Chapter 7

Freedom of Information and Records Management:
Towards Effective e–Government Accountability Paradigm in Africa?

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of e-Government programmes in Africa have been occasioned by the desire to improve public service delivery and to further enhance the government-citizen relationship through provision of access to information. Key to e-Government is information- its creation, management, and uploading onto a defined platform; its consistent updating and archiving; and its access by citizens irrespective of their level of education, social standing, or geographical location. The main outcome of e-Government is enhanced accountability of the governance process. Accountability in e-Government is a value-add to the government-citizen relationship in that citizens become assured that government will account to them as collaborators in the governance process. The reality in Africa is that the adoption of e-Government on its own is unlikely to yield the needed accountability mechanism. This chapter argues that an e-Government programme in Africa, supported by Freedom of Information and records management will result in governance which is both accountable and integral.

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of e-Government in Africa has been motivated by the desire to improve public service delivery, interaction between citizens and government, and to enhance citizen-government

relationship through provision of access to information. Clearly, e-Government goes beyond just the citizens and government relationship but as chapter 16 advances, it includes further relationships with the private sector, community based organisations, civil society organisations and

development agencies. Another key relationship for e-Government is that which exists between public servants and government. It is the public servants who ensure that the e-Government platform works in that the technology driving it is working; services and information are available for citizens to access, and to see to it that policy, strategic and related implementation issues are addressed. While there are many stakeholders to the successful uptake of e-Government, this chapter will restrict itself to three, namely: government, public servants and citizens. Using the authors' experience of the uptake of e-Government in Africa, this chapter argues that an important outcome of e-Government must be improved accountability of the governance process, and that these three stakeholders are imperative to this. However, the accountability will only be effective where Freedom of Information has been legislated and records management is taken as a strategic facet of the public service.

UNDERSTANDING OF E-GOVERNMENT AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR AFRICA

E-government is primarily a platform for enabling government agencies to improve their service delivery and enhance their interaction with citizens through e-Services. The e-Services provided to citizens are meant to promote efficient and effective government whilst at the same time fostering participatory democracy. Thus, citizens engage in e-Government to receive information from the public sector and other information generating agencies. Accordingly, e-Government implementation should not only aim to improve operational efficiency but also to instil a sense of urgency with regard to productivity among government agency employees in particular (Rorissa & Demisse, 2010; Nkomo, 2012). However, e-Government as a strategy can only be effective to the degree to which it achieves its goals. If there

are no specific statutory provisions with regard to its implementation it is more likely to fail. There are numerous facilitating conditions for successful e-Government implementation and these include, among others, a conducive political environment supported by robust legal frameworks premised on information access and sharing values; open leadership styles and existence of human capital (Bwalya, 2009; Batista & Cornock, 2009; Heeks & Bailur, 2007; Kumar et. al, 2007; West, 2004; Napoli, Ewing & Pitt, 2000).

There is little question that e-Government initiatives have brought about the desired social and political impacts. Indeed, online interaction with, and access to, information held by the government has bolstered citizens' appetite for democratic participation. In the context of Africa however, a key question being debated is, what does e-Government mean for the continent? Finding answers to this question is a useful yardstick in gauging the extent to which this innovation has been accepted overall.

Although Africa lags behind in the adoption and implementation of e-Government in comparison to Europe and North America there exists evidence which tend to suggest that this initiative has been well received within the continent (United Nations E-Government Survey, 2012; Heeks, 2002). For the most part, governments have put in place online services through websites thereby allowing their citizens to access a variety of services such as online vehicle registration, online passport applications, judicial services and filling of tax returns. Efforts have also been made to formulate laws to regulate use of online transactions and long-term strategies to support the e-Government initiatives and projects are now in existence. Overall, African governments recognize the transformative nature of e-Government and are thus making concerted efforts to consolidate infrastructural and regulatory frameworks to broaden its reach to their citizens (Burke, 2012; Bwalya et al, 2012; Schuppan, 2009; Carter & Weerakkody, 2008; Kumar et al, 2007).

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