

### Box 1. E-tax services in South Africa

With the advent of e-government in South Africa, citizens no longer have to wait in long queues to file tax returns. South African Revenue Service (SARS) offers an e-filing service, launched in June 2003. Through the e-filing web site (<http://www.efiling.gov.za/>), tax returns can be submitted via the Internet and secure tax payments can also be made online. The SARS website states: "As Internet usage in South Africa has soared (both domestic and in businesses), SARS' research clearly expects a high adoption rate amongst taxpayers."

The site states that the online target market of the service stands at approximately 2.5 million individuals, companies, vendors, and employers submitting in excess of 7.5 million returns per annum, and that the annual revenue collected in respect of these returns is R60 billion in VAT, R1.4 billion in SDL (Skills Development Levies), R90 billion in PAYE (Personal Taxes), and R30 billion in Company Tax. It lists the benefits of e-filing to the citizen as including a detailed record of all returns and payments, quicker turnaround time on submissions and queries, as well as full support via the web or dedicated call centres, 24-hours-a-day, all-year-round. There is also access to the online service and reminders via email or SMS.

e-government services should be piloted with the full participation of citizens before investments are made in scaling up. Fortunately, ICTs themselves can enable citizens' involvement, and in rural areas this can be done through Information brokers, such as Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) who intermediate between the services and rural citizens. The private sector, in particular, has a key role to play, and apart from offering ICT services or jobs, they can provide expertise, resources and inputs in customer service responsiveness and adaptability to customer needs. In addition, partnership with the private sector in e-government services can create revenue streams to sustain such services.

### E-government: How does it work?

With the advent of government reforms in a number of countries, ICTs are fast becoming an essential vehicle for public sector accountability, which forms the bedrock of e-government initiatives on the continent. E-government is offering the public sector new organizational arrangements by enhancing and updating in-

ternal systems and procedures to improve government processes, cutting costs, managing performance, and enabling effective exchange and linkages within government.

### Enhancing resource and performance management

The rationale for the use of ICTs in government business has been to eliminate the waste, bureaucratic delays, mismanagement and corruption within the public sector that leads to inefficiency in the provision of public services. As a result, public sector reforms in African countries have been given a new impetus as a result of e-government initiatives that have enhanced information-based bureaucracies, leading to more informed decision-making that is aimed at greater efficiency and effectiveness.

Information and information systems ultimately assist governments in taking timely decisions, without which, there can be no accountability. As a result, ICTs allow for the use of various types of information systems for accountability that can monitor performance and improve decision-making through provision of more timely, consistent and reliable information on performance.

### Box 2. Localizing ICTs in Uganda

In Uganda, ICTs are being used to strengthen decentralized administration. The District Administrative Network project aims at improving the performance of local governments by establishing functional data/information communication systems for effective and efficient decentralized service delivery. At the same time, the Local Government Financial Information and Analysis System (LoGFIAS) was designed to capture all relevant financial data on revenues and expenditure for all levels of local government, perform analyses and generate various reports (revenue performance, expenditure, donor funds and central government transfers to the local government). This initiative is being implemented in 74 higher local government areas in the country (rural and urban). The information generated through the system is used by local authorities, central government, NGOs and other stakeholders for fiscal and policy planning, as well as for decision-making at local government levels.

### Box 3. E- services for Egyptians

In providing e-services, the Egyptian Government portal provides users with a citizen-centric one-stop shop for public services. It currently offers more than 10 complete services, ranging from online requests for birth certificates to taxation and customs services. In addition to these transactional capabilities, the portal also provides citizens and businesses with information on more than 700 topics and services. The ultimate objective of the Egyptian Government is to put most of its services online by 2007.

### Decentralization and local government

Decentralization means the transfer of decision-making to lower and localized levels of the public sector. This reform process seen across much of Africa aims to reduce centralized decision-making for more responsive governance. Consequently, at the local government level, ICTs can offer new possibilities for a more open communication with the public. Citizens can access public information easily, discuss issues with each other and communicate directly with the authorities. By establishing a direct link between citizens and government, ICTs can help ensure the accountability of representatives, as well as provide mass feedback mechanisms for legislators.

### Enhancing accountability

ICTs can be used as an effective governance tool for ensuring transparency and reducing corruption in government departments. The digitization of mass data with web-based applications forms, for example can streamline operations while providing citizens with information that was often not accessible.

In much of Africa, most rural dwellers have to travel long distances to government district headquarters in order to submit applications, meet officials, get copies of public records (if available) or seek information on health issues or market prices. For these people, such travel can be costly and often upon arrival at

government offices, the relevant official, record or information being sought is not readily available, necessitating repeated visits and mounting costs. Currently, government officials working with paper records maintain a certain monopoly and act as gatekeepers over access to information and records.

### Who pays for e-government?

Through the combined efforts of stakeholders, civil society, governments, private sector and, of course citizens, it may be possible to reduce the financial costs for e-government activities. For instance, the Federal Government of Nigeria's e-government initiative, which will take government transactions online, is a joint initiative between private sector operators and the National

### Box 4. Ethiopian Justice system makes the case for ICTs

The Ethiopian Federal Supreme Court in February 2004 introduced the Court Case Management System (CCMS), a multi-lingual information platform, as part of court administration reforms, including a touch screen information retrieval system that allows officials to monitor the movement of files through the courts with only a touch of the finger. The system provides dates of adjournments and is being expanded to regional courts throughout country. As a result of this information system, monitoring cases has become easier for officials and the public at large. One immediate impact is improved access to relevant information by the citizens, and greater accountability of the courts and judges in the eyes of the public.

Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), an agency of the Federal Ministry of Science and Technology. Several private sector operators and financial institutions are shareholders in the National e-Government project.

Governments should explore innovative arrangements through public-private partnerships for ways to fund e-government initiatives. Such decisions should be based on sound business cases to avoid thinly spread funding that leads to patchy and piecemeal solutions.

### E-government Challenges

E-government is an expensive tool requiring strong and enduring political will. Activities

cannot be sustained without the active commitment of government leaders, allocation of financial resources, adoption of an appropriate legislative framework and at least basic human investment in planning and implementation.

Due to the low numbers of Internet users in Africa, e-government activities will have to involve a variety of applications, including government Intranets, information kiosks and traditional methods of communication such as radio.

In addition, building a strong and reliable national information and communication infrastructure that supports the use and interface of both old and new (high-speed communication) technologies for e-government applications should be pursued. This must be accompanied by improvements in the legal and regulatory environment that facilitate the introduction of e-government transactional services.

To facilitate access to services by citizens, there must be free access to the kind of public information that can facilitate the readiness of citizens to accept the conditions and opportunities that e-government can offer. There should be equal opportunities for information access for all stakeholders, particularly women. Access to information in local languages also has to feature as an element in e-government projects that provide services, in order to ensure access to the information by all the citizens.

### E-government readiness: A checklist for decision-makers

E-government is about the effective transformation of government business, particularly for the benefit of its citizens through the use of ICT tools, especially in an Information Society and Knowledge Economy. However, the introduction of e-government has to be part of a larger reform process, otherwise it may not produce the desired impact. These questions posed below will provide a guide as to whether governments are ready or not for embarking on e-government initiatives.

### What is the rationale for e-government?

E-government is neither easy nor cheap and before resources and political will are committed, decision-makers should understand the rationale for embarking on such initiatives. Otherwise, ill-conceived e-government plans can be a costly mistake, financially and politically. It has to be understood that it is not about computerization of the civil or public service. E-government should be seen as part of a bigger modernization process which is linked to achieving good governance goals.

As with all reforms, drafting a strategy cannot achieve e-government goals per se, rather what is required is how officials think and act, how information can be shared between agencies within the public sector and how each and every position (Government to Government or G2G) will be affected, and how this will involve businesses (Government to Business - G2B), as well as citizens (Government to Citizens - G2C) as a result.

### What is the vision behind e-government?

The purpose is to establish a broad vision that addresses societal needs, usually stemming from a national e-strategy (NICI). The needs of society should be based on factors, such as improving services to citizens, increasing the productivity and efficiency of government bodies and strengthening the participatory process. The focus or thrust of such goals also presents different objectives and priorities. Consequently, the broad vision and priority areas are very much dependent upon the actual conditions and outlook of a country.

### What are the priorities?

There is no one model for e-government precisely because every country has different needs and priorities. One country might want its e-government objectives to focus more on creating a more accountable government. This would mean priorities would be placed on increasing transparency in the legal and judicial sectors as well as strengthening systems and agencies to fight corruption. Another country would opt for strengthening its business potential, which in this case would entail having

## The Potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the African Public Sector



### Introduction

One of the key challenges facing many African countries is how they can introduce information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance government efficiency. Known largely as e-government, the use of ICTs for this purpose can make governments more accountable, transparent, effective and responsive to citizens' demands. This trend is coupled with the fact that democratic reforms in Africa have accelerated citizens' expectations for better services. Consequently, e-government is not just about technology, but also about harnessing ICT as a tool to transform the way governments operate. It is based on a citizen-centred approach that tailors services to people's needs rather than to the needs of the agency delivering them. E-government might involve delivering services via the Internet, telephone, kiosks (self-service or facilitated by others), wireless devices or other communications systems.

### Why e-government

E-government is not about technology but rather how government can be effectively transformed through the use of technology for better ways of functioning and serving the public. It is also part of the reform process and a tool to further good governance. As with all reforms, e-government requires changing how officials

think and act, how they view their jobs, and therefore a re-engineering of the government business processes.

#### *Alleviating poverty*

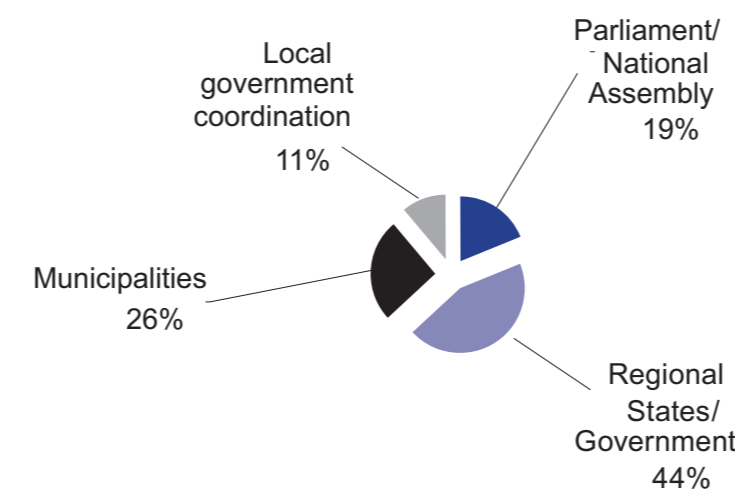
Currently, many rural citizens travel long distances to government offices (whether national, regional or district levels) in search of services, be it submitting applications, meeting officials, getting copies of public records (if available) or seeking information on health or market prices. Such journeys could easily cost a day's income as well as the cost of accommodation, meals and transportation. Often when they arrive at the government offices, the relevant official or information they seek cannot be found or is not readily available, meaning repeated visits and additional costs, which only seek to impoverish them further.

Through e-Government services (Government to Citizens), access to such services by rural citizens can reduce their financial burden and increase their chances to better their livelihoods.

#### *An inclusive process*

Ultimately, e-government is meant to serve citizens and it is imperative that projects are designed to serve the public directly, to assess their needs and solicit their input. It is important that

### African local government websites by type of local government body



budget, backed by effective coordination among government agencies with input from private sector partners. E-government teams should be established within the government with sufficient authority and activities within the departments should be institutionalized to ensure stability and support.

#### *How can resistance be avoided?*

There may be resistance from civil servants to e-government projects and they may refuse to adopt new procedures. The reasons for this are many including, technophobia, fear of redundancy and loss of power. Nevertheless, e-government leaders must find solutions to the problems and develop a strategy for dealing with them, including seeking 'buy-in' from civil servants during the early stages of designing e-government projects.

#### *How do you measure impact?*

Given the high rates of financial, political, technical and human investments, it is imperative that performance of initiatives should be measured to ensure that e-government meets the required goals. Measuring impact determines whether services are being delivered and whether access to information by citizens is translating into greater access to government. In addition, indicators for measuring projects including the applications used should be developed.

#### *How can public participation be improved?*

Public participation is an important element in most stages of the e-government process, from defining a country's vision and priorities for e-government to determining and managing projects. E-government should equate participation, and not automation. The public, including the private sector, civil society organizations (CSOs) can participate in many different ways by commenting on e-government plans; acting as Information brokers for those with limited access or participating in dialogues.

the e-government objectives focus on facilitating trade (such as ports, harbours and customs) and improving the investment or tax regime, as is the case in Mauritius. Apart from that, priorities are dependent on so many other factors including the availability of resources, level of infrastructure, legal framework and human capital.

#### *Is there e-leadership and political will?*

All government reforms need a large dose of political will and this is required for implementing every e-government project in any county. Without ongoing, active political leadership, the financial resources, inter-agency coordination, policy changes and human effort required for designing and implementing activities cannot be sustained. Political will is required when senior decision-makers need to resolve opposition and setbacks. In addition, visionary leadership or e-champions with the authority and conviction is recommended for pushing for change, as they can withstand the most difficult and turbulent periods when there are setbacks.

#### *Is there proper diagnosis?*

An ICT audit is required on the state of government usage of technology and the kind of ICT resources available. As a result, a diagnosis can be the basis for:

- Developing projects and preventing duplication of e-government efforts;
- Establishing economies of scale in e-government programmes (e.g., with government-wide intranets and ICT contracting); and
- Determining the balance between centralized and decentralized e-government (mainly local government) initiatives.

#### *How are e-government projects managed?*

Good management techniques are vital for the success of any e-government activity, including being able to deliver a project on time and within

### E-government resources

#### Some government websites

Egypt  
<http://www.egypt.gov.eg/english/>

Mauritius  
<http://ncb.intnet.mu/govt/house.htm>

Morocco  
<http://www.egov.ma/>

South Africa  
<http://www.services.gov.za>

#### Documents

e-Government Policy  
<http://www.dpsa.gov.za/documents/acts&regulations/frameworks/IT.PDF>

Global Survey on e-Government  
<http://www.unpan.org/egovment2.asp>

<http://www.unpan.org/e-government/Benchmarking%20E-gov%202001.pdf>

#### Links

<http://www.uneca.org/itca>

<http://www.uneca.org/aisi>

<http://www.epolafrica.org>

The African Information Society Initiative (AISI) is an action framework to build Africa's information and communication infrastructure. AISI aims at supporting and accelerating socio-economic development across the region. AISI calls on African governments to provide a strategy and an enabling environment to promote the use of ICTs in government to improve the effectiveness of government service delivery.

For more on AISI go to <http://www.uneca.org/aisi>

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Front picture: An Addis Ababa resident navigates a local e-government kiosk developed by ECA

