Chapter 8

E–Government
A Case Study of East African Community Initiative

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ABSTRACT

E-government and other applications of information technologies can provide powerful means for global, national and local justice, increased democracy, decentralized decision-making, and more efficient service delivery. In general, e-government initiatives are aimed at modernizing governmental agencies in their dealings with the public and extending services into online environments. In various African countries, e-government initiatives have begun; they have allowed citizens easy access to public services and lobbying opportunities at policy level decision-making. This chapter identifies prospects and challenges in e-government and e-governance in the East African region. The author sketches harmonizing strategies for the development of an ethical framework for their implementation and argues that the challenge of e-governance in developing countries resides in the challenge of "good governance" as well as issues of accessibility and user skills.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the role of the modern information and communication technologies (ICT) in the development of e-government and e-democracy in the East African region, particularly, in the countries of East African Community (EAC): Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, and Rwanda. Founded in 1999, EAC is a regional intergovernmental or-

ganization with the goal to develop an economic and political union of the member states[1]. In this chapter the author explores an EAC e-government initiative in enhancing democracy and civil society. The main issue discussed is how the use of information and communication technologies can empower ordinary citizens and help them to participate in politics, public affairs and economics locally and nationally.

The chapter identifies the prospects and challenges in e-government and e-governance in the

East Africa, and sketches harmonizing strategies for the development of an ethical framework for their implementation. It examines the strategic priorities of the East African Community regional e-government initiative and its relation to the wider political, economic, and social issues in the region. The author argues that besides the problems of accessibility and user skills, the challenge of e-government in developing countries resides mainly in the field of "good governance": developing the accountability, transparency, and responsiveness of involved governments (whether national or local). The author emphasises that e-government and the principles of "good governance" have to be implemented concurrently to promote sustainable development and democracy. By "good governance" the author means governance that is responsive to the citizens' needs and concerns, is accountable and transparent, promotes democracy and political participation to realize the common good of the society—instead of supporting narrow and selfish benefits for the ruling elites. The author concludes that for e-governance to bring about democratic participation, more accountable leadership, social justice, and equitable human development, all e-government initiatives have to include elements of attitude and culture changes as well as the principles of "good governance."

BACKGROUND

Globalization has brought a special emphasis on knowledge creation and transfer as the primary driver of economic growth and competitiveness with information technologies playing an ever-increasing role. The economic, social and political landscape in which development is taking place has changed altogether. All countries, developed and developing, are reconsidering their approaches and strategies of growth to incorporate new realities of a globalized knowledge-based economy. For developing countries the opportunities are now open to utilize information and communication technologies to make rapid advances in their economic and political progress by acknowledging and promoting the free flow of information in global communication.

In 1996 only five African countries had Internet connectivity. In 2001 all of the countries in the continent had access to the Internet. During the first decade of the 21st century, the Internet access in Africa has further increased. The mushrooming of cyber cafes in African cities and major towns, the spread of personal computers and mobile phones enabled access to a virtual global village in which information and knowledge from most parts of the globe is accessible at the click of the mouse. Africa currently has 260 million mobile phone users, and about 20 million landline subscribers, with wireless connections increasing faster than wired. According to ComScore, a global Internet information provider, there are over 41 million Internet users across Africa now.[2] But still this number represents only about 5% of the population of the African continent. The continuing growth of interactive Internet-based local, national and global communication and the dissemination of information and knowledge provide a widening base for democratic participation and civil society in the regions that have been formerly marginalized.

The increasing Internet connectivity and e-readiness is particularly important in many African countries that face serious economic and political challenges. These include, for instance: (1) the promotion of sustainable development and the eradication of poverty; (2) providing equal and fair access to the natural resources; (3) the prevention, management and resolution of ethnic conflicts and reinforcement of peace, security and stability; (4) the endorsement of inclusive popular participation in the development processes of democracy and "good governance"; and, (5) the promotion of human rights and civil society activities.

E-government, for its part, is defined by the United Nations as a "government that applies ICT to transform its internal and external rela-

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