Public Service Delivery in a Municipal Information Society

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INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, there has been a significant growth in electronic Government (eGovernment) at local, national and international levels. While there is much hyperbole surrounding eGovernment, there has been considerable transformation in the ways government and the governed interact with one other (Worrall, 2012, p. i). The main challenge by local government is its ability to effectively insert the technology into its everyday performance. The South African Minister for Public Service and Administration, Lindiwe Sisulu, notes that "eGovernment is an essential component to improve service delivery for all," build an inclusive information society (IS) and to integrate government information systems that provide optimised service delivery to government information and services (Sisulu, 2012). However, the interaction by and government and local government (such as eThekwini Municipality in South Africa) with its population may be constrained by information and communication technologies (ICT) because a significantly large population who exist outside the World Wide Web (hereinafter referred to as 'the Web'), do not have access to ICT – paradoxically they are the ones most dependent on publically provided services from a local government which is responsible for providing services to its citizens in a defined geographical area.

The objectives of this article are twofold:

- To discuss the importance of harnessing appropriate ICT for enabling service delivery in municipal areas in South Africa; and
- To posit that from deploying appropriate ICT in a municipal area - for example, broadband services in the eThekwini Municipal Area (EMA), a Municipal Information Society (MIS) can emerge with a framework that will serve to facilitate service delivery and forms of engagement (*e.g.* communication) with households, the private sector and civil society.

BACKGROUND

Proponents of the linkage between ICT and service delivery tend to believe that they can utilise tools such as the Internet, the Web and Government) services to deal with local concerns. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) sees the use of ICT, and particularly the Internet, as a tool to achieve better government (OECD, 2003 p. 23) as community networks provide a range of information services for citizen neighbourhoods, citizens and rural areas (Schuler, 1996). While the use of ICT is not widely dispersed in South Africa, globally, governments are becoming involved in ICT initiatives by developing "public access computer networks" to improve service delivery and increase citizen participation (Guthrie & Dutton, 1992). ICT "must be regarded as a pre-requisite for economic and social development in South Africa" (Averweg & Erwin, 2011, p. 94). Sisulu (2012) suggests that "technology and services must be designed ... to reflect a new social consciousness and commitment to nation building and development." In South Africa, the provision of broadband services, such as eGovernment for the benefit of local communities, is aimed at improving the quality of life in households. Governments aim to improve the services they provide to citizens and organisations by using the options offered by ICT (Aydinli, Brinkkemper & Ravesteyn, 2012 p. 104). ICTs have become critical to enriching citizen's lives and providing citizen-centred services (Sisulu, 2012). When using such services, local government is responsible for the communication between households, the private sector and civil society in a secure way.

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Information and knowledge are keys to help meet the challenges of a rapidly changing society (Averweg, 2005) and ICT are playing an increasingly important role in the daily lives of households, revolutionising work and leisure and changing the rules of doing business. In the present day information society (IS) in South Africa, there has been change and the impact of using ICT in a variety of public services has been felt (Sisulu, 2012). An IS describes a society and a New Economy[1] age that makes the best possible use of new ICT where people get maximum 'benefits of new technology in all aspects of their lives: at work, at home and at play' (www.isc.ie). For example, in the realm of ICT, eThekwini Municipality's broadband service (named Metro©onnect) in the EMA, has spare broadband capacity on its fibre optic network that will be sold to households in the EMA at significantly reduced rates. ICT encompass all technologies that facilitate the processing and transfer of information and communication services (United Nations, 2002).

Creating a connected society means utilising technology to deliver public information, services and transactions efficiently for the convenience of households, the private sector and civil society. A lack of or limited access to ICT and information is characterised by the term 'digital divide'. The digital divide is often addressed from two perspectives: one to access to technology (computers) and networks (infrastructure) and the other being knowledge and socio-economic factors (Lindskog & Johansson, n.d., p. 7). There is an interdependence on households, the private sector and civil society to facilitate social connectedness on the information highway. Significant importance should be placed on initiatives to transform existing service delivery paradigms to cater for ICT and thereby subvert the digital divide.

SERVICE DELIVERY

Service delivery can be regarded as *the* function of a municipality. Fox & Meyer (1995, p. 118) define service delivery as the provision of public activities, benefits or satisfactions to citizens. Service delivery relates both to the provision of tangible public goods (*e.g.* water and electricity supply) and intangible services (*e.g.* provision of ICT broadband services). van der Waldt (2004) notes that the South African Government makes provision for the use of ICT to deliver certain services electronically.

eThekwini Municipality sees the eGovernment strategy (EM, 2003) and its website at www.durban.gov.za as important management tools for improved citizen service delivery and communication to households and the private sector in the EMA. The website is seen as "key to retaining constant communications" with its constituents (Making City Strategy Come Alive, 2004 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 which puts the needs of the public first (van der Waldt, 2004). From a citizen's perspective, services that are delivered to them must be of a high quality and delivered at their convenience (Sisulu, 2012). Since service delivery calls for a customer-centric paradigm, ICT can be used to facilitate communication between households and eThekwini Municipality in the form of online feedback in eThekwini Municipality's various regional service centres. ICT thus represents a key enabler and catalyst for improved service delivery to households, the private sector and civil society in the EMA. eGovernment is seen as a catalyst for a productivity-driven way of working (Millar, 2008).

Definitions of eGovernment vary. Grant & Chau (2006, p. 80) developed a useful definition of eGovernment which will be used in this article. These researchers define eGovernment as a tool:

- To develop and deliver high quality, seamless and integrated public services;
- To enable effective constituent management; and
- To support the economic and social development goals of citizens, business and civil society.

From this definition, eGovernment is clearly about developing new forms of communication between households, the private sector and civil society (Worrall, 2012, p. ii). While the concept of eGovernment involves using ICT (*e.g.* Internet and broadband services) to deliver public services, it is not a simple matter. Ultimately, eGovernment aims to enhance access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens (Pascual, 2003). In South Africa *Batho Pele* is the constitutionally mandated service delivery philosophy and ICT is seen as an aid for fostering service delivery.