



Sarah Woods/iAfrica Photos

ICTs for Human Rights in Southern Africa

By Susan Bazilli

There have been many new developments in the area of information and communication technologies for Africa. This review points to some of the initiatives currently underway in Southern Africa in an effort to broadly disseminate the resources that are available so that NGOs working on all areas of human rights can make use of them.

The Martus tool

Martus means “witness” in Greek. It was developed by Benetech, a non-profit venture that provides social benefits by harnessing the power of technology. Benetech focuses the efforts of technology and technologists to solve important problems facing society. Benetech explores the application of technology to social needs in the areas of disability, bridging the digital divide, education, literacy, human rights, employment of the disadvantaged, and the prevention of suffering. Martus is but one of the Benetech family of social purpose products – others include Bookshare.org, the Landmine Detector, and making information technology accessible to people with disabilities.

Benetech has developed the Martus Human Rights Bulletin System, a free software technology tool designed to assist human rights organisations in collecting, safeguarding, organising and disseminating information about human rights abuses. It enables grassroots NGOs to securely catalogue and store their records on off-site servers with easy-to-use software, preserving crucial evidence for research, investigation and prosecutions.

The tool was designed in close consultation with social justice experts around the world. To date it has

been primarily used to document atrocities and collect secure evidence in armed conflict situations, genocide, and by Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. It has also been adapted by activists in NGOs working on documenting a range of human rights violations.

The tool has been helping non-technical users in the social justice sector to capture, backup and protect their most valuable asset: specific information about abuses and violations.

Martus provides users with control over the decision of which information is kept securely (cryptographically) and which information is publicly and widely disseminated. Once data is stored in Martus locally or in off-site servers, it is much less likely to be lost, preserving crucial evidence for research, investigation, and prosecutions. With violation information preserved and accessible, large-scale patterns of abuse or single incidents can be easily mapped. Multiple testimonies can be gathered. Prosecutions can be reinforced by verified data from a trusted source.

The Martus Human Rights Bulletin System addresses four critical requirements for software, protecting the records of grassroots human rights groups. Martus is:

- *Usable*: The software is as easy to use as e-mail, can run on an inexpensive computer, and does not require a constant connection to the Internet.
- *Secure*: Records are encrypted on a user’s computer hard drive, stored securely at a remote site, backed up in an encrypted format on that server and multiple other servers, and protected by a unique password.

- *Searchable*: Specific violations and identifying details can be searched by groups or by outside researchers granted access to the records.
- *Transparent*: The software is Open Source – any group can examine the code and make an informed decision about using Martus software.

The Martus System includes the Martus Software for entering information or testimonies for safekeeping and organisation, Martus Server Software to backup data offsite and the Martus Search Engine, a Web portal where the general public can read published Martus bulletins that have been backed up to a Martus server.

In its first year, users from more than 50 countries have downloaded Martus, and it has been deployed, adopted and used regularly by NGOs in over a dozen countries in Africa, Central Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. The software and related documentation are available for Windows/ Mac/ Linux and in addition to in-program help, Martus training sessions are conducted worldwide throughout the year by Martus staff and partners. Martus is available in several languages including English, French, Spanish, Thai, Arabic, Russian, and is constantly being translated and updated.

Martus Use in Southern Africa

A survey was recently undertaken to assess the use of Martus in Southern Africa by human rights organisations, particularly women's NGOs working on issues of violence against women (VAW) in all of its forms. The initial purpose of the survey was to work with women's NGOs to adapt Martus to make it more user-friendly for their collection of data on VAW issues such as the incidence and specifics of domestic violence, cases of trafficking of women and children, non-implementation of protection orders, cases and types of sexualised violence, etc.

The findings indicate, not surprisingly, that the issue is not the use of software per se, but the whole issue of capacity building in general. One of the key findings is that many organisations lack the capacity to even collect data and document human rights violations against women because the NGOs and CBOs themselves are so under-resourced. Problems range from the lack of funding to non-existence of computers, offices or Internet access; not enough trained staff; and no or little sustainability. Struggling for funding to even keep the doors open to provide critical services for women is reported

over and over again. Security of staff, premises and equipment is considered more vital than attending to security of data.

Martus therefore is an under-utilised resource. It is free, accessible, secure, easy to use, and could be used much more widely in Southern Africa. But it needs to be used with regional training that includes ongoing capacity building so that the technology assists in the documentation of abuse and violations, where advocates can make use of the information in laying complaints, informing the international community of atrocities such as those being carried out in Zimbabwe and Swaziland, for example.

Capacity Building for Southern African NGOs

It is obvious that the women's human rights sector needs to be sustainable before detailed documentation can be undertaken. Regional training for NGO development is critical before issues of software (Open Source or other), hardware, connectivity, infrastructure, and technology can be included in training and ongoing support.

This review recommends that collaborative partnerships that are already in existence in Southern Africa be further resourced to provide ongoing support and networking. One-off workshops will not meet the need. Donors should consider making long-term social investment in NGO development, using a model of social entrepreneurship. Strengthened commitment from the private sector for resources, funding and training needs to take place in all communities across Southern Africa. Bodies such as Open Society Institute (OSI) can take a leadership role in creating collaborative partnerships to assist organisations to turn policy into action. ■

Susan Bazilli is a Canadian international human rights lawyer who has worked for over 20 years in 30 countries on women's human rights issues – particularly violence against women, women's access to ICTs, NGO capacity building, and social entrepreneurship. She is the Co-Director of the International Women's Rights Project, www.iwrp.org, and the editor of Putting Women on the Agenda: Women, Law and Constitutions in Southern Africa. She is currently based in Johannesburg and can be reached at sbazilli@look.ca.

Some Useful contacts

www.benetech.org	www.martus.org
www.womensnet.co.za	www.apcafricanwomen.org
www.genderit.org	http://avoit.uwc.ac.za
www.itrainonline.org	www.ungana-afrika.org