INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ENHANCING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC ISSUES IN ZIMBABWE: A SURVEY OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The study was focused on exploring the influence of social media in enhancing citizen participation in socio-economic and developmental issues in Zimbabwe using a survey of NGOs and CSOs operating in the country. The major motivation to do the project was to ascertain the extent to which citizens participate in socio-economic, development and political discourses in Zimbabwe using social media platforms. This was particularly important in the face of restrictions imposed on citizen participation by various legal instruments such as the Access to Information Protection and Privacy Act, the Official Secrets Act and the Public Order and Security Act. The Zimbabwean government has been widely criticised for using these legal instruments to throttle citizens’ active and open participation in socio-economic, developmental and political issues, relegating the generality of the people to the periphery of decision-making processes. The project sought to assess whether the use of social media by NGOs and civil society organisation was influencing citizens to participate in socio-economic programmes. The project specifically assessed citizen trust on the efficacy of social media, the influence of social media on citizen engagement in socio-economic discourses and to determine the influence of provision of information through social media platforms on citizen participation. The project adopted the descriptive research survey design and focused mainly five major NGOs; Save the Children, Action Aid, Child Helpline, UNICEF and World Vision. The project considered all 160 management and communication personnel working in the five NGOs as the population of the study. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of 80 respondents. Interviews and open-ended questions were used to collect qualitative data whilst closed ended questions and secondary data were used to collect quantitative data. The project established that social media platforms were helping Zimbabweans to participate in discourses previously regarded as a preserve of the powerful. The project concluded that the use of social media by NGOs and CSOs bolstered public trust, and confidence to partake in public discourses on important national issues. It also validated the widely held view that the use of social media...
media by NGOs and CSOs aided citizen participation in decision-making. The study established that citizen involvement, especially combined with social media coverage, might force politicians to suspend or abandon unpopular decisions. NGOs and CSOs were making use of social media to communicate with citizens on national issues. The study established that use of social media by NGOs and CSOs had provided a variety of opportunities for citizens in choosing sources of news. NGOs and CSOs were making efforts to promote human rights and economic growth through social media; however, majority of citizens had limited access and were still yet to appreciate such services. The study recommends the Zimbabwe government to liberalise the media industry. Citizens of Zimbabwe have to engage in social media platforms of NGOs and CSOs. NGOs need to intensify social media efforts to improve social-economic issues. NGOs and CSOs need to foster stakeholder relationships through social media. Further studies may also be carried out in establishing limiting / inhibiting factors that restrict citizens to participate in socio-economic issues through social media.

**Key Words:** Citizen Participation, Social Media, Socio- Economic Issues, Non-Governmental, Civil Society Organizations
1. INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1970s there have been increased efforts to adopt community participation as a necessary instrument for people driven development. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and governments have been using this participatory approach not only to empower local people, but also to give them a platform to plan and implement their own development projects. But in Zimbabwe, the government has not adequately funded most development projects and NGOs have been providing most, if not all, services in rural communities. NGOs are seen as better placed at facilitating development projects and at engaging local people to actively participate in socio-economic issues (Moyo, 2012).

The government of Zimbabwe treat NGOs and CSOs with suspicion and views most NGOs as regime change agents. As a result, the government in Zimbabwe has maintained a tight grip on information about development issues. This is further compounded by a polarised media, which has severely compromised citizens’ access to information and locked them out of the national socio-economic and development discourses. This has prompted NGOs and CSOs to fill the information gap by embarking on programmes to enhance citizen participation through social media platforms, leading to increased tension with government (Mapuva, 2013).

ACPD (2006) explains that participation means taking part as an individual and as a community in decision making at each step of the development process. This entails that all citizens should be able to participate actively in the local democratic process for any development process to yield fruitful results. Lisk (1985) further defines participation as the involvement of the broad masses of population in the choice, execution and evacuation of programmes and projects that are designed to bring out significant upward movement in the living standards of people. Beneficiary citizen participation is only meaningful for the masses if they are effectively involved at the various levels of the development process (Makumbe, 1996). Citizen participation in socio-economic issues in
Zimbabwe has been rising since 2008 due to the deteriorating macro-economic environment, including high levels of unemployment, infrastructure decay and the general mistrust between the state and its citizens (Sachikonye, 2011). Ruhanya (2013) adds that with almost 100 percent mobile telephone coverage in Zimbabwe, social media has the potential to empower citizens to take part in social change and developmental programmes in the country. Citizen participation in social networking sites has more than quadrupled in the world since 2005 (Jones and Fox, 2009). A study by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) shows that by 2013 there were nearly 2.7 billion internet users globally constituting nearly a third of the entire world’s population. Users of internet range from 6.7% in Africa to 73.9% in North America. Internet usage is higher in developed regions at 50.1% in Europe and 60.1% Ocean/ Australia than in developing regions at 23.7% in the Middle East and 30% in Latin America.

The recent advances in internet technologies (Web 2.0), particularly the participative internet known as social media, have transformed the pattern of communication, including civic participation (Eysenbach, 2008). Social media platforms have increased citizens’ connectivity and enabled users’ direct participation in the communication process (Vance, et al. 2009). Research by O’Neil, (2009) shows that NGO-citizen engagement is vital for successful citizen participation, especially on sensitive causes that NGOs often work with and which require highest levels of trust (O’Neil, 2009).

Bowen (2004) adds that transparency should be a generic principle of citizen engagement, the significance of which is enhanced credibility and trust. It is therefore crucial for communication and conversations between organisations and the public to take place in a transparent and open manner in order to encourage people to act and drive social change (Kanter & Fine, 2010). Ruhanya (2013) argues that given the socio-economic and political problems that have bedeviled
Zimbabwe since 2000 it is important to explore the potential capacity of new media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter on civic participation in the affairs of the country. However, Mhando (2013) says while the impact of social media is generally regarded as having an impact on civic participation, little of the research in this area has been based on social and economic development projects in developing economies such as Zimbabwe.

Jones and Fox (2009 contend that key questions remain unanswered regarding the influence of social media on citizen participation in terms of engagement, trust, transparency and access to information. Therefore, developing an empirically based understanding of the impact of social media on citizen participation in development issues has become a key priority in current development communication research. This study was conducted against this background and in the face of increased trends globally in the use of social media in organizational communication, especially by NGOs and CSOs to promote public engagement and engender citizen participation (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). The study also comes at a time when the number of social media users has been growing exponentially driven by the social aspect of the medium which encourages engagement and connectedness, which are essential for effective citizen participation.

Previous studies on the impact of social media, have focused on different types of social media such as Blogs (Ingehoff & Koelling, 2009), Face book (Waters et al, 2009), and Twitter (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). In addition, these studies were mainly centred on general corporate communication and political campaigns. Mhando (2013) says limited studies have been done on the effect on social media on citizen participation in Africa, and in particular Zimbabwe. Further, studies by Edwards (2006), Ingenhoff and Koelling (2009), Scoble & Israel (2006) and Breakenridge (2008) were generic but presented important insights on effect of social media on communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Theory of Trust

Many different disciplines have studied the concept of trust, including sociology, psychology, communications, management and economics (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995; Lewicki, 2006; Lewis and Weigert, 2012; Sherchan, Nepal and Paris, 2013). As a result, many definitions, perspectives, and theories around trust exist. In addition, issues of trust must be newly considered and evaluated as new forms of communication and interaction become available such as social media. Much of the research that examines trust in online social networks—which is the area of this research—focuses on how people trust online information to foster citizen participation (Kelton, Fleischmann and Wallace, 2008). Mayer, Davis & Schoorman (1995) integrates many different past models of trust into one. Mayer et al.’s model decomposes trust into two components—trustworthiness and trust propensity. Trustworthiness determines whether the trustee can be trusted, while trust propensity determines how likely the trust or is to trust. Here, the researcher focused on trustworthiness because organisations including Governments cannot control the public’s propensity to trust; they can only influence how trustworthy they appear to the public (Lewicki, 2006). The three factors attributed to trustworthiness include ability, integrity, and benevolence (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995; Lewicki, 2006). Ability subsumes those attributes, proficiencies, and skills that give a trustee competence within a domain.

2.1.2 Media Dependency Theory

Foo and Koivist (2014) mentioned that the media dependency theory, which is also known as media system dependency theory, borrows much from and is an extension of the uses and gratifications approach. The two theories have a subtle difference. The media dependency theory mainly focuses on audience goals as the origin of dependency. The theory states that the more
independence an individual gets from media as fulfilling individual’s needs the more the importance of the media will be to the person. Choi and Haque (2012) mentioned that the theory is a correlating relationship between media content, the nature of society and the behaviour of society.

If individuals are exposed to media that fulfil their needs, they will be inclined to such media. The major individual needs to use media include social and self-understanding, interaction and action orientation, and social and solitary play. Individuals are exposed to a variety of media, hence the lesser dependency on one media (Foo & Koivist, 2014). From the Media Dependency Theory it has been established that individuals seek to fulfil their needs when they make use of various forms of media such as social media. Thus, NGOs may need to engage the public in the view of meeting their needs and expectations.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

2.2.1 Use of social media in fostering trust

Citizen trust in government is a core concern in public administration, especially since it has been seen as declining over the last several decades (Denhardt and Denhardt 2009). Citizen engagement through social media has been considered as a method to restore trust in government as it can make the government efficient, effective, and accountable, and/or responsive (Moon 2002; Matthew 2011; West 2004) by enabling more transparency and interactions between citizen and government (Holzer, Melitski, Rho, and Schwester 2004).

Scholars in public management and the use of social media have developed and empirically tested a citizen trust model of public participation through social media by focusing on uncovering the relationship between citizens’ use of and satisfaction with social media and their trust in
government (Morgeson III, VanAmburg, and Mithas 2010; Tolbert and Mossberger 2006; Welch, Hinnant, and Moon 2005; West 2004).

As social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Blog, etc.) diffuse among citizens and private firms, government agencies have recently adopted social media to provide complementary communication and participation channels for citizens (Bonson, Torres, Royo, and Flores 2012; Purser 2012; Snead 2013).

Publics are not interested in detailed disclosure of information but honesty and assurance from organisations (Waters et al 2009). Organisations can use social media to ensure transparency and openness in the way they communicate (Bardhan 2013). A research by Warren et al. (2014) among US citizens showed that social media is shaping civic engagement initiatives and building trust among people and increasing trust in their institutions, particularly the government, police and justice systems.

2.2.2 Social media and citizen participation

Social Media is, “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Mayfield (2008) indicates that social media is best understood as a group of new kinds of online media, which share most or all of the following characteristics; ‘Participation and Engagement, Openness, Conversation, Community and Connectedness’. Hackley (2010) posits that; “the defining feature of social media is not new technology (electronic media) but new ways of understanding how the technology can be applied to facilitate new modes and models of business and communication. It has been reported that there has been negative perception of public relations in NGOs but this is changing in the face of increased use of social media, which have fostered
conversations and dialogue resulting in improved communications and understanding (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

2.3.3 Social media and public engagement

Open conversations with public through social media are modern methods of communication that foster transparency and dialogue with publics. Research that has been done before has differentiated types of social media as website communication (Ingehoff and Koelling, 2009), Facebook activities (Waters et al, 2009), and the use of Twitter (Rybalko and Seltzer, 2010). Social media encourages a three-way model of communication since social media allows a third party to receive messages (Ferber, Foltz and Pugliese, 2007). Kantar and Fine, (2010) argued that there is a fear of losing control over messages when they are spread online but others claim that the advantages of broadening conversations are important. A focus on essential influencers is important (Breakenridge, 2008) but interactivity where there is a two-way flow of information might be crucial since any public can become more than just a viewer (Marshall, 2004).

Bandura (2013) postulated that as of June 30, 2013, there were 2,668,870,408 Internet users in the world—38% of the world’s population of nearly 6.8 billion (Internet World Stats, 2013). The percentage of the population that uses the Internet ranges from 6.7% in Africa to 73.9% in North America. Internet usage is higher in developed regions of the world (50.1% in Europe and 60.1% in Oceania/Australia) than in developing regions (23.7% in the Middle East and 30.0% in the Latin American/Caribbean region). Although only 18.5% of the Asian population uses the Internet, 42.2% of all Internet users in the world are in Asia. In addition, internet use worldwide grew 362% from 2000 to 2009, including 516% in Asia, 1,360% in the Middle East and Africa, and 873% in the Latin American/Caribbean region.
2.2.4 Social media and the provision of information

Shirky (2011) argues that through the advent of social media, the communications landscape has become denser, more complex, and more participatory while the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action. These increased freedoms can help loosely coordinated public demand change. The Law Society of Scotland (2015) says participating in social media provides the opportunity to engage with a diverse group of bodies and individuals. Hanan (2013) says much has already been written about the Arab Spring but what is already clear from the current body of work being produced is that it was the use of social media that acted as the catalyst for change in an already unpredictable environment.

2.2.5 Citizen Participation

Citizen participation is a process that gives private individuals an opportunity to influence public decisions and has a component of the democratic decision-making process. The roots of citizen participation can be traced to ancient Greece and Colonial New England. Before the 1960s, governmental processes and procedures were designed to facilitate "external" participation. Citizen participation was institutionalized in the mid-1960s with President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs (Cogan & Sharpe, 1986 p. 283). Citizen participation and its relationship to public decision-making have evolved without a general consensus regarding either it's meaning nor its consequences (Mize, 1972). Many agencies or individuals choose to exclude or minimize public participation in planning efforts claiming citizen participation is too expensive and time consuming. Citizens often lack technical expertise and can be emotionally involved in issues of concern rather than being detached and rational (Kweit and Kweit, 1986:22).
3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study identifies the procedures and techniques that were used in the collection, processing and analysis of data.

3.1 Research Design

The study is based on quantitative data which was statistically analyzed hence the adoption of positivism philosophy. Saunders et al (2009) presented that a research design is planned arrangement of conditions for the analysis and collection of data in manner that aims to combine relevance to research purpose with economy procedure. The descriptor-explanatory research design was used to describe the characteristics of the variables and at the same time investigate the cause effect relationship between the variables.

3.2 Target Population

The target population was 50 NGOs and civil society organizations in Zimbabwe’s capital Harare (NANGO, 2015). However, the study mainly focused on the five major NGOs, which were Save the Children, Action Aid, Child Helpline, UNICEF and World Vision. The study considered all 160 management and communication personnel in these organizations. These target groups were seen as possessing valuable information sought under study.

3.3 Sampling Frame and sample

The researcher observed that there were about 160 target population elements to draw a sample from. The researcher felt that a sample of 50 percent of the target population was ideal. The sample for the study was 80.
3.4 Sampling

Purposive sampling was used in the selection of 80 respondents. The purposive sampling technique is the deliberate choice of an informant due to the qualities the informant possesses (Bernard 2002, Lewis & Sheppard 2006).

3.5 Instruments

The study, being a descriptive survey, adopted the instruments that were appropriate for the research design namely the questionnaire and interview to elicit information from the study respondents.

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

With the agreement of the respondents, the researcher managed to set up the interview dates, venue and time. The researcher gave the interviewees the interview guide in advance a day before the confirmed and agreed date to allow for familiarization with the agenda of the personal interview by the respondents. All visits to the respondents’ premises were strictly by appointment.

3.7 Pilot Test

The research instruments were pilot tested with respondents outside the sampling frame. Five management personnel from NANGO were interviewed and given a questionnaire. Apart from these respondents, two PhD holders in Sociology and Anthropology from the Women’s University in Africa were given the research instruments to review them. Pilot testing improved the validity and reliability of the study.

3.8 Data Processing and Analysis

All the questionnaire responses were coded into the Microsoft Excel before being imported to the SPSS version 23 for analysis. The data was presented in form of tables, such as bar and pie charts,
figures and percentages. The percentages were used to analyze the data. The tables made easier for the researcher to make inferences.

4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Response Rate

Table 4.1 Response Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Response Rate</th>
<th>Non Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communications personnel</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The average response rate was 63%. Out of a sample of 33 communication personnel from Save the Children, Action Aid, Child Helpline, UNICEF and World Vision, 20 questionnaires were returned thus representing 61% response rate. Out of a sample of 47 management personnel from Save the Children, Action Aid, Child Helpline, UNICEF and World Vision, 30 questionnaires were returned thus representing 64% response rate.

4.2 Social Media in relation to Communication between NGOs and Citizens

These findings show that respondents were of the view that social media was improving communication between NGOs / CSOs and Citizens. On this, Eysenbach (2008) postulated that social media has transformed the pattern of communication resulting in increased citizens’ connectivity and direct participation in the communication process.

Figure 4.1 Social media Influence on Citizen Participation in Socio-Economic Programmes
Figure 4.2 Influence of Social Media Engagement on Citizen Participation in Socio-Economic Issues

4.3 Social media in relation to citizen participation in decision-making
From the Figure 4.2, it was established that 90% of respondents were of the view that social media enables citizens to participate in decision making processes, thereby improving decision making. This was further supported by 10% of respondents who agreed. Interviews with Heads of Communication and Advocacy Departments at Save the Children, Action Aid and World Vision revealed that social media played a critical role in the constitution making process of Zimbabwe. Citizens of Zimbabwe visited social media sites of NGOs and CSOs and posted issues of concern.

**Figure 4.3 Influence of Provision of Information through Social Media Platforms on Citizen Participation.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information through social media of CSOs and NGOs</td>
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<td>Use of Social media by NGOs and CSOs provide multiple news sources for citizens to get reliable and objective news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited access to public media encourages citizens to consider social media as news sources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

modal answer = strongly agree

**4.4 Limited access to public media in relation to social media as news sources**

From the Figure 4.3, 84% of respondents were of the view that limited access to independent public media encourages citizens to consider social media as news sources. This was further supported by 16% of respondents who agreed. Interviews with Save the Children, Action Aid, Child Helpline, UNICEF and World Vision revealed that Zimbabwe’s public media was polarised media and this had severely compromised citizens’ access to independent information. One interview
respondent said that ‘NGOs and CSOs are aware of this information gap and they are embarking on programmes to enhance citizen participation through social media platforms’.

**Figure 4.3 Influence of Provision of Information through Social Media Platforms on Citizen Participation.**

![Influence of provision of information through social media platforms on citizen participation](image)

### Modal answer = strongly agree

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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Social media by NGOs and CSOs provide multiple news sources for citizens to get reliable and objective news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
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#### 4.5 Limited access to public media in relation to social media as news sources

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These findings show that NGOs and CSOs are making use of social media to communicate with citizens on national issues having in mind that public media is polarized. A study by Rybalko &
Seltzer (2010) show that NGOs and CSOs promote public engagement and citizen participation through social media. This is because of increased use of Internet and the fact that it is cheap for citizens to use social media.

4.6 Use of Social media by NGOs and CSOs as providing multiple news sources

From the Figure 4.3, it was established that 86% of respondents strongly agreed that use of Social media by NGOs and CSOs provide multiple news sources for citizens to get reliable and objective news. This was further supported by 14% of respondents who agreed. Interview with the representative from Action Aid revealed that use of social media by NGOs and CSOs had provided interactive sources of media in the discussion of national issues. Participation in social media is not limited; participants choose news sources of their choice.

The study established that use of social media by NGOs and CSOs had provided a variety of opportunities for citizens in choosing sources of news. On this, Rybalko & Seltzer (2010) posits that there are increased trends globally in the use of social media in organizational communication, especially by NGOs and CSOs to promote public engagement and engender citizen participation.

Figure 4.4 Influence of Social Media in Enhancing Citizen Participation in Socio-Economic Issues in Zimbabwe
4.7 Use of Social media by NGOs and CSOs against concern for rights and duties

From the Figure 4.4 above, 40% of respondents disagreed that social media by NGOs and CSOs was enhancing increased concern for rights and duties. However, 30% of respondents strongly agreed. Sixteen percent agreed whilst 8% strongly disagreed. Interview respondents from Save the Children, Action Aid, Child Helpline, UNICEF and World Vision argued that people in Zimbabwe are generally unaware of their rights to access information and the procedure of requesting information from government despite efforts of NGOs and CSOs. However, some interview respondents argued that social media was playing a pivotal role in safeguarding human rights that include rights to life, freedom of speech and freedom of association.

The study established that NGOs and CSOs were making efforts safeguard human rights through social media. However, the culture of secrecy in most government departments in Zimbabwe suggests that access to information is not seen as a right but a privilege that government officials dispense at will. Laws such as POSA and AIPA widely limited information accessible to the public.
and effectively controlled the dissemination of any information to the public by restricting public gatherings.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the research objectives, the study concludes that:

Social media was improving communication between NGOs / CSOs and Citizens; the use of social media builds and trust and transparency among people; social media enables citizens effectively participate in public discourses that contribute to decision making and citizen’s use of social media was on the rise.

Use of social media by NGOs and CSOs has the capacity of aiding citizen participation in decision-making. The study established that citizen involvement, especially combined with social media coverage, may force politicians to suspend or abandon unpopular decisions.

NGOs and CSOs were making use of social media to communicate with citizens on national issues because the public media was polarized. The study established that use of social media by NGOs and CSOs had provided a variety of opportunities for citizens in choosing sources of news.

5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the Zimbabwe government to liberalise the media industry. It has been established that that the government of Zimbabwe treat NGOs and CSOs with suspicion and views most NGOs as regime change agents. As a result, the government in Zimbabwe has maintained a tight grip on information about development issues. Citizens of Zimbabwe have to engage in social media platforms of NGOs, CSOs and any other organisations and participate in social-economic issues. Citizen engagement through social media has been considered as a method to make the government efficient, effective, and accountable, and/or responsive by enabling more transparency and interactions between citizen and government.
CSOs and NGOs need to intensify social media efforts to improve debate on social-economic issues. These efforts will enable them to open up opportunities for citizens to freely express themselves and to challenge hegemonic political and developmental discourse.

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