ABSTRACT: Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) was initiated in May 2000 by several women organisations in Uganda to promote the use of ICTs among women as tools to share information and address issues collectively. Consultations were held with several women organisations, and there was clear need for:

- a list that would facilitate exchange of ideas and information between women organisations;
- a companion website that would profile women organisations and use the web to provide additional exposure to their activities;
- information and support on how to maximize the potential of ICTs within women organisations.

In response to the above, the WOUGNET mailing list and website were setup. By 2000 year-end, the WOUGNET mailing list had fifty subscribers including eighteen women organisations while the website profiled twenty-five women organisations and women-related projects. Currently the WOUGNET mailing list has 200 subscribers and over 40 women organisations are profiled on the WOUGNET website.

It should be noted that we define ICTs to include email, the web, radio, television and print media. However, our emphasis is directed towards email and the web, and how these technologies can be integrated with traditional means of information exchange and dissemination for maximum outreach.

It is widely recognised that women in Africa need increased access to ICTs in order to effectively address local problems of sustainable development and economic empowerment. In line with this, WOUGNET’s goal is to promote and support the use of ICTs to empower women and women’s organisations through access to information and to opportunities for exchange and empowerment. We believe that our participation at the WIS6 presents an opportunity to learn from and share with others with similar goals. The presentation by WOUGNET will:

- give a brief background on how WOUGNET came into being;
- describe our use of a website and mailing lists for information sharing and dissemination by women organisations in Uganda;

http://www.wougnet.org
present the challenges WOUGNET faces in administering our services and programs as well as the challenges our choice of ICTs pose for WOUGNET members; describe how the use of ICTs has enhanced WOUGNET and supported WOUGNET members.

BACKGROUND
WOUGNET was initiated in May 2000 by several women organisations in Uganda to promote the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) among women as tools to share information and address issues collectively. Consultations were held with several women organisations, and there was clear need for:

A list that would facilitate exchange of ideas and information between women organisations;

A companion website that would profile women organisations and use the web to provide additional exposure to their activities;

Information and support on how to maximize the potential of ICTs within women organisations.

In response to the above, the WOUGNET mailing list and website were set up, see <http://www.wougnet.org>. The WOUGNET website and mailing lists are hosted by Kabissa - Space for Change in Africa <http://www.kabissa.org>. By 2000 year-end, the WOUGNET mailing list had fifty subscribers including eighteen women organisations while the website profiled twenty-five women organisations and women-related projects.

WOUGNET WEBSITE AND MAILING LISTS

From its conception, WOUGNET was to facilitate information sharing and dissemination between women organisations in Uganda and beyond. WOUGNET’s primary mode for facilitating this information sharing and dissemination is via the WOUGNET website and the mailing list. Operating online certainly enables us achieve the goal of reaching a national and international audience. However, WOUGNET has got an activity that is not online based and this the World Space Satellite Radio programme (WSRP). WSRP was initiated in August 2002 to make the WorldSpace radio available to members with difficulties in accessing the Internet. The WorldSpace radios when connected to a computer help users to access web based information without having to use the usual method of accessing information from the Internet (e.g., dialup, wireless or cable connections).

Following are the WOUGNET Web-based and E-mail-based activities.

2.1 Email-based activities
Administer a mailing list as a place for women and women organisations to exchange and disseminate information. Information posted has included conference and workshops being conducted, requests for information on current developments in various fields gender, agriculture, technology, health, etc., as well as postings by potential volunteers for various activities. As of April 2003, there are 200 subscribers on the WOUGNET mailing list.
The monthly WOUGNET Update Newsletter that provides details on activities of women organisations in Uganda, upcoming conferences, workshops, training programmes, funding opportunities and tips on computer/internet usage. The newsletter is sent out to the WOUGNET mailing list, an additional 270 newsletter subscribers, and mailing lists with an ICT and/or gender focus. As of April 2003, the WOUGNET Update Newsletter has 300 subscribers.

In June 2002, WOUGNET hosted a 3-week email-based conference Information Access for Rural Womeni to facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences on enhancing access to information for rural women. A report of the online conference was presented during deliberations on Rural Women and Telecentres at the July 2002 Kampala Know How Conferenceii. The Know How Conference is an international conference of specialists in the collection and dissemination of information relevant to women.

In April 2003, WOUGNET hosted an online forum on An Information Society for Uganda to facilitate contributions to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) working documents and Uganda’s inputiii.

2.2 Web-based activities
The WOUGNET website profiles Ugandan women organisations and their activities. In addition, the website contains practical information and documentation on topics of interest to women organisations and the general public, and links to national and international projects.

The Web Design programme began in April 2001 in collaboration with InterConnection.org, to develop websites for WOUGNET members free of chargeiv.

BENEFOTS OF ICTs

The use of ICTs has enhanced WOUGNET in the following ways:

The growth of WOUGNET membership from 18 women organisation members by year-end 2000 to just over 40 currently. All members are profiled on the WOUGNET website, see <http://www.wougnet.org/wo_dir.html>, and can update these profiles simply by sending the new and/or revised information to WOUGNET staff via email.

The increase in the amount of material submitted by members to the WOUGNET mailing list or for inclusion on the WOUGNET website as well as the number of visitors and web links to the website. For example, for each month since October 2002, we have exceeded 4,000 unique visitors to the WOUGNET website. In addition, feedback from members reveals that they have received local and international contacts as a result of having their information available online.

In June 2002, WOUGNET hosted an online conference “Information Access for Rural Women”, see <http://www.wougnet.org/Events/iawr.html>. For many members that participated, this was their first online conference. In addition, to realising “how economic and effective” such a medium can be for sharing ideas locally and worldwide, participants considered this a good way
by which information sharing and networking by organisations and programs addressing information access for rural women can be achieved.

Following the WSIS PrepCom II in Geneva, two basic working documents were produced: a draft Declaration of Principles and a draft Plan of Action. Comments to the two working documents were submitted by May 31, 2003. To facilitate contribution to the documents, WOUGNET hosted an online forum ‘An Information Society of Uganda’ from April 14-30, 2003. The specific objectives of the online forum were to:

Identify the key principles that should underline an Information Society in Uganda
Identify specific actions that are priority in order to ensure equitable access by all within the Information Society
Identify the role of civil society in the development of ICTs and equitable information access in Uganda

Furthermore, as a member of the Uganda WSIS Taskforce, WOUGNET is able to make information readily available to members via the website, see <http://www.wougnet.org/WSIS/ug/ugandawsis.html>.

Also, WOUGNET currently administers a website and mailing lists for the WSIS Gender Caucus, see <http://www.wougnet.org/WSIS/wsisgc.html>.

In addition, some of the WOUGNET members have been supported as a result of using ICTs. For example;

Currently, five members including SOS Sudan Association (SOSSA), National Association of Women Organisations in Uganda (NAWOU), Hope After Rape (HAR), Association of Uganda Women Medical Doctors (AUWMD), and Uganda Media Women Association (UMWA) have had websites donated under the Web Design program. The Web Design program is a partnership of WOUGNET and InterConnection.org to enable members create their own presence on the web by donating websites to them, see <http: www.wougnet.org/Support/webdesign.html>. The websites are developed by InterConnection volunteers and the only responsibility for WOUGNET members is to provide appropriate text and graphics for the websites. WOUGNET provides local volunteers to assist members put together the information packages used to build their websites.

Regarding the WorldSpace Satellite Radio Programme (WSRP), ALFA Ministries also a WOUGNET member, was the first recipient of the service. The beneficiaries tune into the African Learning Channel (ALC), which broadcasts primarily educational material. ALFA is particularly interested in health, education, development issues and news items from across the continent. After realising the full benefit of the service, they acquired their own equipment.
CHALLENGES FACED IN THE APPLICATION OF ICTs
Other than benefiting from the use of ICTs, WOUGNET and its members are faced with a number of challenges and these are as follows.

4. 1 WOUGNET Challenges

WOUGNET does experience major challenges in the administering of our services and programmes, including:

Limited outreach because we currently operate primarily online. Most of our members (or their representatives) are based in Kampala where Internet access is more readily available.

Access to and availability of relevant information (content) for members’ development needs. According to Our side of the divide: African perspective on ICTs (2003), websites, online tools and software are dominated by Latin script languages which limits diversity of content, the development of local content in non-Latin languages, and intercultural exchange and collaboration.

Creating awareness about the potential of ICTs as viable tools for information exchange and dissemination that produces results.

The need to provide training and hands-on demos on the usage and application of ICTs.

The need by members to have more face-to-face collaboration in addition to the online networking.

4.2 Challenges faced by WOUGNET members

In January participants at a WOUGNET meeting recognised the following challenges in the application of ICTs and being WOUGNET members;

Language is a constraint to information access especially to the non-literate. This is due to the fact that all of WOUGNET information is in English and not in local languages. Given the high rates of illiteracy, this information is not fully utilised by the members.

Lack of access to ICT equipment and services. A number of women organisations lack equipment to enable them access information. Typically, organisations will have a single computer, which is stationed on the Secretary’s desk who downloads the information. This affects timely response to issues and ends up leaving a number of women missing out on opportunities.

Lack of ICT skills. WOUGNET information is available through the new ICTs like the Internet as opposed to traditional ICTs such as radio. However, this tends to exclude those that lack the skills to use computers.

Technophobia especially among women and girls.
Gender roles hinder effective participation. In some communities, men do not give women a chance to visit telecentres because they think that women’s roles are only in the homes. It is also stated in Our side of the divide: African perspectives on ICTs (2003), that gender discrimination excludes the majority of women from benefiting from the opportunities that ICTs offer as a tool and catalyst for development and all human enterprise.

Information overload and inadequate content. Apart from a website, WOUGNET runs various mailing lists hence leading to large amounts of information. At times the information given may not be relevant to the needs of a particular group of women.

CONCLUSION

WOUGNET is committed to sharing experiences and lessons learned with partners through networking and empowerment. We thus welcome the opportunity presented by this conference in addressing the gender perspective regarding the different dimensions of information sharing. We also express our appreciation to IRC International Water and Sanitation Institute for hosting the conference.

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