

Organising via mobile phones

One of the most popular uses of mobile phones in South Africa is for text messaging – and innovative social activists use the new tool for social mobilisation. **Sarah Chiumbu** writes about a visit to a social justice organisation in the Western Cape to see how it uses the new organising tool.

During a field visit to Newfields Village, an affiliate of the militant Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign in April 2010, I met the township coordinator busy organising a protest action taking place the following day.

While sending text messages to alert the local community and members about the protest, he told me: 'The coordinators of each community anti-eviction campaign inform each other of the public meeting or protests via mobile text messages, then each coordinator informs their community members through word of mouth, mainly through door-to-door visits.'

Across town in Delft Symphony Way Temporal Location Area, another cheerful coordinator highlights the importance of mobile phones for mobilisation. But says the cost is sometimes a barrier to accessing services.

In remote Blikkiesdorp or Tin Town as it is known by residents due to the shiny corrugated iron dwellings, mobile phone towers are not available. So making a call is not easy. Money for airtime is not always there for the poor residents.

However, the secretary of the Campaign, who lives in Silvertown, another affiliate, never has her

mobile phone out of reach. It keeps her in touch with community leaders and she also sends story updates to the organisation's volunteer website editor.

The Anti-Eviction Campaign is run by a social justice movement fighting for basic rights. It is using mobile phones for mobilisation together with traditional forms of activism such as door-to-door campaigns.

Social movement groups including the Anti-Eviction Campaign, the Anti-Privatisation Campaign, the Abahlali base Mjondolo (Shack Dwellers Association) and the Landless Peoples' Movement were established in the early 2000s to respond to the neo-liberal economic policies of the African National Congress (ANC). Although the Campaign has a website (www.aec.org.za), a Facebook page and a Twitter account, organisers are increasingly using mobile phones for mass coordination.

MOBILE PHONES MOBILISE

Since the 1990s, global social movements, which inspired the South African groups, have used the Internet and mobile phones to share information, organise and coordinate direct action. In

early 2011, the world witnessed the organising potential of mobile phones and social networking technologies in the 'revolutions' in North Africa and the Middle East.

The Philippines is where mobile phones were first used for mass mobilisation. Filipino citizens toppled President Estrada in 2000 through public demonstrations using mass text messages. From this leading scholar Howard Rheingold coined the term 'smart mobs' to describe a form of technological swarming that spreads like a virus.

Mobile phones have developed explosively across sub-Saharan Africa, with South Africa, at 87% having one of the highest penetration rates. In the last five years, there has been a broad adoption of mobile phones by social movements in Africa.

Social justice movements in South Africa are increasingly using the Internet and mobile phones to mobilise, create networks and lobby for social justice, despite their origins among poor communities. Mobile phones have many uses that allow for organisational efficiency and Internet access.

Mobile phones create connections between and among social networks that are known as

social capital. These networks are useful for activists and victims of evictions.

ORGANISATIONAL EFFICIENCY

One key contribution made by the mobile phone in the Campaign has been the lowering of costs and barriers to organising collective action. The movement has no 'central' office and coordinates 15 affiliate community organisations.

Mobile phones have introduced flexibility, rapid mobilisation and closer contacts among the affiliates. For instance, texting has become an important practice used by leaders to reach their dispersed members, mobilise for action or provide them with important information.

The secretary of the Anti-Eviction Campaign noted how mobile phones had changed how they worked: 'Nowadays we can SMS and call each other more frequently and also it assists in many dilemmas such as mobility. The way Cape Town is built, it's very broad, it takes a lot of roads to get to one place and taking taxis sometimes is very difficult because you have to travel from A to B to C so with mobile phones we can frequently help each other.'

SMS texting among community leaders and members has thus resulted in more efficient forms of organisation and community mobilisation against evictions and electricity cut-offs.

ACCESSING THE WEB

To a limited extent, Campaign community leaders are also using the mobile phone to access the web. Some members with smart mobile phones also send comments to the website and access the Campaign's Facebook and Twitter pages. One of the affiliates of the Campaign, the Mandela Park Backyarders, is also on Facebook and Twitter.

According to a 2009 survey on mobile phone use among poor

communities in Phillipi and Khayelitsha in Cape Town by Tino Kreutzer, Jonathan Donner and ShikohGitau a relatively large number of people accessed the Internet through their mobile phones.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Mobile phones, by establishing communicative connections between members in different townships, are creating different forms of communication and support. For instance, when an eviction is taking place an SMS is sent to alert family members or neighbours. Sometimes the message is also sent to a known community leader or posted to a website through mobile phones.

This is demonstrated by the following message: 'Hi I am in desperate need of help. I am kicked out of my granny home because she passed away, the lawyers sold the house. Me and my wife have no place to go. Can someone help us please? We stay in Ravensmead.'

Once a message calling for help reaches a community leader, some form of action is urgently taken. Before the use of mobile phones became widespread, sending this kind of information was difficult.

USING MOBILES CREATIVELY

Although South Africa has a very high mobile phone penetration, costs of maintenance and access remain high. Many people cannot afford to buy airtime frequently. Despite access obstacles, people have found creative ways of using mobile phones, assisted by innovative pricing models such as 'pay-as-you-go' and 'please call me'.

'Please call me' allows a user to send a free SMS to another phone user asking them to call. The recipient simply clicks on the 'please call me' message to call back the sender.

The Campaign members use 'please call me' to get in touch with community leaders, who in most cases have access to airtime and are in a position to call back. In turn the leadership also uses a combination of SMS and 'please call me' to coordinate within community structures and mobilise members for protest action.

CONCLUSION

The traditional tools such as pamphlets, face-to-face communication and community meetings, and new media technologies create a powerful mass mobilisation force. Information communication technologies such as mobile phones complement traditional methods of organising protests and mobilisation in social and labour movements.

The use of the mobile phone facilitates organisational efficiency and makes long distance communication easier in the Campaign and other social movements. But its potential for effective mobilisation has not been fully realised.

People in South Africa do not use mobile phones for tactical purposes. The mobile phone can be used for swarming and sending bulk SMS for protest action to municipal offices. Street protests can be captured on video and the messages sent to a wider audience.

However, it is important to exercise caution by not ignoring other more established forms of mass mobilisation and protest. Some writers on the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011 have ignored offline tactics. Groups and interpersonal networks in labour and social movements in South Africa are complex and cannot be replaced by new media technologies. ¹⁸

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