THE USE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY (ICT) IN E-SERVICE DELIVERY AND EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The current debate within the ASGISA and NEPAD policy structures of the South African Government is to enhance E-service delivery via Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for all citizens. This paper deals with the problem how ICT in governance may be constructed to facilitate greater accountability, transparency and reducing corruption through better financial, public information management, procurement and administrative systems. South Africans especially in rural areas have a limited access to ICT. The main barriers to ICT access relate to high cost of Internet access, connectivity problems, lack of technical skills to support maintenance and low number of computers with Internet connectivity at schools, libraries and other public places.

Keywords: - Information and Communications Technology (ICT), E-government, Service Delivery, Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsgiSA). and E-Citizens.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Emphasis on this paper would be based on challenges/barriers that South African citizens and government encounter on the process of effective and efficient service delivery through the use of ICT as well as bridging the digital divide. Good governance rests on the effective and efficient use of ICT and bridging the digital divide amongst the citizens. The transformation occurring are unique and unprecedented in many ways and has the potential of reaching the citizens who were marginalised from decision-making processes. South African government seek to reduce social exclusion and contribute to the wellbeing of its citizens.

Due to South Africa's history of segregation, the debate is still on how to change the lives of its citizens by addressing the issue of inequalities in freedom, access to information wealth and opportunity based on race. The marginalization of underprivileged people from the political process has been the cause of poor and unresponsive governance in the past.

Information of the South African e-service delivery –in its enhanced stage-- should be provided online about public services. Being aware of this fact, the South African Government is already in the process to improve service delivery and redressing the imbalances of the past. Subsequently, the pressure is on for citizen's needs and how it should be put first. Therefore ICT

services need to be better, faster and more responsive. The use of ICT in e-service delivery means to all South African transferring government services /activities into online formats. The Batho-Pele principles need to be driven harder and taken to heart by all public servants. "Batho-pele" exactly means putting the citizens first in transforming public service delivery in a changing South Africa.

Such principles includes among others, openness sand transparency, service standards, access, information availability, and delivering best value need to be used in each and every department. The Implementation of ICT for development and e-government strategies, South Africa's President Mbeki noted in his state of the Nation address before to first joint sitting of the third democratic parliament on 21st of May 2004, that the departments of Public Service and administration, Provincial and local government, as well as communities will work to ensure that modern Information and ICTs are introduced to assist their developmental and governance efforts.

This paper further seeks to debate how South African government is engaged in the electronic governance and effective and efficient service delivery. Citizen needs to understand how ICT can improve change in their daily lives, and as a result stand behind the government in its efforts to introduce policies and legislation that facilitates the developments. Challenges facing South African government are to ensure that the projects and government intervention programmes such as Reconstruction and Development (RDP), the Macro-economic Strategy, Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR), and the White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service Delivery (WPTPSD) succeed at all costs. The E-NEPAD ocean cable alongside the West coast of Africa is a good example to emphasise Africanisation as well.

1.1   South Africa's stage of Development in ICT and service Delivery

The advent of the Internet has presented opportunities to overcome difficulties in service delivery. Public Sector organisations can potentially provide vast quality of information, and guide to consumers towards other sources of information through the medium of Internet facilities.

South Africa is on the intermediate stage or level on the ICT development and gets itself ready to provide online public services. By the year 2002, a large number of government departments in South Africa provided some form of e-governance through their official websites. The largely articulated government policies, provided information on the country's political system, listed government departments and reports, and provided tenders, drafts; bills etc., among others, the different governments in Africa had websites with variety of links to that of South Africa (Anzinger, 2001).

E-government should always be an instrument for better governance and improving communication between government and citizens. At this stage South African government departments are still struggling with online administration, communal and social services in order to improve the people's lives.

Today Information and Communications Technology (ICT) constitutes the fastest growing component of the global economy and the revenue generated by the interactive information industry may have reached $3.5 trillion (Hariharan, 1999).

The rapid advances in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) provide the means to get information to the poor marginalised South African communities that can have a far greater impact on the lives of the poor. New technologies in this country created opportunities for quality, diversity and relevance of information needed by the disadvantaged citizens. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is helping the disadvantaged in fostering more participatory processes of governance as well as new forms of social and economic innovation.

The revolution of ICT has facilitated the globalisation of the economy, business, finance and culture (Berleur, 1997, Heeks, 1999). The application of ICT within the government services and thus can be divided into: access of information, transaction services and citizen participation.

ICT plays a vital role in enabling the modernisation of government and its services. It also allows both individual and companies the opportunity to interact with government 24/7 using different means of communication such as:

- Desktops,
- Laptops,
- Cell phones,
- Telephones,
- Self service kiosks, and
- ATM's

Access by citizens to e-government services depends on the availability of personal computers and their connection to the Internet. In addition to private access in households, users may also access the Internet via Public libraries, tele-centres and internet-cafe's (Durrant, 2002).

The rapid advances in ICT infrastructure provide the means to get information to poor and marginalised communities in order to improve the quality of lives of the poor people. ICT also assist poor people by fostering more participatory process of governance as well as new forms of social and economic innovation that directly benefit poor people.

1.2   E-governance and Service Delivery

South Africa has nine (9) provinces and each has its own Provincial legislature and Provincial Administration. Each Provincial government has various departments responsible for various aspects of service delivery including health, social development and welfare services, education, agriculture and conservation, safety and security, transport, local government planning and housing. Provincial departments are key agencies of service delivery. The country constitution provides for co-operative governance, whereby National, Provincial and Local government co-function interdependently but in an interrelated manner.

The rationale behind usage and introduction of e-governance is that e-governance would reduce costs and delays in delivering services, expand citizens access to Public Sector information, reinforce innovation, increase transparency and Public accountability (Pardo, 2000, Heeks, 2001, Norris, 2001).

The emergence of e-governance has significantly changed the nature of the relationship between citizen's and public servants. The e-governance movement not only promises higher quality and better delivery of services, it also offer stronger bonds between public servants and citizens based on transparency and accountability (Schware, 2000).

The use of new technologies in governance undoubtedly provide an opportunity to raise the quality of life, foster economic growth and help the citizens in everyday life.

The use of Internet facilities represents more than just a new channel for service delivery, but an enormous change to governance itself. On the other hand the Internet serves a catalyst that challenges age-old assumptions about how governments should operate, the use of Internet has started to shift logistics and organisation of government structures from being just a product or process-centric approach rather to a customer-centric model (Deloitte Research, 2001).

Introduction of more efficient electronic transactions, a bureaucratic administration would become more transparent, efficient and market-like. Provision of efficient e-service may require dramatic transformation in governance of the citizens. E-government for good governance is the description of applications one could get in for an effective and efficient service delivery to all citizens o South Africa.

Good governance relates to a broad array of practices that maximize the common practices and management styles. Some of its visible attributes are participation in government, rule of law, transparency and accountability. In the public management realm emphasis of good quality of service valued by

citizens, promotion of increasing managerial autonomy, especially, the reduction of central agency controls, demands, measures, etc. Electronic service delivery can and does contribute to good governance in South Africa.

1.3 Challenges / Barriers of smooth running of effective and efficient e- service delivery through ICT in e-government

President Thabo Mbeki noted in his State of the Nation Address before to the first joint sitting of the third democratic parliament on 21 May 2004, that the departments of Public Service and Administration, Provincial and Local Government, and Communications will work together to ensure that modern information and communications are introduced to assist in the developmental and governance efforts.

The Presidential Review Commission on the reform and transformation of the public Service in South Africa (1998) identified a lack of strategic direction in the utilisation of information management, information management systems and information technology, to support government's goals. There are a number of challenges that needs to be addressed for South Africa information systems to be able to deliver on the development priorities.

As previously stated, the main debate revolves around the fact that the majority of South African citizens lives in poverty and has no access to ICT. The greatest problem is the digital divide. South African communities, especially those in rural areas and other disadvantaged parts of the country have very limited access even to electricity and telephone lines. Another main barrier to ICT access relate to high cost of Internet access, connectivity problems, lack of technical skills to support maintenance and low number of computers with internet connectivity at schools, libraries and other public places.

In early nineties IT technologies were supplemented by ICT technologies to extend its use for wider sector application with policy emphasis on reaching out to communities. The focus of this approach is about using ICT to support and transform the external working of the government by both processing and communicating information (CPSI, 2003)

The challenges facing South African government today are to ensure that the Reconstruction and Development (RDP) of South Africa succeed. The digital divide can potentially limit the success of digital government. Historically, the education infrastructure in South Africa has been segregated and unequal. Consequently, ICT provision in schools still reflects this fact. Unfortunately, the lack of relevant content and application is still a significant problem in our country.

The lack of tradition of intercommunication and public discussion as well as lack of culture of openness and skill to obtain personal information from public

sphere is a serious problem in our country. The South African government departments are poorly linked while the systems in use often differ from one department to the other and in many cases do not allow them to communicate efficiently with each other, businesses and with citizens. One other point in the debate that needs to be mentioned is the problem of administration staff's special education and training in order to be able to use the current e-government's resources fruitfully.

1.4 Resolutions to the effective and efficient use of ICT in South African government pertaining to the Challenges cited.

Introduction of digital governance is a way to ensure that citizens have equal right to be part of decision-making processes which affect them directly or indirectly, and influence their conditions and quality of lives. The use of new technologies in governance can undoubtedly provide an opportunity to raise the quality of life, foster economic growth and help citizens in their everyday lives.

Any successful technical and organizational innovation requires a stable alignment of the actors: designers, vendors, users and sponsors (Latour, 1993).

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) the challenge for all countries is to create and develop a system of governance that promotes, supports and sustains human development. While on the other hand e-governance is regarded as the ICT enabled route to achieving good governance since it integrates people, processes, information, and technology in the service of governance initiative.

However, E-government would bring additional benefits for instance Home Affairs department in South Africa is overloaded with human activity problems including birth, marriage and death registrations, changing documents, and working permits. This paper cite this department particularly since it had a situation of one of its officials who were held accountable by a certain Kabelo Thibeli because he had waited too long for his identity document and took staff members hostage. (Cf SA Media paper clippings. 2006). The whole hostage drama could have been avoided if the online administration was righteously utilised. Also to register a newly born baby, the people from rural areas have to travel long distances. To the opinion of officials unregistered children do not exist. Really a shocking point up for debate…

Effective electronic government seeks to support social, economic and political development, to reduce social exclusion, to contribute to the well-being of citizens, and strengthening of the relationships across ministries and other government bodies.

In the South African government different departments needs to integrate online services in the form of one stop service as part of effective and efficient

service delivery to all citizens. It needs to be a simple, time-saving and flexible service delivery; there should be no more long queues in service points such as pension payouts, payments of taxes, housing subsidies, and birth and death registrations.

Disadvantaged society needs special attention and support regarding access and use of e-government services. E-government services should take into account the specific needs of different groups of users.

Poverty reduction through ICT can be achieved through several means. Firstly, the educational aspect on increased access to information and knowledge enable poor people to understand their situation and voice their opinions and needs. Secondly, ICT has an impact on health through increased volumes and flows on medical records and information.

It is important for our debate that the use of ICT in government should be implemented to facilitate a more effective and efficient use of development resources by fostering greater accountability, transparency and reducing corruption through better financial, public information management, procurement and administration systems. The realisation of electronic government and transformation of service delivery would be accompanied by basic decisions and day to day practical actions in South Africa.

2.   CONCLUSION

ICT plays a vital role in speeding up the flow of information and knowledge between government and citizens as well as transforming the way in which government and citizens directly interacts effectively and efficiently. Transparency, efficiency and effectiveness should be the new metrics for public organisations, transparency and universal access to information are necessary for interactive creativity and world solidarity. The Batho-Pele principles need to be driven hard and taken to heart by all public servants, openness and transparency, service standards, access, information availability, and delivering best results to be practised by each and every South African government department.

There is no doubt that South Africans have been sensitised about the value of e-government future programmes on IT and ICT application in improving administration and planning of government. ICT provision in disadvantaged communities or rural areas needs to utilised efficiently and bridge the digital divide and should further be aimed to provide a sustainable ICT structures.

Those without access to ICT "are left behind" (Bridges.org, 2005) and are not in a position to exploit the rewards on increased income, better quality of life, and the associated cultural and political advantages.

E-government fortifies good governance practices such as e-management, e-accountability, e-transparency and e-freedom of information, rule of law and combating corruption. E-government is expected to develop content of

immediate local relevance, and preserve national history, heritage and traditional knowledge (Sawe, 2004)

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