

Information & Communications Systems Strategy: A Look at the Information Strategy of The United Nations in Kenya

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Abstract

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are a key feature in many developing nations, among which Kenya falls. This paper will examine how the United Nations as an example of an NGO - through its sub agencies like the World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) among others - uses Information Systems in order to carry out its charter within Kenya.

At present there are over 60 offices of UN Funds, Programmes and Agencies in or operating from Kenya [3]. Total number of UN staff working in Kenya is close to 4600. In addition some common services (e.g. Kenya Security Coordination) are provided to Bretton Woods Institutions (IMF, World Bank) and associated international organizations e.g. IOM, ICC etc ...

UN assistance to Kenya is realized on the basis of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) [6] which emphasizes the principles of UN Delivering as One (DaO), aimed at ensuring Government ownership, demonstrated through UNDAFs full alignment to Government priorities and planning cycles, as well as internal coherence among UN agencies and programmes operating in Kenya.

The UNDAF narrative includes five recommended sections: Introduction and Country Context, UNDAF Results, Resource Estimates, Implementation Arrangements, and Monitoring and Evaluation as well as a Results and Resources Annex ¹.

On 16 December 1963, Kenya became a member of the United Nations [8]. With this membership, Kenya and the UN had to work together in co-operation. Indeed, the United Nations had to come up with a strategy in order to build up its presence in the country. Part of that strategy needed to be a communications strategy that makes use of Information Technology in order to communicate its cause.

¹Inclusion of a section on Initiatives outside UNDAF was considered but it was UNCTs agreement that all initiatives would fall within the utilized framework [6].

Recently, the United Nations has taken advantage of IT. However, even though many positive efforts have begun, much more remains to be done. Just as business conditions keep changing rapidly, the UN also needs to adopt an effectively IT strategy to suit its needs and also be in line with its vision and mission statement.

The research was carried out with literature found in published United Nations journals, official communiqués academic journals and online search engines.

Even though the UN has various semi-autonomous agencies, they all eventually align under One UN to provide governance and guidance. It is necessary that UN in Kenya take all the necessary measures to align its IT strategy with the global UN strategy.

After a review of target audiences by individual UN agencies, the following categories have been identified as most important to the majority of the agencies: [6]

- Government and its ministries/agencies
- Parliament
- Mass media
- Civil society organizations
- Donor community
- Academia, research institutions
- Youth organizations and networks
- Community based organizations
- Private sector (an emerging partner)

Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) generally drive the development of developing economies especially in their rural areas. As in many sectors of the modern economy, the NGOs are turning to IT for solutions for their systems to run effectively. Within the UN, this is also applicable. Most manual operations have been eliminated and many operations now handled by a kind of IT system or another.

The United Nations, however, has embraced ICT at rate slower than that of other similar establishments. The UN's technology structure is very fragmented across the Secretariat and in all duty stations and field missions. It does not comply with technical standards; is not properly governed; and in, many cases, is not secure, resilient or robust. [2]

The demographics and diversity of the UN also makes the embracing of Information Strategies a slow process especially because of the reliance on outsourcing and a need to control an increasingly complex environment. The aging workforce also experiences a big need on training in order for them to remain relevant, competent and efficient. However, there is a need for ICT to be better configured for it to be able to support the UN mandate and charter.

IT Strategy: Then, Now and The Future

Information Systems (IS) strategy is a comprehensive plan that information technology management professionals use to guide their organizations. Like any other strategy, this strategy is all about a road plan:

1. Where are we now
2. Where do we want to go?
3. How will we get there?

In the past, IT managers had inadequate knowledge of the business strategies and business managers also has very little understanding of the potential IT had. Most IT plans were technical and reactive rather than proactive and strategic.

In the course of the last decade, a changing world has forced the United nations to *Do More With Less* [6]. This has made IT to be the go-to strategy in order to do more with less. Having much of the travel costs reduced, for example, has made video conferencing the defacto meeting method for many conferences.

Because the UN charter was developed before the Information Age really picked up, many of the processes were designed to be manual with faxes flying all over the place. However, Information and Communication Technology has enabled the automation of many processes, controls, and information production using computers, telecommunications and software.

Recently, the United Nations Secretariat introduced an enterprise resource planning system called Umoja [2]. This technology has enabled self-service facilities that eliminates much manual paper-pushing.

This development has enabled the UN to provide a much more efficient and secure services that can be accessed wherever one may be, through the use of the Internet.

The UN holds sensitive diplomatic information. This information has to be strategically kept in order that any unauthorized access is unthinkable. Cyber security has become a critical issue.

Alignment of IT with the UN mandate

When IT serves the main business need, then IT makes sense and is said to be aligned with the business. ICT must be better configured to support the work of the UN.

Some of the business objectives of the United nations include development programmes, refugee support, peacekeeping missions, internal HR,

finance and procurement. Sometimes, a compromise needs to be made in order for such an alignment to occur.

The UN office in Nairobi has relied on outsourcing because the expertise it needed was not available within the internal workforce. However, much of the workforce has learned the necessary skills and indeed newer blood has been injected from the market. This has made outsourcing to be a secondary workforce and not primary. The addition of skills such as internal applications development and maintenance has enabled IT to understand the business more, thereby helping IT align with business.

Aligning IT and business strategies is a complex process that requires all stakeholders' input. In the UN in particular, it involves the various sub agencies of the UN all aligning to fulfilling the mandate of the entire UN. The organization structure and accountability and strategy formation processes revolve intra-agency and inter-agency participation worldwide.

Based on the nature of the work of the UN, there is a very strong need of good communication in addition to the good set of IT and business skills plus good communication. Indeed, technology and innovation is everyday changing the various ways in which business objectives are met.

In order to make sure that the communication strategy was viable, the members of the UN made a plan to make use of a set of 'building blocks' that constituted the following theme areas:

- External Communication: Newsletters, Advocacy, Media (including social Media) Events and Visibility,
- Internal Communication: UN intranet, UN Induction Package and Recognition and Awards Programme.
- Emergency Communication: Guiding principles and standard operating procedures (SOPs)

Success Factors in Developing an IT Strategy

In order to develop an efficient and effective IT strategy, there are a few factors that need to be considered by the UN in Kenya:

Revisiting The UN Business Model

The UN does not work in isolation. It collaborates closely with Government and civil society partners. Consequently, the communications strategy emphasizes on the need for cultivating existing partnerships and collaborations as well as encouraging formation of new partnerships.

These collaborative relationships and strategic partnerships aim to help the UN to maximize their record in addressing various development and human rights related issues. The relationships also provide a great opportunity to promote a participatory approach to planning, development, implementation and monitoring of the UNs technical assistance programmes, thus making them more sustainable. Strategic partnerships will also help minimise duplication of efforts.

The business model describes how different parts of the business fit. Initially, all employees need to have their focus on the value the UN is intent in creating. Only then will it be easier to develop strategies on how to deliver value.

Indeed, it is imperative that both IT employees and business employees understand in detail how the United nations as a whole works. In many aspects, most employees see IT as a necessary evil instead of realising how it is an enabler of business. The business managers need to understand IT while at the same time, IT needs to understand the business. Many a time, Information Technology has been regarded as a utility, separate from the substantive business even though the two are very joined at the hip.

Adoption of Strategic Themes

For a long time, separate IT strategy used to work for individual separate UN entities. With time, however, large projects have come up within the UN that separate entities have to join hands.

Other issues affect everyone in a similar way, such that it only makes sense that joint effort is made in developing centralized IT systems. A good example is a security alert system that uses SMS based messages to relay a variety of information. Such a system indeed needs to have a common approach within all parties involved.

Support from Senior Management

The bureaucratic nature of the UN makes it such that progress is only made when decisions are made on a top-down approach. Therefore, it means that the executive management are in the fore-front of IT decision making. The UN General assembly meets from time to time in order to review all the elements of the strategy.

It is important that the people with the necessary expertise to be involved in order to develop the IT strategy. This may includes the business managers, heads of the various agencies and other key stakeholders.

Balancing IT and Business Costs

There are many different ways that the UN can make use of technology in order to improve business while creating value.

There is a need to properly allocate budget for IT. Many a times, IT budget has been a matter of left-over budget from other departments. Consequently, there is a need for analyzing and finding the most cost-effective way of providing IT services to their organizations. Part of this method can be outsourcing of non-critical IT services such as printing, IT support

or Internet services.

Focusing on the UN Charter

Every department within the United Nations plays a role in delivering the UN mandate.

Challenges

The UN General Assembly is making efforts in order to ensure that both IT and business strategies are aligned. However there is the reality that the world is changing and that the UN has to survive on dwindling resources.

The semi-autonomous states of the various sub agencies within the UN also makes developing a general acceptable strategy difficult.

Conclusion

One of the big successes of the communication strategies of the United Nations system in Kenya is the presence of the headquarters of a major agency here - the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). This has ensured that various other agencies have a "big brother" who does the strategies for them to replicate.

Further to that, the other smaller UN offices rely not only on the infrastructure of UNEP, but also the framework that it has built regarding external and internal communication channels.

Because of the very nature of the UN, some functions overlap among the various agencies and this may cause confusion especially if the strategies also overlap. An example is that the United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, strategizes on using the government mechanisms in order to foster development, whereas United Nations World Food Pro-

gramme involves itself with food distribution. UNDP is teaching how to fish while at the same time WFP is giving fish.

The 2007/2008 post-election violence gave a good opportunity to showcase how the communication strategies of the UN can be used for the good of the population. Coming together with the international community showed how the strategy of a collaboration is what is needed in order to move as one.

Much of the Kenyan communication infrastructure such as the Internet, newspaper distribution channels, etc. have concentrated their efforts around the urban periphery. Much of rural Kenya usually lags behind in getting information. Consequently, the strategic information needed to get the rural areas up-to-speed is delivered late or never. Therefore through alternative means should the strategy be focusing on getting the message across.

A study of the UN has revealed the need to improve internal communication, documentation and information sharing through a joint online platform. The present UN Communication Strategy therefore proposes to establish a joint web-based format in the form of the UN Intranet which could facilitate informing all the UN staff in the country about the UN vision, help streamline the document exchange on common matters, promote the culture of sharing substantive programme information, better coordinate the UNs advocacy and outreach activities and increase staff awareness on UN activities.

The UN Resident Coordinators Office will be responsible for regular maintenance of the content of the UN Intranet with inputs from the UNCG members or designated Communication Focal Points of the UN agencies. As for the UN calendar of events, UNIC and UN communication focal points will be responsible for regularly updating planned events on the Intranet concerning their respective agencies including training, project site visits and major missions.

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