

**Conrad Jardine (Director, Inkanyezi GuideStar) speaks with us
about the development of the South African GuideStar**

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GSI: What are some of the unique features about the civil society sector in South Africa?

CJ: I would not say we are unique in most respects. Each country has its own unique character, that is, essentially social construction of human interaction to sustain life. We have a variety of civil society organisations, traditional and locally based ones, sports clubs, religious, trade unions, unconstituted social clubs and anything where people gather to do things that people do best. They are all bonded by class and social stratum. Then you get the charity oriented organisations.

We see charity different in South Africa from the ones you may find in the UK and elsewhere. These are the ones that are full of compassion, taking care of homeless people, street kids and others that are socially excluded, by making sure every weekend food is delivered to local soup kitchens in impoverished areas, to unemployed people, etc. These and other traditional forms of social organisations work tirelessly to keep societies from unravelling around the edges. All these organisations try to deal with the type of social ills (and health) that our society is struggling with.

Then we have other categories of organisations that sort of operate within the political sphere (not political parties), around advocacy and trying to deal with the issues of change and transformation. They will generally be seen as sort of Non Governmental Organisations. We also have both regional and national issue driven civil society organisations.

You always find people trying to change things in their immediate environment and working on issues around which they have a common cause. The larger ones deal with public policy issues, policy improvement and policy change.

I am not too sure if that makes South Africa unique, because you find it all over the world but in a broad brush the uniqueness is around engagement with the public policy, social and economic issues ... but then again you find that also all over the world. Tenacity is a strong characteristic of CSOs in South Africa, even with the current transformation that our country is going through. They are not excluded from difficulties and changes. The issue of funding is one classic example. I would say funding although not a problem is a huge challenge. It is quite a serious challenge that impacts on the ability of CSOs to do the work they are supposed to do. It becomes quite a struggle to get things done but it does not stop people from working and trying.

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GSI: In what ways do you anticipate iGuideStar will help with the development of civil society in South Africa?

CJ: Locally GS would overnight provide public profiles of thousands organisations that we don't even know exist. It will also create a greater public understanding of "who's who in the zoo" and what everybody is busy with. As it is, "*we don't know who's is the zoo*". SANGOCO is inundated with requests for a database of members of CSOs. At this stage we cannot give them the data. Even government departments, and other public organisations and private institutions want this information. So immediately, all of the dark clouds around civil society and what its up to, will be cleared.

"...an understanding of who's who in the zoo..."

From my own personal view I sometimes get the impression that the work of the sector is not really appreciated. I like to use the analogy that it is only when the lights are switched off that you start appreciating electricity. At least there are backups with electricity, but with civil society, we don't want to know what will happen when it switches off. So the work that we are doing and going public with it, will really really really help to clarify the critical role of civil society in sustaining a healthy and humane society.

GSI: What has been the general reaction to Inkanyezi GuideStar among those working within the CSO sector in South Africa?

CJ: I would say quite positive, not only in that sector but in other sectors also. However, like any good thing, there is a too good to believe type of response, we will believe it when we see it. That is the impression I get. Unless it is tangible today people don't really appreciate the worth of something that is too good to believe. But in the brief period I have been here, and considering the types of requests I have received, I have started to realise there is a dire need, because they don't know where to go to search for organisations and who's doing what. The most positive response was from SANGOCO and the Archimedes Foundation, and some smaller organisation that I have had direct contact with.

GSI: Actually that leads into the next question ... Who are the main partners in this initiative?

CJ: We are fortunate that we have attracted wonderful people who embraced the idea of IGS. The founding partners are SANGOCO CORN Gauteng and the Round Up Foundation (previously The Archimedes Foundation). They are represented by Hassen Lorgat, Buhle Myeza and Jeanne Rose respectively.

We are also fortunate that we have attracted a leading IT company CONSOLOGY as our technology partner. They are supporting us quite generously in terms of their time and IT resources.

GSI: How will Inkanyezi GuideStar work?

CJ: There are 2 departments in South Africa that accept registration for NPOs. We will start with the organisations that are registered as NPOs with the Department of Social Development and the ones registered as a Section 21 not for profit companies that registers with the Department of Trade and Industry. That will be the primary source of information. But as we go along we have realised that there is a much wider pool of non registered but quite strongly formed social organisations. We are hoping that we will be able to pick them up as soon as possible, from say the date of going public. The tendency is for most organisations to register as a non profit organisation so that will be the main source and as we go along we will try our best to accommodate the other forms of CSOs. Maybe as a temporary arrangement we will probably assign some unique number to them, until they feel they want to become formalised for example.

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One of the main things we will have to do is go out on contact visits to networks of organisations to convince them about the value and the opportunities that it (IGS) can bring to them. The strength of Inkanyezi GuideStar will only be as strong as the smallest organisation participating in it. They will be logging in, updating the information, casting their information into this big pool and hoping somebody will bite or come in and support them, giving resource support or volunteer support or whatever to give hope. And in that way we are unlocking much more potential in terms of support to the sector.

The public will have an interest in the information for research purposes or any other purposes that will advance the work of the sector. So the first 3 years will literally have to be dedicated towards cleaning the dirty linen - I mean cleaning up the data.

GSI: How do you intend to overcome the digital divide and encourage greater participation with iGuideStar among all civil society groups?

CJ: The small CSOs will be critical, because they are doing a good job out there and they are not asking for anything. South Africa has very good communications infrastructure and systems and on the other side of the coin, we also have serious developing challenges in terms of access and poverty. I would also say that there are serious government and private sector initiatives trying to straddle the digital divide between the first and third world”.

" IGS will also give practical benefits and opportunities for local communities to participate in the digital age."

I think it will be a combination of physical contact with organisations at the local level that are excluded from the technology benefits. We will have to access most of them physically, but by doing that it will create

a greater awareness amongst them about the immediate benefit for them to participate. For most, I think IGS will also give practical benefits and opportunities for local communities to participate in the digital age.

My hypothesis is that that would put pressure on, for example local municipalities, to create access for local organisations to have access to the internet to populate their records. Local authorities want to be seen as working with local communities and this will encourage them to collaborate.

Then of course there are other government initiatives around setting up information kiosks in post offices to try and explain all sorts of government information. I think through the IGS initiative, organisations will then demand information about other organisations using the GuideStar platform.

The other thing also is convergence technology a new term I picked up in talking with CONSOLOGY. At some point we should be able to update via text messages, fax etc. It is just a question of how we would pay for that. But I think once we prove our worth we will be able to leverage that and get the bigger IT companies to sponsor us on. Then there are your archaic forms of traditional texting and phoning.

So yes a divide is there and real, and I think that it will not be a difficult to cross that bridge. So if we can get local organisations to become aware they could start putting pressure on their local authorities ... "please give us access we want to update our organisational information and share with the world the good work we are doing". So it's there but in South Africa I can say it is not an insurmountable mountain to climb. We have climbed many mountains already.

GSI: Mobile phones are important for communications in Africa. Do you see a role for it in the development of iGuideStar? You have partly answered this question, but is there anything else you would like to add.

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CJ: Well I just read in the newspaper this morning, that our market penetration is over 76% of the mobile phone market compared to 20-30% in Nigeria. But Nigeria will probably take over the market - they have one of the fastest growing mobile phone markets in Africa. So yes depending on the non-stop rate of technology growth even the smallest and resource poor organisation will be able to have access. There is a lot happening here in terms of connectivity etc., which, as it unfolds we will be able to piggy back on and make it work for Inkanyezi GuideStar, and the benefit of organisations.

GSI: Can you envision this type of information system being pursued in other African countries?

CJ: Absolutely. Of course implementation will probably be different and take on a different form depending on the state of technology in another African country, but I don't see why not, even if it is low level technology, a fixed line or whatever, I still don't see why something like this cannot be implemented. You can actually develop quite innovative approaches to get a system like GuideStar running.

For instance we don't want the public to think that Inkanyezi GuideStar is an IT system or organisation. We are just using IT as an enabler. This innovative approach is also linked around the digital divide issue.

We need to literally get the interest of organisations within a municipal area, or at the local government level, get them together and organise something like an annual accountability weeks, where all organisations within a particular municipality or local government area will come together and share information of the work they are doing.

Inkanyezi could collaborate and print all the names of the organisations listed from that municipality, exhibiting that there, and accept updates physically on the day. This will create what I will call social connectivity amongst organisations at that local level. You'll be amazed how disconnected and at times disengaged they are. They will be able to see themselves on a hard copy... what it looks like or what it could look like on the internet, thus creating interest and curiosity amongst organisations to seek access to the internet. It will be through initiatives like this that magic will be created.

It is also going to depend on the kind of activism that can be generated around this. I think we can do that even if we, in collaboration with other civil society organisation go out and try to create that kind of activism around visibility, accountability and transparency. So yes although it is IT driven the deployment of it is not necessarily dependent on IT, and yes, it can be implemented in other African countries where technology is not as high in the rest of the developed world, or some developing countries.

GSI: What do you see in Inkanyezi GuideStar's future? What are the main challenges and opportunities?

CJ: Well our main challenge will definitely be to get the necessary resources in place to operationalise the initiative. That is quite a challenge here and of course resources will be funding, but we are looking at ways of trying dealing with that.

The opportunities for Inkanyezi GuideStar are that it will help create a much stronger visibility around the sector and a better understanding of the constitution of the sector. For instance, the contribution the sector makes to other spheres of society like the market, political democracy and stability, the economy and of course, human sanctity. Just to know those basic facts about who is out there, who is doing what, who's in the zoo will enable all sorts of players in the sector and outside of the sector to make better decisions around the distribution of resources and support. It will tell us actually quite a lot about the status of social capital and cohesion in our society.

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So opportunities are basically enormous especially in terms of the practical influence that it will have on public policy, private sector initiatives and social connectivity.

GSI: What advice would you give to those interested in developing similar information systems in their country for CSOs?

"the one piece of advice I would give is to go for it..."

CJ: It will depend from country to country. It will depend on the enthusiasm that people in the country have. But the one piece of advice I would give is to "go for it". Keep the door open and open it wider. It will do so much more for the sector as a whole. It will really open up the system and strengthen the credibility and integrity of the sector. There is a lot of scepticism of the sector due to the lack of understanding, so this will help overcome attitudes, perceptions and barriers for the sector to operate at its most optimum level.

I sometimes wonder in fear ... what will happen if civil society is liquidated or close doors the way doors are being shut on it?