

# **Towards Understanding IT Needs of Social Activists: The Case of the World Social Forum 2006 Organizing Process**

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## ***Abstract***

*Recent literature has highlighted that most civil society organizations lack IT appropriation in their work practices. There is strong need to focus on this application area to empower these organizations by IT capabilities. As there is not much literature about the specific needs assessment of voluntary organizations, there is a need to carry out ethnographic studies to better understand IT requirements of this sector. In this paper we have investigated the organizing process of the World Social Forum 2006 event in Karachi, Pakistan. World Social Forum is an important gathering of social movements and voluntary organizations across the globe, and organizing such an event requires extensive communication and effective planning skills. The objective of this paper is to highlight the need and importance of this research issue. Our intention is to introduce appropriate technology in the organizing process to facilitate social activists.*

## **1 Introduction**

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are very diverse in their operations and composition. There are number of factors which make IT usage in this field of application very specific. Most CSOs face significant lack of funding for development, improvement and maintenance of their IT infrastructure. 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 differnt regions adds further complexity in designing an effective IT infrastructure. (Benston, 1990) has described how participatory design methods can be used to help non profit sector organizations. There have been examples of the application of technology in regional non profit organizations by different researchers' cf. (McPhail et al., 1998; Trigg, 2000; Rohde, 2003; Rohde, 2004; Farooq et al., 2005; Farooq et al., 2006). (Mclever, 2004) worked with transnational NGOs to develop a multi-lingual collaborative legislative drafting application. Still there has not been much work carried out on typical technological requirements of CSOs.

In order to gain better understanding of issues hindering IT appropriation in civil society organizations, we need empirical evaluation, especially ethnographic studies are needed. Keeping this in mind, we turned our focus towards the organizing process of world social forum (WSF). 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. In the following sections the paper describes applied research methods, the organizational structure of social forums, the historical background, the organizing process and the use of IT infrastructure of the Karachi event. 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. The initial information was gathered using literature review, and open-ended email questionnaires were sent to the people involved in the organizing process. This information was further refined by reviewing of documents, websites of the event and telephonic follow-up interviews. In order to understand the communication activities, the contents of the emails were analyzed by joining email lists (Yahoo Groups). The interviews and observations at the

organizing meeting of European Social Forum in Berlin helped in establishing relationships between the regional and world social forums.

### **3 Organizational Structure**

WSF is a renowned event organized by social movement and other civil society networks worldwide. This event initiated as a result of a gathering of community organizers, trade unionists, young people, academics and activists in January 2001 at Porto Alegre, Brazil to rethink and recreate globalization for the advantage of poor and deprived people. Later this event turned into an annual meeting and now it is scheduled as a bi-annual event (WSF, 2008). The charter of WSF emphasizes that this forum is not a decision making body but an open space for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action instead (WSF Charter, 2001). The success of WSF has triggered a number of local, national and regional forums (Kavada, 2006). These forums are related with WSF in the context that they adhere to the charter of the WSF but the organization and management of these forums are independent from each other. The individuals and representatives of CSOs can participate at any level. There exists a weak relationship among participants, who are almost the same who work at smaller level (City, Country, Regional etc). So for every event these volunteers gather in the organizing process and present proposals about the initiatives and program (Juris, 2005). The organizing tasks are divided among the WSF-International Council (IC) and an organizing committee (Kavada, 2007). The organizing committee is responsible for the day to day organizations of event whereas IC is decision making body for WSF.

### **4 Organizing Process**

There were some Pakistani voluntary organizations who were participating in this event from start. So on 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2005 a provincial consultation in the Sindh province was carried out to analyze arrangements for the event. Similar meetings were carried out in other cities like Karachi, Hyderabad, Multan, Lahore, Rawalpindi, Peshawar and Quetta. On 18<sup>th</sup> October the first country-wide meeting of 86 representatives was held at Karachi to form a National Organizing Committee and different sub-committees. The organizing team consisted of member organizations of the Pakistan Social Forum like community voluntary organizations, labor organizations, boy scouts and girl guides, students, community workers and sports organizations. There was also an office team and a

coordination committee with members from all existing groups to take routine immediate actions. There were two joint planning meetings with the Bamako and Caracas chapter but further communication did not take place due to the delay in the Pakistani event. In October 2005 the country was marred by an earthquake and as a result local meetings were held in different cities of Pakistan to discuss delaying the event. After these local meetings a joint meeting of Pakistan Social Forum and the WSF National Organizing Committee on 22<sup>nd</sup> November decided to postpone the event for two months (Report, 2006).

An Asian meeting of the WSF was held on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2005 in Hong Kong. The representative of the Pakistani Organizing Committee briefed about the post earthquake situation and the preparation of the event. The financial difficulties were discussed and the Indian Organizing Committee assured to take this up with the WSF International Council and that a transfer of WSF Mumbai funds to Karachi will also be discussed. The Pakistani Organizing Committee requested other Asian countries to take more responsibilities including fundraising resulting in formation of Asian committee and a South Asian subcommittee. The Asian committee's responsibilities were defined as fundraising, decisions regarding plenaries in Karachi forum, guidance for program and finance committee, identification of speakers and formal approval of decisions of Pakistani organizing committee whereas the South Asian subcommittee would focus on logistical support, increased mobilization in their countries and participation and registration of events at the forum. It was also suggested to have frequent visits of members of the Indian Organizing Committee to Pakistan for help in finalizing arrangements. The meeting approved the 24<sup>th</sup> -29<sup>th</sup> march as the revised dates for the Karachi event (Report, 2006).

## **5 Execution**

The forum was held at the KMC Sports Complex, Karachi and it was attended by nearly 40,000 people. The event included a number of activities like conferences, seminars, workshops, demonstrations, processions and cultural events. More than 20, 000 delegates from 58 countries from South Asia, China, Middle East and Europe were present at the Karachi forum (Khaleej Times, 2006). The effective organization of such an event requires a sufficient amount of funding and the Pakistani Organizing Committee had a budget of only 250,000 US Dollars whereas the cost of organizing the WSF event in 2005 was 4 million U.S. dollars, the 2006 event at Caracas had an eight million dollars budget and the Bamako event had 2.5 million dollars (Kirk, 2006). The Karachi event suffered from serious problems in fund raising. There was a big deficit between anticipated and actual funds because many regional organizations were not able to meet their promises (Report, 2006).

The mobilization efforts play an important role in attracting large audience and volunteers for the organizing process. Nearly 1,700 volunteers cooperated with logistics and other groups to make the event a success. The volunteers were mostly students and members of labor, political and women organizations from all over Pakistan. There were 3 volunteers from Germany and Switzerland to show a symbolic international representation. In order to increase local and international participation, a coordinator was designated who maintained the lists of interested foreign participants to facilitate travel and visa arrangements. There were delays at governmental and local levels, several organizations had not done effective mobilization and coordination at their end to increase participation. The communication with the local NGOs and general public was mostly offline by arranging meetings and seminars at city levels and by providing supporting published material in form of posters and leaflets. The media can play a vital role in this respect but the coverage of the Indian and other regional media was not as positive, similar to 2004 WSF event in Mumbai. On the contrary, the local print and electronic media covered the event well, along with some foreign media resulting in the awareness of the event. In order to increase the media coverage before and after the event, a media center was established with 150 computers with email and fax facilities for journalists and for the use by delegates (Report, 2006). During the event there were minor administration problems like cancellation of sessions without information, and some venues were impossible to find due to lack of information about them (Chan, 2006).

## **6 IT support in the WSF Karachi event**

Once the event was scheduled, the WSF International Council established a website for this poly-centric event which was available in three languages: English, French and Spanish. This website was common for all the three poly-centric events. It was developed by a working group of the Methodology Commission of the International Council using the content management system drupal and mysql as the underlying database. The main objective of this website was to provide a mean for registration of activities for the poly-centric event. Any organization interested to carry out an activity (Workshops, Seminars, etc.) at any of the poly-centric venues needed to register this activity here. The website provided the functionality for registration<sup>1</sup> of an individual and after registration

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<sup>1</sup> The user could be a primary member or an ordinary member. The primary member was the person who is the official administrator of the organizational presentation on the website. The primary member could edit the organizational profile, edit and describe the activities of organizations at any of the three social forums, invite other members of the organization to join that organization' section (ordinary members) and he could join the theme discussion forum for the event. The website also provided the feature of changing the primary member of an organization.

one could create profile of one's organization and then later describe the details of the activity which the organization was going to organize for the WSF. The website also provided the opportunity to search and contact the resource persons of the organizations to get information about their planned activities. Furthermore, the web resource offered a database of all the activities planned for the event along with relevant information. The website also contained the web links of all the three events maintained by the organizing committees. In order to attract more people, the website was advertised in the WSF newsletter and was further replicated by social movements, NGOs, and groups in their own networks throughout the world.

There were a total of 3,089 activities registered online and among them 440 were for the Karachi event. The fields which were present for each activity are described in Table-1. The search facility was also available, based on any of the below mentioned fields. As many social movements do not have internet access, offline registration (fax, personal visit) was also possible. The exact number of activities registered offline could not be gathered.

Organization				Activity							
Name	Email	Prime Contact	Title	Location	Type	Scope	Terrain	Transversal Theme	Area1	Area2	Activity Outline

Table 1: Scheme of the list of Activities

There were a total of 6,177 organizations registered on the website but 11 of them had not filled out their name field leaving it empty. The organizations could be searched based on organizations' name, email, country and contact person. The schema of the organization list is described in Table 2.

Organisation Name	Primary Contact Person	E-mail to Prime Contact	WSF Participation	Members
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Table 2: Scheme of the organization List

The hosting Pakistan chapter of the WSF Karachi event was having online representation through a Yahoo group, as this was the free option available to coordinate with other members of civil organizations countrywide. This Yahoo group was working since June 9, 2005. Currently there are 166 group members in the group. The group traffic in this group is shown in Table 3. As the traffic indicates, it is a very low communication level in a vibrant country like Pakistan, where the civil society is quite active and nearly 60,000 registered and unregistered groups of NGOs exist (Sattar and Baig, 2001). As the table below shows, the average number of messages for 2005 was 52; in 2006 it exceeded to 60 and reduced to 41 in 2007.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2007	40	29	67	51	29	22	32	31	44	50	63	34
2006	62	26	74	77	59	78	87	56	42	61	38	58
2005						14	19	59	55	92	57	67

Table-3: Number of Messages received in the group since its existence

In order to have a platform for publishing additional information about the event, a website was established. The website provided information regarding program topics, logistics, accommodation, venues etc. The registration details of delegates were saved for future reference. As there were not any IT people in the organizing team, the work to establish the website and setting up network facilities at the event location were outsourced.

In order to successfully carry out an event of this size, communication with stakeholders plays an important role. The communication with donor agencies as well as the one amongst the members of the organizing committee was carried out by using emails and telephone calls. There was also close coordination with other social forum chapters, especially the Indian Social Forum on issues like selection of speakers etc. This communication among organizing members and others was also mostly based on emails and telephone calls followed up by personal meetings. The “Youth and Students” working group also used a Yahoo group to coordinate effectively within volunteers. The objective of this working group was to mobilize young people to contribute to the thematic agenda of the social forum. The group was founded on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2005 and has 330 members currently. The traffic statistics on this group are shown below in table 4.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2007	31	9	36	15	27	20	29	47	37	25	32	38
2006	110	71	89	53	46	53	46	21	30	31	19	50
2005							26	20	24	87	108	132

Table-4: Number of messages received in the group since its existence

## 7 Lessons Learned

The host chapter of the Pakistan Social Forum was not having any presence on the web other than a weak representation in a form of a Yahoo group. A strong online presence could have increased the participation of the new generation, as the intention was to include more youth in the process. The existence of a website of the Pakistan Social Forum could have been a major platform for attracting internet users and along with that the email lists and blogs could have been a major tool to generate debate on the event resulting in enhanced awareness and mobilization. One of the volunteer for IT activities at the social forum described that the lack of resources have hindered them. In our interviews one member of the Karachi organizing committee acknowledged that the Yahoo group was very helpful, since it helped to attract lot of volunteer to work at the event. In Pakistan the use of social networking sites like Facebook, Orkut etc. is getting increasingly popular (Kirplani, 2007) and this could have been used as a tool for the enhanced participation of the students’ community.

The mobilization for the event mainly took place through seminars and physical meetings at different cities. As these meetings were organized by local member organizations, the direct communication with general public was limited. One participant described that the presence of people who were not directly involved in the organizing process was very poor (Chan, 2006). The organizing committee members were aware of the importance of modern IT infrastructures in the organization of such an event, because they have been part of other events all over the world - but the shortage of technically experienced people hindered them to establish such kind of an infrastructure. As it has been observed, there was close cooperation between organizing members belonging to different organizations in the country and with members of the Indian Organizing Committee. Therefore, to keep each other updated it was decided in the December 2005 Asian meeting that all information would be sent on emails and that the website should be updated frequently - but there were serious problems in this regard, because there were not enough volunteers available who could update the website and there were no specialized mailing lists in place which could help effective communication. The organizers also faced problems in updating the website, because of missing IT competencies and expertise. This resulted in lot of overhead as the information was not available in time and extra queries kept on coming and caused delays in the coordination work. Additionally, the response to email requests from the organizing team members was inefficient and after sending email it was customary to make a follow-up telephone call, resulting in increase in expenditures and time delay. This absence of an effective communication framework also caused more regional and country-wide visits from the members of organizing teams resulting in an increase in expenses. In collaborative work the use of cooperation platforms, in which members can login and contribute, can enhance the productivity, resulting in higher efficiency of activities and smooth communication. The problems of miscommunication resulted in some organizational “hiccups”, e.g. one NGO consortium which participated in the Karachi event described that there was lack of coordination between virtual and real world activities: there was no information to the reception desk about which participants had paid online (PNAC, 2006). There were also problems like cancellation of sessions without information, and some venues were impossible to find due to lack of information (Chan, 2006). These types of problems could have been resolved easily by using electronic notice boards/beamers at designated slots displaying important notifications to reduce some organizational shortcomings.

## **8 Conclusion**

There was awareness in the organizing committee that the use of IT could support the organizing process, but the shortage of human and capital resources was a

significant limitation for these efforts. A limited amount of ICTs was used in form of email communication and a website. Furthermore, there was a lack of support for the appropriation of technology in CSOs. Our work provides an insight of the work practices of the WSF as one of the most important events for civil society worldwide. According to our findings, some appropriately and needs-oriented designed systems could improve the practice of CSOs and the people participation, especially with respect to the civil society activities in Pakistan. As limited resources and missing technology skills are major hindrances, open-source-artifacts and end user development could reduce the costs of IT adoption and enhance the usability and learnability of such systems. Thus, there is need for more IT literacy and participatory development efforts, so that this important sector of society can benefit from the advancements of technology. As the organizing process reveals there is extensive collaboration among civil society and government organizations and appropriate information and communication technologies can improve this communication. Secondly if the debates and discussions are stored and analyzed using data management techniques then this could provide an effective input for government policy making and its implementation.

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