

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ENHANCING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC, DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES IN ZIMBABWE: A SURVEY OF NGOS AND CSOS.

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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 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

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