FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS REPORT
West Africa Online Platform for Civic Space

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the key findings of the focus group discussions conducted with the potential users of CiviConnect, the West Africa Platform for Civic Space. The discussions revealed a general understanding of the significant changes brought by digital technology in Civic Space and Civil Society Organisations' operations in West Africa and the potential for the platform to help leverage these capabilities. Indeed, digital technologies have considerably increased access to information as well as opportunities to debate, mobilization, and engagement (…).

The findings of the discussions detailed in this document should ensure that the needs and views of potential users are included in the design of the platform. As a by-product, the consultations gave valuable insight on the core functionalities sought by users enabling CiviConnect to be a useful tool for Civil Society Organizations in West Africa.

Introduction

As threats on civic space persist across West Africa, it is imperative for actors to redefine their strategies by, among other things, leveraging the enabling factors of collaboration and addressing the challenges that impede collaboration. Building strong partnerships, inventing creative strategies and tactics, learning from one another, increasing mutual trust via transparency and accountability, and documenting their experiences are all approaches that can aid in the formation of significant cross-country partnerships. In the context of the COVID-19 epidemic redefining and increasing the use of digital channels, it appears critical for West African social movements to capitalize on all opportunities presented by digital technology in order to increase their impact.

CiviConnect, the West Africa Platform for Civic Space is being developed in this context and seeks to connect different actors interested in societal challenges, whether from civil society, the media, academics or individual activists, foster information sharing and the creation of alliances. It showcases information about campaigns and mobilisations in West Africa, facilitates collaboration and dialogue between civil society, media, and academics, foster learning and information sharing on civic space developments and trends in the region. The platform is also looking to increase joint strategic action and advocacy efforts on issues both at national and regional level and engage influential policy actors, including Economic Community of West African States.

The digital platform to be developed should strive to improve collaboration among many stakeholders, whether they are from the media, academia, social movements, or civil society and facilitate the ability for these various stakeholders to connect, collaborate, and share knowledge towards building an inclusive and open society in West Africa.

Objective

The Focus group discussions (FDG) were undertaken to consult the potential users of the on:

1. The relevance of the features already developed on the platform and their ease of use;
2. The potential missing features that users expect to have on the platform;
3. The aspirations on how the platform should be run and operated.

Methodology

Five focus group discussions (FDG) were conducted online via Microsoft Teams with 35 potential users (7 users per focus groups) to explore their views. The Five focus group discussions were held separately in French (3 focus groups) and in English (2 focus groups) with participants from Togo, Benin, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire Ghana, Nigeria and Gambia representing a dozen of Civil Society Organisations, 2 alternative medias and 1 academic institution.

Informed-consent procedures were explained at the beginning of each focus group discussion (see Appendix A). Some focus group discussions were recorded with the permission of the participants. The anonymity of participants in the focus groups is protected in this report.

To begin the data analysis process, facilitators debriefed after each focus group to discuss session content, what was learned. Next, facilitators conducted a preliminary analysis to get a general understanding of the data and reflect on its meaning. An individual summary report was drafted for each focus group. Once individual reports for each group were completed, the data was further analyzed across all focus groups.

Key findings

The main findings from data generated by the focus group discussions are summarized below. The consultation brought about valuable information also in terms of current trends and challenges related to cross-sector collaborations and digital civic engagement.

On the relevance of the features already developed on the platform and their ease of use

The focus groups participants adhered to the main features already developed with some feedback on specific aspects of the platform's functionalities:

- *Content management and optimisation*

The participants expressed the need to have a search engine on the platform to allow for searching for indexed content without the express need to go through the pages one by one.

The participants also wished that the different pages allowing to propose content on the platform be grouped under a single menu ''participate in the platform'' as well as the display of the information of the contributors (Name, Organisation, country and/or email address) of content on each page in order to facilitate networking.

- *User engagement*

Participants called for a more simplified and flexible registration form with the possibility for users to update their information post registration.

For anonymity purposes and to avoid user's activities tracking across internet, it was proposed to disable the option for user to create new accounts on the platform using other social media integrations (google, facebook etc...) ''so that users could only create accounts using their email address and make their account on CiviConnect unique and not shared with other web sites''.

It was also recommended to set up mechanisms allowing users who wish to be anonymised to participate in the platform in a secure and anonymous way.

Regarding user interaction, the participants advised to take the necessary measures to ensure the security of the data exchanged on the platform.

- *Interoperability*

Participants advised against integrating the platform with other services with opaque privacy policies.

They also advised having an option for the user to enable or disable email alerts and notifications.

- *Cross-Platform Capabilities*

Participants expressed interest in having a mobile application of the platform. They also proposed the introduction of an option for exporting the content to a .pdf format especially the news and funding opportunities. They also suggested the implementation of an option for users to share the content of the platform via email directly.

Participants also pointed out problems of display on older devices. In a quest for inclusivity, it has been advised to make the necessary adjustments to allow users who do not have the latest devices to equally be able to use the platform.

On the potential missing features users expect to have on the platform

Participants discussed ideas for additional features to be integrated into the platform, including a discussion forum, online collaboration tools, a mobile application and anonymity tools.

The participants put forward the idea of a discussion forum on the platform to allow civil society organisations and other stakeholders to exchange, develop strategies and other actions. It was argued that this will allow less organised and structured groups to participate in the platform without having to necessary submit righteous and structured content. The forum should be structured into topics and sub-topics that can be run on a voluntary basis by users. It was also suggested to consider making the forum a non-moderated space centred on free expression.

Regarding online collaboration tools, participants expressed the desire for the platform to have ''tools to facilitate turning ideas into concrete action''. They proposed to make available on the platform a set of open source tools that allows organisations and individuals to work together whether it's for brainstorming sessions, the development of action plans, grant proposals writing, creating of campaigns etc...

Participants raised the idea of developing a mobile application for the platform that could be available on the two main platforms (Android and iOS). It was argued that this ''should allow users to be solely focused on the platform's tasks''.

It was proposed to develop tools allowing users who wish to navigate the platform in an anonymously. It was proposed that the platform be made available on trough the tor network.

On the aspirations on how the platform should be run and operated.

Participants suggested that the team should be open to volunteers and that the user community should be able to participate in the development of the project. They raised the idea of also turning CiviConnect into a collective action space. The discussions drew attention to the fact that over the last years, technology has also been used to "suppress, surveil and harass dissidents, political opposition, human rights defenders, activists and protestors, and to manipulate public opinion". New technologies including "the Internet of Things, open data, artificial intelligence and robotics" are significantly impacting civic space. Digital tools have been employed to hinder civic participation in numerous ways, including arbitrary limits imposed by cybercrime legislation, Internet shutdowns, control and manipulation of information flows, mass digital surveillance, smear campaigns, and online harassment. There is a pressing need to coordinate efforts to design, regulate and manage the governance of digital technologies. Significant initiatives already exist in this regard and the participants believe that CiviConncect can go further than providing a dedicated digital space to catalyse policy advocacy efforts on these aspects.

The discussions also revealed that Civil Society Organisations have limited awareness and knowledge of digital rights, information technology, and digital tools. There is a lack of policy on digital technology and social media use, limited digital security capacities, and Civil Society Organisations are vulnerable to attacks. Civil Society Organisations are also often not fully aware of their rights online, and there are capacity gaps on technological issues as well as on the exercise of fundamental freedoms online. The participants raised the possibility for the CiviConnect to act at this level through capacity building and other actions. A webinar schedule on different aspects of digital technology was mentioned.

Conclusion

The focus group discussions confirmed the need of levers that could enable Civil Society Organisations to work collectively and with other stakeholders to address the challenges they are facing. Strengthening existing Civil Society Organizations coalitions and support broader coalition-building with diverse actors is essential and digital technologies are a great tool. In the meantime, there is also limited Civil Society Organisations awareness on digital tools, what they entail, the legal framework and protections. Building Civil Society Organisations capacity on technological skills, digital security can considerably reduce the gap toward the building of resilient and sustainable online movements/campaigns.

Appendix A - Focus Group Discussion Protocol

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION PROTOCOL

Purpose

The purpose of this protocol is to guide focus group discussions (FDG) with stakeholders from Civic Society Organisations, Medias and Academic institutions. The objective of these focus group discussions is to consult the potential users in view of finalizing the CiviConnect, West Africa Online Platform for Civic Space.

I. **CONDUCTING a Focus Group Discussion**

1. **Welcome participants**: Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to join us for this discussion today.

2. **Introduce yourself**: My name is _____, and I'm here on behalf of the team developing CiviConnect

3. **Explain purpose**: We are conducting a series of discussions with potential users of the platform to learn from each other about: (1) The relevance of the features already developed on the platform and their ease of use; (2) The potential missing features that users expect to have on the platform; (3) The aspirations on how the platform should be run and operated.

4. **Explain your role**: In the coming hour, I will be asking questions. I am interested to listen to all points of view and I will not be participating in the discussion.

5. **Ensure Confidentiality:** We will be calling each other with our first names. We are committed to maintain your confidentiality, we are interested in your points of view and not in who said what (notify participants beforehand that we are taking notes).

6. **Begin with introductions**

7. **Explain the platform structure and functionalities**

8. **Ask for feedback**; move from general to specific questions if required.

9. **Explain discussion process to participants**:
   a. "We will start now by discussing …."
   b. For each of the themes, use open-ended questions to encourage discussion and explore participants' points of view. Note down recurrent points and re-visit them as necessary.

10. **Summarize keys points**; encourage some general agreement:
    a. To summarize what we discussed, you think _____. Does this capture the essence of what was said today?

11. **Thank participants, inform them about next steps**: Thank you again for connecting with us today. The points of view you shared today are really important to us and for the success of the platform. Thank you for helping us in planning this. We will make sure to take your opinions into consideration in the finalization of the development of the platform to be launched next month. We will inform you once the final version is completed and send you invitations for the lunch meeting