E–Government Strategies for Poverty Reduction in Africa

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STRATEGIES FOR E-GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) launched the African Information Society Initiative (AISI) in May 1996, which serves as a guiding framework for building the information and communication infrastructure in Africa. Since the launch of AISI, ECA has been supporting member states to embark on the development of National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) policies, plans and strategies, which are instrumental to materialize the visions enshrined in the AISI at the national level and to create an environment conducive for information and communication technology (ICT)-led development initiative. Thus far, more than 30 countries in the continent have embarked, in one form or the other, on the development of national ICT strategies, and more countries have expressed interests to initiate national ICT policies.

One specific element of the NICI process is to realign the country's development goals, more precisely the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) objectives, with the emerging ICT Policy. It is not an easy task, as traditionally the decision makers see ICT as a completely separate domain and often fail to see the role of ICT as a tool to attain the PRSP goals. Therefore, The Gambia NICI process was deliberately geared towards centering ICT policies and plans on the country's declared PRSP elements. The NICI policy that was developed consciously mapped the route to underlay the ICT tools that will help the country reach its PRSP destination swiftly, efficiently and more responsibly to the people.

This article illustrates an e-government strategy built on the objectives of poverty reduction as illustrated by a case study of The Gambia e-government strategy and NICI policy. The process and its evolved mechanism might serve as a model for e-government strategy and policy developers, planners and all stakeholders in general working in the area of digital governance.

NICI PROCESS: A CASE STUDY OF THE GAMBIA

The NICI process in The Gambia, as indicated above, is geared towards recognizing the areas where ICT would contribute to attaining the overall objectives of the four strategic issues identified in the PRSP besides other priority areas (called "Pillars") of NICI:

1. Enhancing the productive capacity of the poor.
2. Enhancing access to and the performance of social services.
3. Local-level capacity building.
4. Promoting participatory communication processes.

A captious analysis of the prevailing socio-economic condition in The Gambia further highlights the challenges faced by the country in attaining those visionary goals. The e-readiness baseline survey conducted by the National Technical Committee for eGovernment (NATCOM) in July 2003 with technical assistance from ECA was used to map the prevailing status of the country in terms of ICT infrastructure and plans.

During consultative meetings with various stakeholders from all sectors of the society—government, private and the civil society—efforts were made to further pinpoint vital developmental issues concerning poverty alleviation at the grassroots level that a comprehensive NICI policy for the country should address. The consultations were used to highlight and espouse the role of ICT not as an end itself but as a means to achieve the PRSP goals. These consultations led to the shaping of a vision statement that underlines the link between poverty reduction strategy and ICT policy:

To leverage the benefits of ICT for a people-centered, free market-based and export-oriented socio-economic development strategy built on principles of public-private partnership for wealth creation.

In other words, the NICI policy was aimed at supporting the strategic objectives of the PRSP:

To achieve higher growth rates in all spheres of socio-economic activities using ICT as a platform to exchange data, information, knowledge and a tool to implement applications and provide services in order to 'leapfrog' several stages of development through a participatory approach in building human resources and a conducive environment.

The PRSP priorities in The Gambia are focused on "attaining a high level of economic growth with a special focus on the critical areas of private sector development, agriculture, natural resources, tourism, trade, industry (SPA II, 2000), and a timely attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)." According to the September 2001 report of the World Bank (World Bank, 2001) on attainment of these objectives, The Gambia is on track toward the attainment of universal primary education by 2015, moderately off-track towards halving the 1990 illiteracy rates by 2005 and on track towards gender equity in primary and secondary education. The Gambia was the only country listed as being on track towards reducing infant and child mortality rates by two-thirds by the year 2015, and is also reported as being on track towards attainment of the target on access to clean drinkable water.

Therefore, the first phase of the extensive consultations under NICI Process boiled down to four critical poverty alleviation goals, addressed under the SPA-II for The Gambia as follows:

1. Enhancing the Productive Capacity of the Poor.
   1.1 Promoting labor-saving devices for women.
   1.2 Providing access to credit.
   1.3 Reorganizing agricultural research and development (R&D) to encourage labor-intensive agriculture and development of small ruminants.
2. Enhancing Access to and the Performance of Social Services.
   1.1 Expanding access to basic social services in rural areas.
   1.2 Delivering responsive social programs to the poor.
   1.3 Enhancing sustainability and quality of social services.
3. Local-Level Capacity Building.
   1.1 Political and legislative framework for decentralization.
   1.2 Empowerment of local government authorities to assume decentralized responsibilities.
4. Promoting Participatory Communications Processes.
   1.1 Enhancing participation beyond consultation.
   1.2 Addressing gender at national and local levels.
   1.3 Institutionalizing dialog between government, civil society, and donors.

POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY IN THE GAMBIA

The Gambia is among the poorest countries in the world. It was ranked 155 (out of 177) in the UNDP Human Development Index (UNDP, 2005). A series of exogenous shocks in the 1970s and 1980s, coupled with inappropriate policies, led to a decline in average GDP growth from 7.25% during the '70s to 3.25% during the late 1980s. The narrow resource base is a major inhibiting factor to economic resilience, aggravated by a high population growth rate.

Positive results in terms of stabilization under the economic reform program and its successor program (PSD) could not be sustained as the economy suffered adverse shocks, including the coup of 1994, which adversely affected tourism and aid inflows, devaluation of the CFA franc (Communauté Financière Africaine/African Financial Community franc) and declining world market prices for the primary export crop, groundnut. Consequently, real GDP growth declined from 5% in 1992 to about 1.7% during 1993-1996. Since 1998, the pursuit of prudent macro-economic policies and implementation of broad-based structural reforms have, together with favorable climate conditions, resulted in an improvement of the economic environment and laid the foundations for a sustained recovery. Real GDP growth increased to 5.3% between 1998 and 2001, and offers hope in the renewed effort to reduce poverty. The emerging situation presents an opportunity to investigate ways in which government can consolidate the achievements of successive stabilization programs and embark on pro-poor growth.

The outlook for economic performance in The Gambia remains gloomy, as the crop failure in 2002 and the rise in inflation are likely to have increased the level of poverty. Implementation of the PRSP has been weak due to limited capacity, absence of donor support and inadequate prioritization by the government (IMF, 2004). The government has committed itself to address these issues during the preparation of the 2005 budget.

On the brighter side, real GDP is estimated to have grown by 7% in 2003, largely on account of a recovery in agricultural output following the crop failure in 2002. The external current account deficit is estimated to have improved, and inflation as measured by 12-month changes in the official consumer price index (CPI) was 18% at the end of 2003. There are no reliable data yet for 2004 on real activity or the external account. The CPI inflation rate, however, declined from 18% in January to 16% in April, 2004. The overall fiscal deficit remained unchanged from 2002 at 4.5% of GDP in 2003.

Against this backdrop of structural and stabilization, reforms implemented so far focus on creating an enabling environment for private-sector activities, which include

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