

Chapter VII

E-Governance in Uganda: Experiences and Lessons Learned from the DistrictNet Programme

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ABSTRACT

E-governance is a powerful tool for bringing about change to government processes in the developing world. It operates at the crossroads between Information and Communication Technology and government processes and can be divided into three overlapping domains: e-administration, e-services and e-society. To succeed, e-governance must be firmly embedded in existing government processes; supported, both politically and technically, by the governments; and provide users with reasons to use these on-line domains. To maximize the impact, process change must be part and parcel of e-governance. This chapter presents and evaluates the ongoing DistrictNet e-governance programme in Uganda which was set up in 2002 to provide transparency at the local government level and improve the provision of public information using ICT. DistrictNet's achievements are presented and evaluated according to the criteria of the three domains of e-governance and their impact on government processes. On the basis of this evaluation, we elicit lessons that can be used to guide smaller programmes at the local government level in the developing world.

INTRODUCTION

In the developing world, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is often welcomed

as an important instrument for accelerated change. ICT programmes are used to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of organizations and

to help align processes with best practices from the developed world.

Governments in the developing world are under a lot of international and national pressure to review and update their processes. Internationally, donors and governments in the developed world are urging governments of developing nations to increase transparency, support decentralization, decrease corruption and participate in global digital information sharing. Nationally, the private sector demands more openness and willingness to participate in transparent relationships, and citizens are asking their governments to provide better, faster services and to extend their information and service offerings to the rural areas. As a result of these pressures, governments in the developing world are challenged to change more than ever before (United Nations, 2003).

E-Governance is defined by the United Nations as “A government that applies ICT to transform its internal and external relationships” (United Nations, 2003). ICT allows a government’s internal and external communication to gain speed, precision, simplicity, outreach and networking capacity, which can then be converted into cost reductions and increased effectiveness - two features desirable for all government operations, but especially for public services. ICT also enables 24/7 usefulness, transparency and accountability, as well as networked structures of public administration, information management and knowledge creation. In addition, it can equip people to participate in an inclusive political process that can produce well-informed public consent, which is, increasingly, the basis for the legitimacy of governments.

This chapter reports on the experiences of DistrictNet, an ongoing e-governance programme in the East African country of Uganda which tries to provide transparency at the local government level and to improve the provision of public information through the use of ICT. The implementation of this programme can be considered as an action based research with the goal to measure the impact evaluate this programme against a

theoretical background, and also to draw practical lessons from the programme that could provide guidance to new e-governance programmes in the development context. After a short introduction to Uganda the chapter begins by providing some theoretical background for e-governance, which is important to better understand the objectives and design of the DistrictNet programme. In the section entitled ‘DistrictNet–Uganda’ we discuss the programme, focusing on its beginnings and its achievements so far. In the final section entitled ‘Conclusions and Lessons Learned’ we evaluate the programme in a larger context and elicit lessons learned from DistrictNet.

SHORT INTRODUCTION TO UGANDA

Uganda is one of the poorest countries in the world. In 2005, the per capita income was estimated to be approximately US\$250. Life expectancy at birth remains low: 43 years in 2004, compared to 47 years in 1990. Similarly, infant and child mortality has not improved much over the same period and today remains at around 100 respectively 150 per 1,000 live births. Nevertheless, the country’s firm commitment to poverty reduction, as spelled out in its Poverty Reduction Strategy, produced several positive results in the area of development, which brought the country closer to reaching the Millennium Development Goals:

- The number of adults with HIV/AIDS declined significantly over the last decade from about 18 percent in the early 1990s to 6.1 percent in 2005.
- Access to safe water increased from 54 percent in 2000 to 65 percent in 2005 in urban areas and from 50 percent in 2000 to 55 percent in 2003 in rural areas.
- Net enrolment rates for primary schooling increased from 62.3 percent in 1992 to 86 percent in 2005.

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