

Chapter 44

Benchmarking Botswana's e-Government Initiatives with WSIS Principles: A Review of Progress and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The chapter assesses the state of e-Government projects to anchor Botswana's drive towards attainment of the goals of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Data for the study was obtained through a survey research design, which employed desk research and interviews with strategic respondents in the ICT sector in Botswana. Botswana's e-Government projects are then benchmarked against the WSIS Declaration of Principles and a Plan of Action and other international and regional strategic frameworks for ICTs. The findings reveal that while Botswana, through its various e-Government projects, has made some progress towards laying the foundation for meeting the goals of the WSIS and has reached other international milestones for ICTs, a lot remains to be done as the e-Government projects have yet to positively impact the lives of the majority of citizens. This is due to a number of factors that have to be addressed, including inadequate infrastructure, low citizen capacity in terms of skills, accessibility, and affordability of ICT systems, and absence of an enabling e-Legislative and policy framework. Among the proposed areas for future studies are measuring the levels of ICT uptake at the citizen (individual) level to determine levels of e-Participation.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a symbiotic relationship among the concepts of Information Society, Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), the Digital divide, and e-Government. Businessdictionary.com (2011) has defined the Information Society as “Post-industrial society in which Information Technology (IT) is transforming every aspect of cultural, political, and social life, and which is based on the production and distribution of information...” Businessdictionary.com further sees the Information Society as having different impacts on society: (1) influence of IT on home, work, and recreational aspects of the individuals daily routine, (2) as a stratification agent of society into new classes of those who are information-rich and those who are information-poor, and (3) as a tool for ‘loosening of the nation state’s hold on the lives of individuals’ with both positive and negative consequences such as the ‘rise of highly sophisticated criminals who can steal identities and vast sums of money through information related (cyber) crime’ (Businessdictionary.com, 2011). Information Society is also seen as referring to a stage in human development where human activities are largely enabled by information processing driven by computing and telecommunications devices and systems (Whatis, 2011). Information society is perceived both as a tool for eradicating the digital divide (with positive impact on human development) and as a tool for perpetuating the digital divide and domination of the information rich over the underprivileged information poor. The former view is largely held by development agencies such as the United Nations (ITU, WSIS 1 [2003], and WSIS 2 [2005]); the latter view is held by human rights advocates who see neo-liberal motives in international calls for the promotion of the attainment of the information society (Stallman, 2003; Burch, 2006).

This chapter adopts the view held by development agencies where information society, theoretically, is perceived as ‘... a society where all people

without distinction should have the opportunity and the right of access to and use of information through the application of digital technologies...’ (Mutula & Moahi, 2008, p. 179); an information society that caters for all people by providing them with information in many formats, and exposing them to the different technologies used for collecting, manipulating, and disseminating the information. And also where there is increasing use of computers; convergence of computing and telecommunications; e-Governance; e-Commerce; online education; universal access to telephony, the use of technology for community development; and use of information technology in the management of public utilities (Martin, 1995).

Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) simply refer to ‘pieces of equipment, networked infrastructure, and associated knowledge and skills for creating, manipulating, transferring, and using information or knowledge’ (Tiamiyu & Aina, 2008, p. 4). The digital divide refers to the barriers that, for a variety of reasons, exclude individuals, communities, nations, social groups, and regions from participating in an ICT-driven environment.

Mutula (2008) has characterised the digital divide as essentially being inequitable access to ICTs. Webopedia (2011) has defined the digital divide as:

A term used to describe the discrepancy between people who have access to and the resources to use new information and communication tools, such as the Internet, and people who do not have the resources and access to the technology. The term also describes the discrepancy between those who have the skills, knowledge, and abilities to use the technologies and those who do not. The digital divide can exist between those living in rural areas and those living in urban areas, between the educated and uneducated, between economic classes, and on a global scale between more and less industrially developed nations.

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