

E-Government Readiness in East and Southern Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Governments in East and Southern Africa, like their counterparts in developing and developed world, are under increasing pressure from donor agencies and non-governmental organizations to improve service delivery to citizens and at the same time be able to demonstrate accountability and transparency in the management of public resources (International Records Management Trust, 2004). Most countries in East and Southern Africa, largely began to appreciate the importance of sound public record management practices during the 1980s and 1990s. This period experienced increased donor pressure especially from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) through their structural adjustment programmes (SAPS) that was exerted on the recipients of global donor funding in an attempt to remedy the economic hardships that characterise most developing countries including those in Africa. Structural Adjustment Programmes were meant to provide the best opportunity to implement public sector reforms in order to promote better use of public resources and enhance accountability by governments to their citizens (Wamukoya, 2000).

To meet the accountability and transparency demands of the global donor agencies and also the need to meet the increasing demands by citizens for efficient delivery of services, governments worldwide are now taking advantage of the revolution that is taking place in information and communications technologies especially the Internet, the personal computer, the mobile phone, and other modern communication devices. The concept of e-government in its simplest form is now the catchword that is increasingly being used to imply the delivery of government services online. Heeks (2002) defines e-government as the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to improve the activities of public sector organisations. E-government is claimed as an efficient means to streamline public sector functions and increase

citizen participation in the running of public affairs (Wamukoya, 2000).

Governments in East and Southern Africa like their counterpart in a developed world, are increasingly turning to e-government to streamline public sector functions and increase citizen participation in the running of public affairs (Wamukoya, 2000). However, in an attempt to implement e-government projects, countries in East and Southern Africa face numerous challenges such as lack of requisite skills and competencies in e-records management; lack of enabling policy and legislative framework; lack of standards and formal methodologies for managing e-record; and inadequate infrastructure.

BACKGROUND

The countries of sub-Saharan Africa in general and many public sector institutions are turning to e-government by moving online, and conducting business using e-mail and the Internet. This has implications for information management with regard to accountability, transparency, accuracy, reliability, and security. For the purpose of this article, the countries of East Africa will refer to Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania under the umbrella of the East Africa Community (EAC), while those of Southern Africa under the banner of the South African Development Community (SADC) will include: Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Tanzania is both a member of EAC and SADC.

HISTORY OF E-GOVERNMENT

The European e-government observatory, that has the responsibility to provide a synopsis of the e-government situation and progress in Europe notes that the concept of e-government, became more pronounced in the 1990s

and was aimed at enhancing progress towards an information society status (IDABC, 2005) as customers increasingly expected government to be accessible and convenient. In Canada, for example, the Government Online strategy paved way for the creation of e-government services in 1999 (Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2004). On the other hand, in the United States, Government Paperwork Elimination Act of 1998 compelling federal agencies to provide the public with the option of submitting, maintaining, and disclosing required information electronically instead of on paper was a significant stimulus for e-government development (Relyea & Hogue, 2003).

In Asia, Wescott, Pizarro, and Schiavo-Campo (2001) point out that governments in the region are only in the initial phases of adopting information and communication technology to improve financial management, streamline the delivery of government services, enhance communication with the citizenry, and serve as a catalyst for empowering citizens to interact with the government. Similarly, in Africa, Heeks (2002) points out that though governments have been using information technology for more than 40 years, key innovations such as computer networks, intranets, and the Internet started to emerge on the continent in the late 1990s. E-government phenomenon is therefore a new paradigm sweeping government enclaves both in developed and developing world. Oyomno (1998) points out that e-government is still undergoing development to provide an overarching conceptual framework. He points out that the development of e-government has evolved from merely using advanced ICT to deliver public services through to electronic service delivery as a new way of doing business in government, to currently locating e-government within the context of the emergent information and knowledge age.

MEASURING THE DEGREE OF E-GOVERNMENT

The degree of e-government can be measured along a continuum of five stages namely, emerging, enhanced, interactive, transactional, and fully integrated or seamless (UNDP, 2002). At the emerging stage, a country commits itself to becoming an e-government player. At this stage, it has formal limited Web presence with static organisation and political information. In East and Southern Africa, amongst the countries at this stage include: Angola, Botswana, Malawi, and Lesotho. Similarly, the enhanced stage comprises of countries whose online presence has content that is usually dynamic and specialised such as government publications and legislations and is frequently updated. Countries in East and Southern Africa include: Kenya, Namibia, Mozambique,

Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (UNDP, 2002). In contrast, the interactive stage is characterised by governments that have dramatic increase in access to a wide range of services, and capacity to search specialised databases, and download forms and applications. Within East and Southern Africa, only two countries, namely; Mauritius and South Africa have attained this degree of e-government (UNDP, 2002). Likewise, the transactional stage is characterized by governments that have secure transactions such as obtaining visas, passports, death records, licenses, and permits online. Within the East and Southern Africa region, only South Africa is reported to be moving towards this stage. At the seamless or fully integrated stage, the Website has capacity to access any service clustered along common needs in a unified environment. No country in East and Southern Africa has reached this stage (UNDP, 2002).

E-READINESS PARADIGM

The degree of e-government depends largely on the level of e-readiness of the government concerned in various areas of its operations (Heeks, 2002). The concept of e-readiness like e-government emerged in the late 1990s when the term was first used by the Computer Systems Policy Project-CSPP (a public policy advocacy group of the United States information technology companies), when it developed the e-readiness assessment tool -the Readiness Guide for Living in the Networked World in 1998 to provide a unified framework to evaluate the breadth and depth of the digital divide at macro level between more and less developed countries. CSPP defines e-readiness with respect to a community that has high-speed access in a competitive market; with constant access and application of ICTs in schools, government offices, businesses, healthcare facilities, and homes; user privacy and online security and government policies which are favourable to promoting connectedness and use of the network (Bridges.org, 2001). In contrast, the Centre for International Development at Harvard University, defines e-readiness in relation to a society that has, the necessary physical infrastructure (high bandwidth, reliability, and affordable prices); integrated ICTs throughout business, communities and government (Bridges.org, 2001).

Heeks (2002) points out that the lack of e-readiness, contributes to the lack and potential failure of e-government initiatives. He identifies types of e-readiness that need to be considered in e-government plans. They include: readiness of data systems infrastructure in terms of quantity, quality and security of use for supporting government online; readiness of the legal infrastructure in

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