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***Negotiating Multi-Stakeholder Partnership in Education
(MSPE) in Namibia***



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***NEGOTIATING MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIP IN
EDUCATION (MSPE) IN NAMIBIA***

by
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Vanessa E. Shields, Juárez & Associates

1. Context

In September 2007 Juárez & Associates conducted a series of interviews with public and private sector partners of the Namibia ICTs in Education initiative; commonly referred to as the TECH/NA! initiative. The purpose of these interviews was to examine how private partners first established a relationship with the Ministry of Education (MoE) and how this relationship evolved over time. This brief report highlights the main features encountered in this research

2. Starting Negotiations

Negotiating on behalf of a company or government ministry before the launch of a multi-stakeholder partnership for education (MSPE) can be a long and laborious process. Microsoft Namibia's Director, Glen Matswetu, candidly described some of his experiences negotiating on behalf of Microsoft. Namibia's African Pathfinder Initiative started as a partnership between Microsoft and the Parliament of Namibia. Parliament wanted to create more visibility for what it does and have a vehicle for how it make constituents more aware of the law-making and legislative processes. The idea conceived by the late, former Speaker of Parliament, Dr. Mose Tjitendero, was to have a mobile bus with computers linked to the government website. The bus would drive around the country and invite people to come on-board to see what the Parliament of Namibia does and how they can give their input into the law-making process. This was a widely supported cross-party initiative led by Dr. Tjitendero. Dr. Tjitendero also involved a number of Parliamentarians instead of merely confining the government side of the partnership to just one individual. This was an important aspect of the Microsoft – Parliament partnership because it ensured that many individuals in the government had ownership and institutional knowledge of the project. Microsoft wanted to scale this project up through providing computer labs to schools. Microsoft representative, Glen Matswetu, and representatives from Parliament who had participated in the Pathfinder Initiative then met with the MoE to pitch broadening the scope of the Pathfinder Initiative.

Private companies that have a history of participation in MSPE often have a particular set of qualities they look for in future partners. According to Glen Matswetu, 'You need to pick good, visible partners that are broad-based as some communities worry about the motivations of private companies. You must also consider the wishes of the users'.

With the provision of school labs, Microsoft partnered not only with the MOE but also with the Namibian Education Technology Alliance (NETA), a coalition of NGOs that provides technology training at Pathfinder schools. Microsoft promoted a model that was intended to become sustainable by utilizing the school labs after hours as community information centres. These information centres charge a minimal amount for use in order to pay for their internet connectivity and staff. During this time, Microsoft, and – through a separate initiative – SchoolNet, approached Namibia's internet and telephone service providers to see if they were willing to be a party to the partnership. Eventually these relationships evolved into the XNet program which is an integral component of the TECH/NA initiative.

The XNet Development Trust was formed as a partnership between SchoolNet Namibia and Telecom Namibia in 2003 as a vehicle to provide affordable bandwidth connectivity to a variety

of social sectors (such as agriculture, education and health). The education sector is the first sector for connectivity roll-out. This is the first effort towards Universal Access in Namibia. Microsoft is not only on the board of the XNet but is also working to establish a strategic partnership between XNet and Microsoft for the provision of discounted internet connectivity to Community Information Centers (CICs). Glen Matswetu said that Microsoft either wants a MOU signed with the MoE or an ICT Trust should be established for this purpose in order to ensure that there is agreement on how the CICs partnership will be implemented and managed. According to Glen Matswetu, 'A Trust is better as it has a legal identity. An MOU is like a gentleman's agreement. The Trust also has freedom so we wouldn't be tied to the government'. For example, XNet's funding from the government is due to expire in late 2007, and the one full-time staff member of XNet is currently housed at the MoE. Therefore, despite the fact that XNet is intended to be independent it is still housed and funded by the government.

3. A view from the Private Sector: Challenges of MSPEs

Compromise is an essential component of any MSPE particularly as the relationships between partners change over time. For example, government Ministers and policy change, and private partners may see opportunities in other areas that are more strategically aligned with their Corporate Social Responsibility agendas. Furthermore, the personalities of those involved in a MSPE also play a part in the success of any given initiative. Competition between private partners for business can create conflict as can government inertia due to understaffing. Government regulations can also slow down the process of releasing funds. However, the transparency and accountability of government accounting are essential components of good governance and therefore should be supported as opposed to being viewed as an obstacle.

The following is a brief excerpt from an interview with a private partner involved in the XNet and TECH/NA initiatives:

'Government processes are very slow so when you want to do anything it has to go through an evaluation process, a tender process and sometimes a stakeholder workshop which includes not just government but also the affected communities. The end result is that you have to plan something way in advance to make sure that it happens. That is a big constraining factor. Also, the issue of whether or not the government has adequate resources to assign to a particular project in terms of money and manpower. You can agree on the timeframe and the activities but because government has priorities that change from time to time – due to emergencies or changes in policy – money can be diverted and the private partners have to wait for another financial year to begin work. Government also does not have the proper resources in terms of skilled personnel, especially when you are thinking of an area like IT where you might require a person with administrative skills. If they don't have these skills they eventually have to engage an outside person.

I would rather walk away from a bad situation with government. If government is to sustain an initiative including employing the people and putting in the computers, they could be very dictatorial. But, if various parties are collaborating with the government they must also differ to the will of the collective. The issue for us is whether the citizens can get

access to what we are contemplating. We don't want to be used to drive an agenda that we don't agree with.

From the private side, each person coming into a [MSPE] has certain goals that they want to achieve. Some just want branding, others are driven by profit. To avoid these kinds of conflicts arising, starting a Trust or some other governing agency will allow the various parties to have a say but limit any one organization (ie. the government) from having complete control over it'.

4. Civil Society Perspectives

The perspective of civil society members participating in a MSPE can be a unique way to measure the successes and potential stumbling blocks being encountered in any given partnership. For example, in Namibia the ICT sector is small. Because of this local partners involved in the TECH/NA initiative know one another quite well and may compete against each other in government tenders. This competition among individuals who may also sit on the Steering Committee or in Working Groups can create tension and limit the quality of substantive discussions on how to implement any given project.

SchoolNet Namibia is a Namibian ICT deployment, training, and support organization that was registered as a not-for-profit in 2000 and has its roots in the formation of partnerships between and among learners and disadvantaged youth. SchoolNet wants to create incentives for ownership of ICTs by eliminating the donor dumping of technology in schools and community centers. SchoolNet saw that there was a niche for a civil society organization to step in and provide a long-term service to schools that may not be able to afford it or who would not get the necessary hardware and software if they worked through traditional government procurement channels. SchoolNet took responsibility for sifting through computers given to schools by the private sector, refurbishing them, and managing the repair of those computers while also providing basic IT training. As Joris Komen from SchoolNet Namibia commented,

'Many people don't understand that social activism is part of the solution. Many people tell me not to be so aggressive or passionate but absolute transparency [in the tendering process] has not happened. Why is it that I can't see the profit margin of a company that is providing a service to a school? I want to know as a taxpayer what they are charging. That is the problem with MSPE, there is so much secrecy'.

SchoolNet has set up wireless connectivity in Northern Namibia as well as installing solar technology for electricity in rural schools throughout Namibia through partnerships with private companies located in Canada, Spain and the Netherlands. Telecom and SchoolNet eventually negotiated a discounted rate for the provision of internet connectivity and bandwidth which resulted in the formation of XNet.

During the interview process, SchoolNet expressed some concerns about the TECH/NA initiative due to a lack of a monitoring and evaluation plan. However, the initiative is still very young so it is premature at this point to begin this process. They also expressed frustration with the lobbying done by private companies who are pushing for the use of proprietary platforms in schools as opposed to open source software. The TECH/NA initiative has embraced both types of software.

For example if there are 20 schools receiving a deployment, 10 will receive open source platforms and 10 will receive proprietary. These schools will then be monitored through the NETSS Centre helpdesk to evaluate which platform is easier for users to navigate. However, the Communications Bill, currently being debated in the Namibian Parliament and modeled on the South African bill of the same name, stipulates that proprietary sources can be utilized by government institutions only if there is no open source solution available. Indeed, the fate of this bill may have a big impact on the hardware and software already purchased by the MoE. Unfortunately, the hardware and software, housed at the NETTS Center, has not yet been deployed.

Some individuals and groups interviewed for this study also had concerns about the government tendering process not being transparent enough. Companies or civil society groups who want to tender for contracts coming out of the TECH/NA initiative must remove themselves from all Working Group or Steering Committee meetings which discuss technical specifications or goods and services being put to tender. Some groups interviewed that are involved in the TECH/NA process have encouraged the use of a Reverse Auction process where the sellers compete to obtain business – similar to an E-Bay auction for example. A reverse auction can drive purchasing prices downward. It was said that this would be a ‘pro-poor’ strategy which would more effectively use government funds in a transparent and accountable way.

5. Closing Remarks

Namibia has a great deal of experience with MSPEs, particularly those focusing on ICTs. Through an examination of the experiences and history of a few key participants in Namibia’s ICT partnerships one can identify a number of lessons learned that should be considered when developing sustainable MSPE.

All company representatives, civil servants and civil society organizations interviewed were passionate about the importance of introducing ICTs to educational institutions in Namibia. However, debates over what type of hardware and software should be deployed were fierce. This is particularly the case due to the mix of private sector partners involved in the Steering Committee and Working Groups. Some of these partners represented companies that sold or used one platform or the other. Therefore, these private partners had the capacity to put their personal or business agenda before the success of the partnership. However, the private sector has the expertise and knowledge of the ICT market and what it will take to assist Namibia bridge the digital divide. Therefore their views and opinions are vitally important to the success of not only the TECH/NA initiative, but also of the wider government policy of Vision 2030.

If the government has the central coordinating and decision-making role in a MSPE they are often the target of criticism. As one civil servant I interviewed explained,

‘Most of the time, if you ask me, I am like a referee. You have two teams that are playing and my job is to make sure that they don’t break each other. There are rules we have to follow but [sometimes] I get kicked. I am the bridge between the political system and the private sector. If some partner says to me, “We are not agreeing on this. We need your assistance”, I have no one to run to. My job is to get in there and figure out exactly why we aren’t moving. If there is a problem, it is a human problem and it has to have a human solution’.

This government perspective is a reminder of how complicated navigating the terrain of a MSPE can be. Indeed, it was reiterated during every interview that power, politics, personalities and motivations have a tremendous impact on the success of a partnership. Furthermore, the ability of private partners to compromise and work amongst their competitors is a necessary skill. Equally, if the government is the key driver of a MSPE it must ensure that private partners have a formal way to express their concerns, that transparency in all tendering processes is a norm, and that modes of decision-making agreed upon at the inception of a MSPE are not abandoned once the partnership reaches the implementation stage. Indeed, private partners must believe that their opinions are being valued and that their voices are being heard in order to ensure their continued engagement.