

UN and GuideStar International put African charities online

GuideStar International (GSI) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) announced in August a joint venture to develop a free web portal for African civil society organisations, which will showcase the work of all NGOs, charities, non-profit organisations and community-based organisations from the smallest to the largest.



Utilising a shared internet platform, organisations will, for the first time, be able to display their vision and mission, objectives, activities, needs and finances to donors, researchers, policy-makers and the general public.

The service, known as GuideStar, is already fully operational in the US www.guidestar.org and the UK www.guidestar.org.uk where these websites contain detailed information on hundreds of thousands of registered charities and non-profit institutions. GuideStar International is also working to develop similar systems in Europe, Canada, India, South Korea and South Africa.

GuideStar will enable charitable organisations in Africa to upload essential information about their organisations through a user-friendly interactive webpage, where they can also upload additional information, publications and photographs. This can then be accessed through the free website to help increase transparency and accountability to the public they serve. It will also contribute toward building an effective database that would indicate the outreach and the level of influence these organisations have both in social and economic spheres of African countries.

According to Jalal Abdel-Latif, chief of the Civil Society Section of UNECA, "UNECA is embarking on this project because we believe in the fundamental importance of strong, vibrant and responsive civil societies. We seek to ensure that the work of these vital organisations is revealed and enabled. We believe that the GuideStar System will provide a tried and tested means for the provision of transparent information on the objectives, activities, accomplishments and finances of non-profits. Such transparency is critical to elicit public trust in these organisations, thereby also attracting a more generous and accountable allocation of society's resources."

Caroline Neligan, director of partnerships and development at GuideStar International said: "Our vision is a nationally, regionally and globally connected African civil society where decisions within and across borders are driven by transparent, high quality and comprehensive information."

The launch process

The UNECA and GuideStar International will collaborate with national registrars and regulators, as well as civil society umbrella groups and associations to populate the portal with information on all legally registered

charities, NGOs and non-profits in each participating country.

One of the first steps in the project will be to undertake a rapid assessment of selected countries. This will enable greater understanding of the peculiarities, constraints and capabilities of African civil society organisations in order to pilot a set of GuideStar interventions in partnership with local institutions. The vast informal community-based sector, the lack of access to the internet among grassroots and rural organisations, the legal and home-grown ideas of the sector as well as the local attitudes toward information sharing pose challenges to implementing GuideStar Systems in Africa. In order to better understand the specific constraints under which these organisations operate, they will engage community-based networks, NGOs and public agencies to advise on the most practical approach to motivate all stakeholders to adopt standard transparency and accountability facilities such as GuideStar.

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