

AFRICAN e-GOVERNANCE – OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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e-governance: what it means and why it matters

Throughout the world, the work of government is being reshaped by two ineluctable trends. The first is the movement away from centralised, vertical and hierarchical government machines towards polycentric networks of governance based upon horizontal interactions between diverse actors within complex, dynamic and multi-layered societies.ⁱ Governance entails governments co-governing with a range of organisations, public, private and voluntary, in what Bryson and Crosby have called a ‘shared power, no-one in charge, interdependent world.’ⁱⁱ Secondly, there has been the rapid growth of information and communication technologies (ICT) which can transform the generation and delivery of public services, thereby reconfiguring relationships between government and citizens (G2C), governments and businesses (G2B) as well as within and between governments (G2G.) E-government has the potential to improve the performance of public institutions and make them more transparent and responsive; facilitate strategic connections in government by creating joined-up administrations in which users can access information and services via portals or ‘one-stop-shops’; and empower civil-society organisations (CSOs) and citizens by making knowledge and other resources more directly accessible

The concept of *e-governance* describes the convergence between these two trends, resulting in new ways of governing via new information and communication channels. E-governance offers the prospect of at least ten major administrative and democratic improvements:

- i) cheaper and more effective management and processing of information;
- ii) a freer flow of information between departments, agencies and layers within government;
- iii) more professional administrators, supported by standardised, electronically-embedded decision-making systems;
- iv) the routine provision of services according to impersonal rules, as opposed to clientelist arrangements;
- v) transparency, particularly in relation to the procurement of government services;
- vi) opportunities to work in partnership with the private sector in modernising governmental processes;
- vii) a freer flow of information between government and citizens;
- viii) the strengthening of intermediary democratic institutions, such as parliaments, local government, civil-society organisations (CSOs) and independent media;
- ix) opportunities for citizens to participate more directly in policy development;
- x) opportunities to combine traditional and modern methods of accountability

The 50-plus nations of Africa could derive major benefits from such bureaucratic and democratic outcomes, but they should resist introducing technocratic quick fixes in isolation from complementary changes to organisational structures, regulations, processes and cultures. The aim of this paper is to recommend appropriate policies for promoting an effective, African-owned strategy for e-governance.ⁱⁱⁱ

African e-governance – examples and opportunities

One, pessimistic reading of the current state of African politics is to dismiss the relevance of e-governance because ‘the trajectory of development of bureaucratic institutions in Africa has produced internal and external contexts that differ fundamentally from those of the Western states within which computing and IT have been developed.’^{iv} The argument for African exceptionalism is rejected by most writers on contemporary African governance, who argue that ‘institutions of governance, including the parliament, the executive and the state bureaucracy, should adopt modern information and communication technology’ in order to ‘transform their operations and make their work more transparent and people-centred.’^v The fourth African Development Forum (held in Addis in October 2004) produced a Consensus Statement declaring that

E-governance ... is an important innovation for enhancing good governance and strengthening the democratic process and can also facilitate access to information, freedom of expression, greater equity, efficiency, productivity growth and social inclusion. Successful e-government initiatives can have demonstrable and tangible impact on improving citizen participation and quality of life as a result of effective multi-stakeholder partnerships. African governments need to develop appropriate policy frameworks, supported by legislation for e-governance, that are linked to strategic development objectives; enlist high-ranking political e-government champions; focus awareness, outreach and training efforts on the less privileged segment of targeted users, particularly women and neglected rural communities; and promote local content and supports local language development.

In the light of such agreed policy intentions, it would be a major error to regard Africa as an exception to the global transition towards e-governance. There are many examples of successful African e-governance projects, often implemented in isolation from broader strategies for sustainable e-governance. Strategic programmes for e-governance have been established recently in countries such as Egypt (www.mcit.gov.eg/Egy_vis_mess.asp), Kenya (<http://www.csk-online.org/library/kenyaegovstrategy.pdf>), Senegal (<http://www.pnbg.gouv.sn/>), Mozambique (<http://www.infopol.gov.mz/>) and South Africa (http://www.bridges.org/e-policy/sa/inventory_oct03fin.pdf) These strategic initiatives are welcome indications that African e-governance is moving beyond the stage of novel experimentation. As in Europe and North America, African governments are proceeding pragmatically and incrementally towards e-governance, but they are increasingly doing so within a framework of established good practices and strategically-articulated objectives. Some examples of the wide range of relatively successful African e-governance projects are listed below:

Country	Project	Rationale
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Ethiopia	Distance learning for civil servants	There are approximately 350,000 civil servants in the Ethiopian government, of whom 14% have PCs and under 1% have email access. The World Bank's Global Development Learning Network has established a peer-to-peer videoconferencing and distance learning centre in Addis Abeba to train civil servants in the use of ICT.
Zambia	Zamlii: the online Zambian legal information portal	A comprehensive online collection of documents and research relating to Zambian legal and constitutional issues, intended as a legal network for lawyers, judges, academics, students and citizens.
Uganda	Parliamentary Technical Assistance Project	Introduced in 1998, to assist the Parliament of Uganda with its own modernisation process so that elected Members can better represent the interests of their constituents, make better laws and provide more effective oversight of the executive. Features include e-mail addresses for all MPs; an electronic bill tracking system; a parliamentary information database; parliament's own Vsat satellite; and provided training to the IT staff, researchers and MPs.
Mozambique	e-SISTAFE	A standardised and computerised system for the administration of public finances, including electronic payments of salaries.
Tanzania	Government Payroll and Human Resources System	The system, covering 280,000 public servants, is intended to create more efficient management of government employees.
South Africa	The Cape Gateway portal	Provides web-based information about government services and departments, structured according to users' life events.
Cameroon	Tax portal	The site contains tax-related data and guidance, providing citizens and businesses, providing instant information on payment and refund procedures – and to undermine opportunities for corrupt officials to charge for such information.
Ethiopia	Devinet (www.devinet.org) an information network for NGOs	A web-based information gateway providing a networking space for development NGOs in Ethiopia. It contains a database of NGOs, key documents and current projects; a discussion forum which serves as a virtual 'meeting room'; an electronic newspaper; free web space for NGOs; and an email digest service for those who do not have access to the internet.
Ghana	Environmental Information Network	The project aims to strengthen effective networking between various environmental agencies and NGOs
South Africa	Independent Electoral Commission voter registration system	A satellite-enabled network enables the Commission to register voters, relay, collect and verify ballots, and relay election results across the country. In 2004 the Election Results Tabulation Database system was linked via a Wide Area Network to all district collation centres.

Barriers to African e-governance

Despite the impressive range of case studies listed above, not all African e-governance projects have been success stories.^{vi} Heeks claims that 85% of e-government projects in developing/transitional countries are partial or total failures^{vii} and Berman and Tetley assert that ‘the success rate of introduced information technology systems in African state agencies has been distressingly low, and the capacity-building objectives remain largely unachieved.’^{viii} Similarly negative observations could be made about e-government initiatives in developed countries; the transition to e-governance is rarely smooth and early adopters in any region tend to encounter mixed results. African e-governance faces two additional barriers: the lack of ICT infrastructure and mass connectivity to the internet, and the existence of post-colonial administrative cultures dominated by under-resourced and unaccountable bureaucracies. But these barriers do not provide grounds for giving up on e-governance in Africa; on the contrary, they indicate the particular needs of African states for modernised systems of governance, aided by the latest technologies.

A key lesson from countries that have attempted to introduce e-governance is the importance of honestly evaluating projects and strategies, considering why they were started; how, and at what cost, they were implemented; and what impacts they achieved. An effective strategy for African e-governance should avoid three key pitfalls:

- i) The adoption of technologies without developing human skills and capacities to manage, integrate and sustain them;
- ii) The centralised use of technologies by national government departments, without devolving the benefits of technology to intermediary institutions, such as local government, parliament, parties, civil-society organisations and the independent media;
- iii) A failure to link better governance to broader and more inclusive democracy which gives voice to those who cannot afford technologies, but have needs and ideas to express.

Providing practical support for African e-governance

African e-governance strategy should be based upon three key principles:

- It should be African-owned, combining traditional methods of accountability with modern techniques of e-governance.^{ix}
- It should be developed in partnership with with private sector, which should be involved in providing skill training and community-level capacity building, as well as hardware and software.
- It should be evaluated regularly in terms of its contribution to more transparent, accountable, inclusive and efficient governance.

The G8 countries should provide active support for four specific policies:

- **Consolidate and expand e-governance training for African civil servants.**

E-governance training projects already exist, most notably the Information Technology Centre for Africa (ITCA) which seeks to demonstrate to policy-makers and planners the value of ICT for African development, and the African Training and Research Centre in Administration and Development (CAFRAD) which was established in 1964 to work with African governments to improve their public administrations. CAFRAD's long-term experience of working with 37 African governments; ICTA's ICT exhibition centre, onsite and distance learning centre and outreach service centre; as well as private-sector initiatives, such as the Cisco Networking Academy Programme, should be used as a hub for a new Network for African E-Governance, the purpose of which would be to train and accredit African civil servants in the techniques of e-governance. Courses could be offered online, so as to not disrupt government activity and enable officials to interact with advanced ICT applications as part of their training. Most importantly, the Institute should seek to disseminate organisational and democratic governance best practices as well as effective uses of ICT.

- **ICT resources and skill training should be provided to intermediary institutions: parliaments, local governance, parties, CSOs and independent media.**

A key feature of good governance is that central government is held to account. This is a primary function of parliaments, but, as the Economic Commission for Africa's *Striving for Good Governance* report observes, 'legislatures in most African countries remain fairly weak and marginalised.' The report proposes that parliaments should 'create better access for the people ... perhaps taking parliamentary hearings to the people, especially for key national issues.'^x The provision of ICT resources and skill training for MPs and parliamentary officials, as well as people working in local government and political parties, would help to strengthen their capacity to scrutinise central government and raise issues for public debate. At this intermediary level, ICT can enable CSOs and independent media to build online networks of civic democracy. There are lessons to be learned from the use of ICT by civil society in the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.^{xi} In particular, ICT resources and capacity-training should be provided for CSOs and independent media, enabling them to act as grass-roots intermediaries between local communities and the state.

- **Introduce a transparent e-procurement process**

The introduction of e-procurement can radically improve the efficiency and accountability of the public sector by establishing legally-regulated opportunities for registered suppliers to bid online for government contracts, either in competitive auction or individual tenders. E-procurement can reduce costs, cut red tape, make the bidding process more transparent and less open to corruption, and make it easier for small businesses to compete. Several organisations, including the World Bank, the OECD and the Development Gateway are able to provide expert guidance in

establishing a legal framework for e-procurement. The effect upon trust in the financial probity of the public sector arising from the introduction to e-procurement would be likely to have long-term benefits for the culture of governance.

- **Establish an Africa-wide multimedia debate, utilising all channels including the internet, mobile telephony and radio and face-to-face, with a view to enabling the public to set an agenda for better governance in Africa.**

This is in some ways the most ambitious policy proposal, for it seeks to use ICT to give greater voice to the citizens of Africa. Clearly, a purely online debate would exclude the vast majority of African people, but a multimedia debate, conducted via the web, email, mobile telephony, radio and live events, could become a focal point for a pan-African discussion about priorities for good governance. Such a debate would need to be conducted by an alliance of trusted and well-connected players – UNPAN, Civitas, SARDC, FODEP, the Panos Institute, the Cisco Networking Academy, Access2Democracy – and should seek to create a balance between accessible, localised opportunities for citizens to contribute to the debate and online collation of the overall debate. If conducted effectively, over a period of two to four months, this project could serve as a pioneering initiative in pan-African interactive democracy.

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ⁱ Kooiman, Jan (ed), (2002), *Governing as Governance*, Sage

ⁱⁱ Bryson, John M. and Barbara Crosby (1993), *Leadership in a Shared Power World*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

ⁱⁱⁱ For any such policy to be effective Africa must develop an infrastructure which makes e-technologies more widely accessible to African citizens. The question of ICT infrastructure is being addressed in a separate paper. From a democratic perspective, we should not forget Kofi Annan's statement that 'The divide between technology's haves and have-nots threatens to exacerbate the gaps between the rich and poor, within and among countries.'

^{iv} Berman, Bruce J. and Tettey, Wisdom J. (2001), 'African States, Bureaucratic Culture and Computer Fixes', *Public Administration and Development*, 21:1

^v Economic Commission for Africa (2004), *Striving for Good Governance in Africa*,

^{vi} In the 2004 election, Mozambique attempted to employ a high-tech election results tabulation database, but this did not work, due to insufficient time for testing and incomplete programming. Several World Bank-funded public sector ICT projects in Africa closed down after a year or so of operation; see Moussa, A., and R. Schware, (1992), 'Informatics in Africa', *World Development* 20(12):1737-1752. The East African decision-support system for the Ministry of Natural Resources failed because information outputs did not form an input to strategic decisions which continued to be made on the basis of informal information, external pressures, and political considerations. (See Heeks, <http://www.egov4dev.org/sfoverviewcases.htm>) In Sudan, the Ministry of Finance and National Economy established a computerised system which was intended to institutionalise and standardise financial decision-making, with the integration of financial spreadsheets and databases to conduct economic analyses. After two years of work on the project funding stopped and the IT staff left. (See Higgs, H., (2003) 'Implementing an Information System in a Large LDC Bureaucracy: The Case of the Sudanese Ministry of Finance', *The Electronic Journal on Information Systems in Developing*

Countries, 14,3,1-13) There have been a number of initiatives across Africa to computerise land registration, which would have the advantage of limiting opportunities for official corruption, but so far none of these has been implemented.

^{vii} Heeks, R., *Achieving Success/Avoiding Failure in Egovernment Projects*, IDPM, University of Manchester, 2003, downloaded from <http://www.egov4dev.org/topic1smry.htm>

^{viii} Berman and Wisdom, *op. cit.*, p.2

^{ix} As the ADF IV Issue Paper on *Traditional Governance*, ‘any reform of chieftaincy must have as its objective the integration of chiefs into the institutional structures of modern government.’ Given the role of traditional chieftains in some areas as local intermediaries with the state, it would be a mistake for e-governance processes not to connect with them.

^x Economic Commission for Africa, *op. cit.*, p. 26

^{xi} See Coleman, S. and Kaposi, I., (in press) *Citizens and the Internet in Emerging Democracies*, Open Society Institute