aim is to provide a means by which organisations can develop and 'publish' short segment audio content that the public can dialup and listen to using any kind of telephone. The administrator's interface will be accessed using a browser application (eg Firefox, Safari, Internet Explorer). Through a control panel they will be able to manage audio files and menu options; white and blacklists of numbers; allocation of free callback time; usage statistics and more. The system has been designed to accommodate the content of multiple organisations, allowing them to co-habit on one technical backend installation.

Depending on the telephony options available to an organisation, Freedom Fone can be connected to landlines, mobile SIM cards and/or VoIP numbers.

Freedom Fone consists of a web-based content management system written in Ruby/Rails, and an Asterisk-based telephony server. All software is open-source. The software automatically generates interactive voice response (IVR) menus that enable callers to navigate audio content using their telephone keypads.

Freedom Fone can be accessed in a variety of ways. A person can call a phone number, and then pay for the call themselves. Or, a user can phone a special call-back number or send an SMS to the system, and the system will then return the call at no further cost to the user.

Freedom Fone completed its first pilot test in November 2007. We have secured funding for extensive development and deployment of this service both in Zimbabwe and the region, and we plan to develop call-in information services around issues such as HIV/AIDS, elections, and small-scale farmer support. Other future uses could include citizen journalism, legal rights information, community radio style initiatives, and information for minorities, sex workers and refugees among many others.

Freedom Fone takes advantage of the affordability and increasing popularity of the mobile phone. We are excited at the potential of Freedom Fone to provide current, relevant news and information to a range of people - without the access constraints of email or the Internet. In addition, Freedom Fone opens up potential to say much more than one can with the 160 character constraints of SMS. There are still cost hurdles to access for some users, of course, and we look forward to developing a product model that is able to subsidise some portion of users, in order to make the service more accessible to poor communities.

Read more about Kubatana's field test of Freedom Fone here: <http://mobileactive.org/mobileactive07-preview-m>