Category: Concepts, Trends, and Challenges

Municipal Information Society in South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Information and knowledge are keys to development in the knowledge-based society. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are playing an increasingly important role in the daily lives of citizens, revolutionising work and leisure, and changing the rules of doing business. ICT encompass all technologies that facilitate the processing and transfer of information and communication services (United Nations, 2002). Mbigi (2000) indicated that interdependence and "networking are part of African cultural heritage" (p. 23). The African Networking Renaissance is about business organisations finding innovative ways of doing business by harnessing ICT, cultural strengths and inspiration to meet the challenges of its local delivery needs and global competition.

In the realm of government, ICT applications are promising to enhance the delivery of public goods and services to citizens not only by improving the process and management of government but also by redefining the traditional concepts of citizenship and democracy (Pascual, 2003). Van der Waldt (2004) noted that the South African government makes provision for the use of information technology (IT) to deliver certain services electronically (electronic governance). Because there is a need for municipalities in South Africa to realise "the strength and importance of a virtual infrastructure framework, which includes…technology and innovation" (eThekwini Municipality Integrated Development Plan 2003-2007, 2003, p. 24), the concept of a municipal information society (MIS) is proposed. An MIS conceptual framework to facilitate public service delivery is this article's objective. This article is challenging because it discusses a fundamental realignment of the manner in which information, knowledge, ICT, people, and business organisations need to network within a selected municipality in South Africa to meet the challenges of public service delivery.

The ideal attributes of successful public service delivery in a developing democratic society were formulated by an authoritative study of public service reform in South Africa (PRC, 1998). Public services are supposed to improve the lives of citizens in the policy areas for which a public service organisation (such as a municipality) is legally responsible. According to this approach to service delivery, local governments can utilise Internet technology to improve quality (better services), efficiency (cost effectiveness) and effectiveness (economic development). Electronic service delivery (ESD) is a method of delivering services and conducting business with customers, suppliers, and stakeholders to achieve local government developmental goals of improved customer service and business efficiency in a sustainable manner. The capacity to deliver services in a sustainable way refers to "the ability to perform appropriate tasks effectively, efficiently and sustainably" (Grindle & Hildebrand, 1995, p. 445).

There is no more important issue in South Africa than improving the delivery of public services (van der Waldt, 2004). eThekwini Municipality sees the e-government strategy (eThekwini Municipality Integrated Development Plan 2003-2007, 2003) and its Web site (http://www.durban.gov.za) as important management tools for improved citizen service delivery and communications to the business community in the eThekwini Municipality Area (EMA) in South Africa. The Web site is seen as "key to retaining constant communications" with its constituents (Corporate Policy Unit, 2004b, p. 64). Improving service delivery calls for a shift away from inward-looking bureaucratic systems and attitudes towards a search for new ways of working that puts the needs of the public first (van der Waldt, 2004). In African Networking Renaissance, there is thus a need for "how-to" knowledge and information on modernising existing service delivery in keeping with new, appropriate ways of serving the needs of South Africans. ICT represent a key enabler for improved service delivery to both its citizens and business organisations in the EMA. Cronjé, de Toit, Marais, and Motlatla (2004) noted that the crux of social responsibility is "the insistence of the community that business should in every respect be a 'good corporate citizen'" (p.106). The focus of this article is on ICT, eThekwini Municipality, and business organisations in the EMA. Good governance assumes that public service delivery (including ESD) is the implementation of public policies aimed at providing concrete services to business organisations.

BACKGROUND

The concept of governance developed out of the descriptive, positive public management school of thought, which originally sought to give new meaning to the traditional

role of government in society by focusing on the effectiveness and efficiency of the outputs and outcomes of governmental decisions. Cloete (2000) indicated that as a result of the perceived inefficiencies of the traditional public management system that were highlighted by the public management approach, this descriptive approach was in turn expanded to the more prescriptive new public management (NPM) school of thought. This then coined the phrase *governance* to describe what was regarded as a new way of governing in order to be more effective (Toonen, 1998). There are major pressures for a renewed focus on the issue of "service delivery" in South Africa. An important consequence of public service transformation in South Africa has been the changing nature of state–society interaction and exchange (van der Waldt, 2004). E-government is about transformation that helps citizens and business organisations find new opportunities in the world's knowledge economy (Pacific Council on International Policy, 2002). Governments that define e-government as simply moving services online "miss larger opportunities which will determine competitive advantage in the long run" (Caldow, 2002, p. 17).

Since its creation, use of the term *governance* has started to change over time (Cloete, 2000). For example, increasingly in South Africa "there has been recognition of the value of demonstrating accessibility, transparency and accountability beyond the traditional domain of financial performance" (eThekwini Municipality Integrated Development Plan 2003-2007, 2003, p. 48). This change in focus led to the conceptualisation of self-organising networks providing services by the governmental, private, and voluntary sectors (Rhodes, 1997). As a result of the complex interactions between these sectors, NPM scholars no longer agree about the ideal boundaries between the public and private sectors in society.

Governance is defined as "the patterns that emerge from governing activities of social, political and administrative actors" (Kooiman, 1993, p. 2). According to Kooiman, these patterns form to the emerging outcomes that constitute a more abstract framework at a higher level for day-to-day governing activities (Cloete, 2000). Inherent in Kooiman's governance definition is the idea of public-private interactions within a network of relationships aimed at achieving desired objectives for society. With the advent of new ICT, there is a need to reengineer work processes and systems. Both cybernetic and network models of governance see the task of governments (including local governments) as the establishment of effective interactions between local government and central government, business organisations, and civil society in catering for social needs. In such interactions, ICT plays an important role. Rhodes (1997) noted that governance "is the result of interactive socio-political forms of governing" (p. 51). Good governance assumes that public service delivery (including ESD) is the implementation of public policies aimed at providing concrete services to citizens and business organisations.

Definitions of e-government range from "the use of information technology (IT) to free movement of information to overcome the physical bounds of traditional paper and physical based systems" to "the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees" (Deloitte and Touche, 2003, p.1). However, it is not a simple matter. Ultimately, e-government aims to enhance access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens (Pascual, 2003). This effectively means the business community's use of innovative ICT (e.g., Internet and associated technologies) to deliver to all business organisations improved services, reliable information and greater knowledge in order to facilitate access to the governing process thereby improving customer satisfaction, improving cost effectiveness and efficiency, and promoting economic development in the EMA. E-government needs to find a positive developmental role. Heeks (2003) suggested that without this, "e-Government runs the risk of being a 21st century 'rusting tractor,' cast aside as it fails to fulfil its promise" (p. 1). E-government services focus on four main customers: citizens, the business community, government employees, and government agencies. The focus of this article is on the business community in the EMA.

eTHEKWINI MUNICIPALITY AREA IN SOUTH AFRICA

The population of eThekwini Municipality is 3.09 million citizens (Statistics South Africa, 2001). The population is an amalgamation of racial and cultural diversity. The eThekwini Municipality has a capital budget of US$337,760,000 (approximately ZAR2,29 billion) and an operating budget of US$1,262,537,000 (approximately ZAR8, 56 billion) for the 2004-2005 financial year (see http://www.durban.gov.za). The EMA's gross geographic product income is US$3,770 (approximately ZAR25,529) per person per annum, which is higher than the South African average of US$2,620 (approximately ZAR17,756) per person per annum. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of citizens in EMA are employed (URBAN-ECON, 2003). During 2004, eThekwini Municipality was voted the best metropolitan municipality in South Africa. It is the local authority governing the City of Durban, South Africa's major port and the second largest industrial hub after Johannesburg. Durban is becoming recognised for its ability to contribute towards building a knowledge and learning network not on on the African continent but also on an international scale (Corporate Policy Unit, 2004b).