

ICTs and Governance in Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) comprise a range of technology products and activities that enable the recording, storage, processing and retrieval, transmission, and reception of information. These products include computers, basic telecommunications services, e-mail, satellite communications, microelectronics, and the Internet. Arguably, these products and activities have found pervasive “functional inclusion” in virtually all sectors of any economy. Their use can help improve the quality of life for citizens, especially in the health, education environment, and agriculture sectors (Mansell & Wehn, 1998). IDEA (2000) asserts that ICTs and the phenomenal growth of the Internet also create new opportunities and challenges for the process of widening and deepening the process of good governance. For example, electronic communications through the use of ICTs offers the potential for greatly enhancing the transparency, efficiency and ease for sustainability of good democratic governance (IDEA, 2000).

It is apparent that though ICTs have emerged as the major engine of economic growth and international competitiveness in certain developing countries (mostly in Southeast Asia) and some of the larger developed economies, applications and developments of these technologies, however, are still at a minimal level, starting to make very small beginnings in African countries. Although there are some noticeable applications of ICTs to governance in some African countries, most of the countries are yet to grasp the underlying dynamics of ICT contribution to economic development. Of particular concern are those countries that lack the technology capacity and legal policy frameworks. The implications and importance of ICTs in different countries, thus, vary considerably in complexity, and this can be argued to be a function of the national level of technological capabilities (NLTC) available, as well as the governance regimes to guide and coordinate the efficient use of ICTs (Oyeyinka, 1997). Many of the less-developing countries (LDCs), especially in Africa, were by-passed in the earlier technological development train ... largely as a result of the historical antecedent of lack of assets and technological capabilities and good governance. Rather than being further left behind, these countries have started to appreciate the fact

that ICTs can present opportunities to allow them join in the new economic order, and help reduce some of the technological gap between the developed and less-developed economies (Dzidonu, 2001). Much research would seem to have gone into understanding the component of NLTC with very little done on the governance component. This article attempts to consider the application of ICTs in governance in Africa.

Defining Governance

Governance is sometimes viewed as the process by which a constituted government practically exercises its statutory power and authority towards achieving its set goals for society. Such perception, however, tends to minimize the importance of the role that the citizenry, as the governed, must be allowed to play in setting the dynamics and direction of governance. Accordingly, a more inclusive notion of governance is that it is the process by which people in a community govern themselves towards achieving the goal that they mutually set for themselves. This notion was aptly expressed by the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, Louise Frechette, who said that governance is “the process through which institutions, businesses, and citizens’ groups articulate their interests, exercise their rights and obligations and mediate their differences” (UNECA, 1999, p. 1).

According to Tiamiyu (2000), governance in society is about the communication, articulation, and sharing of vision, and the synchronization of action among various stakeholders or socio-economic groups in the society. In other words, governance is not just about the relationship between a governor and the governed, nor the mere exercise of authority by one group over others. It is the aggregate of the participation of all stakeholders and groups in the society in the economic and socio-political life of that society. According to UNESCO (2005a), governance refers to the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority in the management of a country’s affairs, including citizens’ articulation of their interests and exercise of their legal rights and obligations.

In developing world areas, such as in Africa, where satisfying basic necessities of life is still a challenge, the definition of governance must be inclusive. Good governance must include effective participation in public deci-

sion making and management by citizens, accountability, legitimacy, transparency, the rule of law, and an open and enabling environment for addressing socioeconomic problems. This requires participatory democracy and capacity by governments to respond to the demands of development. The capacity aspect must be emphasized, as "... a more open, participatory government is not a sufficient condition for good governance. Expression of citizen demands, whether for services, accountability, or transparency, is futile without a government willing and able to listen and respond. A democracy without effective administrative capacity is an empty shell" (Lal, Gaumer, & Manhica, 1999). As such, good governance is not only about providing an open and free political atmosphere, it also requires a government with the capacity to raise the standards of living and quality of life of the people.

WHAT ROLE FOR ICTS IN GOVERNANCE?

E-governance may be understood as the performance of governance via electronic medium to facilitate an efficient, speedy, and transparent process of disseminating information to the public and other agencies, and for performing government administration activities. E-governance is generally considered as a wider concept than e-government, since it can bring about a change in how citizens relate to governments and to each other. The idea of adopting ICTs is to move beyond the passive information-giving to active citizen involvement in the decision-making process. E-governance can bring forth new concepts of citizenship, both in terms of citizen needs and responsibilities. Its objective is to engage, enable, and empower the citizen.

The purpose of implementing e-governance is to enhance good governance. Good governance is generally characterized by participation, transparency, and accountability. Recent advances in communication technologies and the Internet provide opportunities to transform the relationship between governments and citizens in a new way, thus contributing to the achievement of good governance goals. The use of ICTs can increase the broad involvement of citizens in the process of governance at all levels by providing the possibility of online discussion groups and by enhancing the rapid development and effectiveness of pressure groups. Advantages for the government include that the government may provide better service in terms of time, and governance may be more efficient and effective. In addition, transaction costs can be lowered and government services become more accessible (Ningo, 1999).

The fields of implementation of e-governance are:

- **E-Administration:** Improving of government processes and of the internal workings of the public sector with new ICT-executed information processes.
- **E-Services:** Improving delivery of public services to citizens. Some examples of interactive services are: requests for public documents, requests for legal documents and certificates, issuing permits and licenses.
- **E-Democracy:** Creating greater and more active citizen participation and involvement enabled by ICTs in the decision-making process (Heeks, 2001).

According to Coleman (2003), e-governance offers the prospect of at least 10 major administrative and democratic improvements:

1. Cheaper and more effective management and processing of information
2. A freer flow of information between departments, agencies and layers within government
3. More professional administrators, supported by standardized, electronically embedded decision-making systems
4. The routine provision of services according to impersonal rules, as opposed to client list arrangements
5. Transparency, particularly in relation to the procurement of government services
6. Opportunities to work in partnership with the private sector in modernizing governmental processes
7. A freer flow of information between government and citizens
8. The strengthening of intermediary democratic institutions, such as parliaments, local government, civil-society organizations (CSOs), and independent media
9. Opportunities for citizens to participate more directly in policy development
10. Opportunities to combine traditional and modern methods of accountability

African Governance and ICTs: Some Reference Points

According to Coleman (2003), successful e-government initiatives can have demonstrable and tangible impacts on improving citizen participation and quality of life as a result of effective multi-stakeholder partnerships. There are many examples of successful African e-governance

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