

Chapter 36

Electronic Government and Rural Development in Anglophone West Africa

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ABSTRACT

E-government has taken off since the end of the millennium. It has emerged as a viable means to address development issues and challenges especially at the grassroots level because citizens find empowerment through access to information. This chapter notes that Anglophone West Africa has been hard hit with poverty and disease, and this has had an immense effect on the quality of social, cultural, and political lives of the people. It identifies the major problems facing the isolated rural communities and various operational and infrastructure problems associated with implementing e-government are discussed, along with possible solutions. The chapter recommends, among others, that Anglophone West Africa must pursue a more active role in the formulation of national policies and strategies to promote the information economy, to reap huge benefits in terms of economic and social growth/development.

INTRODUCTION

In the fast globalizing world economy of today, governments the world over are recognizing the importance of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in development. All governments throughout the world are facing the challenge of improving the efficiency, productivity and quality of information and knowledge services to citizens at the grassroot. As a result, ICT calls for a new generation of electronically supported governmental services, termed as e-government

(electronic government). E-government is a western invention and has been imported into developing countries in different ways. It embodies design and implementation characteristics of its original context (Heeks, 2006). The adoption of e-government in developing countries is of equal importance like in developed countries. A high adoption rate is poised to create value of investing in e-government initiatives to governments and their customers and to bring about development at the grassroot level. In order to achieve this,

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the nature of e-government and the context of implementation play fundamental roles.

E-government has emerged as a viable means to address development issues and challenges because citizens find empowerment through access to information. Emerging developing economies such as Republic of Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia have embarked upon e-government initiatives so as to provide a just, fair and equitable governance environment to the governed and they have achieved tremendous success in national and rural development. African governments have also understood and appreciated the contribution of e-government to the government agenda and the development of rural areas. At the moment, strategic plans have been initiated in Egypt, Senegal, Mozambique, South Africa and Kenya. Although, a claim cannot be made that all of African leaders have understood the importance of e-government, a handful of them have accepted the notion of e-government and recognise that this concept has come to stay if Africa were to compete favourably in global economic value chains.

In Anglophone West Africa, the adoption of e-government in rural development represents likely pathways out of poverty and food insecurity. This widespread perception is supported by large amounts of evidence indicating that the vast majority of the populations of the sub-region keep living in rural areas, under subsistence or semi-subsistence regimes. How to tap such development and growth potential remains, however, an open question. Clearly, rural smallholders face access barriers to information, and their voices are often not heard in the policy fora where the decisions that affect their livelihoods are taken (Adam et al, 2010:1; World Bank 2007:153). However, Anglophone Western African nations, namely, Nigeria, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone have lagged far behind.

It is instructive to note that there has been relatively little scholarly analysis and evaluation of Anglophone West African e-government and rural development efforts. The little efforts has

come largely from outside Africa and has not been updated for recent developments. Given the rapidity of growth in Anglophone West Africa of information technology in general and e-government in particular over the past decade, more up-to-date assessments are needed. More recently a few African scholars have come on the scene presenting a more Afro-centric view, grounded in the realities of the region. Why is e-government important to the English-speaking countries of West Africa? Because these countries in particular are inheritors of the British tradition of collecting and reporting information and commissioning studies on a myriad of topics. Membership of the British Commonwealth carries an implied responsibility for governments to provide all kinds of information to their citizens in order to promote the public good, and reciprocally, citizens of the British Commonwealth in West Africa legitimize their governments to the extent that they accept their governments' role as reliable information providers. Due to these problems, management of different services, natural resources and financial resource mobilization in rural areas, it would be necessary to study the application of e-government using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)/ wireless technologies for its rural development (Kalpana et al, 2011). This chapter therefore examines the influence of e-government on rural development efforts in Africa with special reference to Anglophone West African countries.

E-GOVERNMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN MEANINGFUL CONTEXT

Many studies have defined e-government in different ways. Although the term is widely used, there is no one common definition of e-government. E-government seeks to improve the activities of public sector organisations using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Some view E-government primarily as E-commerce facilitat-

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