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**ICTS FOR EFFECTIVE DECENTRALIZATION:
A PILOT STUDY IN SELECTED *WOREDAS*
(DISTRICTS) IN ETHIOPIA**

Summary

by

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SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the shortcomings of a centralized form of public administration, the government of Ethiopia has embarked on an ambitious plan of decentralization that accords an important role to *woredas* (districts) in the planning and decision-making processes. Within the framework of the Agriculture Development led Industrialization, the government has laid a decentralization and empowerment scheme at *woreda* level. The decentralization is aimed at providing opportunities for implementation of projects and programs at community level and improving the impact of different interventions. The *woredas* are expected to be active in the provision of basic infrastructures such as setting up and administering schools, health facilities, roads, drinking water supply, agricultural development, etc.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) can play key role in the decentralization process and in the economic and social developments of the *woredas* by improving the efficacy of public administration and effectiveness of local interventions. Telecommunication, broadcasting, computer hardware and software, and related technologies could emerge as strategically important factors for social and economic changes. However, if they are not implemented properly and carefully, the same technologies could contribute to the imbalance between rich and poor, powerful and marginalized. It is, therefore, essential to analyze the information and communication needs of public institutions and communities at *woreda* level and identify strategies to harness the fruits of ICTs to improve delivery of government services.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In view of the planned decentralization process and the roles that could be played by ICTs, this study aims at determining the information and communication needs of public institutions at *woreda* level. The information needs of public institutions such as health, agriculture, education offices and *woreda* administration were carefully examined. The study also aimed at investigating the information and communication flow between communities and public institutions. Lessons are drawn on the type of information needed and the application of IC technologies that are likely to create an impact on social and economic development in each *Woreda*.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This pilot study was conducted in four *woredas* that were purposively selected from Addis Ababa, Oromiya and Benshangul-Gumuz regional states. The selected *woredas* can roughly be grouped into three strata, namely rural (Bambassi from Benshangul-Gumuz), semi-urban (Ada'a Liben from Oromiya) and urban (*woreda* 13 and *woreda* 26

from Addis Ababa). Four different types of instruments, which were tested and revised several times, were used to collect the necessary information for the study.

The data were assembled from different government offices found in the four selected *Woredas*. Some of the government offices visited include, *Woreda* Administration offices, Finance offices, Health offices, Education offices, Police stations, Agricultural Development offices, etc. In addition several non-governmental organizations and community-based groups were also contacted.

MAIN RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The different government offices prepare several reports, which are submitted to zonal and regional offices and other sector offices in the *Woreda*. The main types of reports prepared by the sector offices include weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual progress reports as well as work plans and in some cases annual budget plans. In the course of preparing these plan documents, the offices need information from the different higher and lower level offices and the general public. Some of the communications are more frequent and are made on daily basis while others are done weekly, quarterly or annually depending on the nature of the issue to be communicated. The technology used in the process of information exchange and in the preparation of these documents is rather backward and traditional. In nearly all cases, reports are hand or typewritten. Various conventional modes of communication are being used, including personal deliveries using messengers, and face-to-face contacts. The use of telephones and faxes to send and receive messages is unknown in most cases.

The members of the community in the four *woredas* also need information on social, economic and political aspects. The main sources of information for the community in the study *woredas* include federal and regional sector offices, zonal and *woreda* level offices and administrations, NGOs, relatives and friends, the mass media, particularly the Ethiopian News Agency. Information is also obtained from community leaders and elderly people. Iddirs and public gatherings or meetings usually create important forums for exchanging information. Market places, social ceremonies such as weddings and funerals, public notices, public gatherings and direct face-to-face contact with administration officials and individuals are also used to share information.

MAJOR PROBLEMS OBSERVED

In the course of running the day-to-day affairs of the respective *woredas*, the government offices visited are confronted with several problems, which significantly reduce the efficacy of their service provision.

Lack of standardization: One of the most serious impediments to the smooth operation of the civil service is perhaps lack of accountability and effective management system with clear objectives, and well-designed procedures, manuals and policies. Lack of regularity and completeness as well as extreme variation in the size of the annual plans and performance reports suggest the absence of uniform standards and guidelines. There

is limited community participation in the formulation and implementation of development projects and there are feedbacks. In some cases even the wordings are not changed. The preparation of budget plans, for example, is only a wishful list and not based on actual disbursement of funds. Moreover, there is no clear and standard format, which is being followed during the preparation process. Due to lack of common understanding about the size, content and time required to prepare these documents, there are a lot of variations between the reports prepared by the offices even within a give *woreda*.

Shortage of skilled manpower: One of the critical factors of the decentralization process is shortage of human resources. The available manpower at the different offices in the four *woredas* is very much unsatisfactory. All the public institutions visited are very much understaffed and hence are not in a position to discharge their entrusted responsibilities properly. Moreover, the educational qualification of the employees is far from being satisfactory and very few employees are able to use the computer. On-the-job or in-service training programs are largely unknown. High turnover of staff also suggests that employees would only continue working in the public sector until they get a more attractive offer in the private sector or NGOs. There is no proper transfer of information from a person leaving to a person replacing him/her in many cases, leading to a loss of valuable and relevant information.

Poor Data acquisition and storage: The process of data collection, storage, processing, transmission or communication leaves much to be desired and lead to serious inefficiency and information loss, thereby reducing the efficiency of service delivery. No adequate time and resource is devoted to gathering relevant information or establishing database. Minutes are rarely circulated and discussed to ensure follow-up and accountability. Most of the public institutions visited indicated that they do not have adequate space in the archive sections to store the information. Documents are simply shelved using box files and paper folders. Files are also exposed to damages by rodents and rain. Moreover, there are no proper reference or code numbers or modern filing systems to locate files. In situations where there is an archive, individuals assigned may not have any training on documentation or file handling. Because of poor communication systems, particularly in the remote *Woredas*, higher-level offices often receive outdated and unreliable information.

Lack of analytical skill: The public offices do not have the necessary know-how or the technology to process the available information analytically. Comparisons with previous years or trend analysis are not included in progress or annual reports. Information is not analyzed to make appropriate decisions. The same problems of implementation are listed in every progress report without identifying the root causes and providing lasting solutions. Moreover, the general public and lower level administrations have no access to these documents, hence the chances for challenging the performance of elected officials or administrative officers are limited.

Poor Infrastructural Development: The provision of requisite infrastructure is inadequate particularly in remote *woredas* like Bambassi. Electricity is not available,

telephone service is almost non-existent, postal services are not in place, and transportation is inadequate. The introduction of computers and the Internet service must be preceded by measures to supply electric power (e.g. solar energy), improved telecommunication and transportation services in rural and remote *woredas*.

Shortage of ICT facilities: The availability of modern IC technology such as computers, faxes and e-mail service is almost non-existent in most of the *woredas* covered in this study. Some don't even have radio communication and there are *woredas* where there are no typewriters, satisfactory postal and telephone services. Telephone booths, where the general public can make calls, are also limited or non-existent. Besides, none of the visited offices have any ICT specialized professional or a separate ICT department nor any strategic plans regarding ICT development. Long waiting time to get telephone connection, lack of budget, high cost of ICT equipment, shortage of trained manpower as well as lack of awareness on ICT role have been stated as serious impediments to any ICT expansion strategy.

Poor horizontal and vertical communication: Communication between the different offices and the community is very much limited. Development agents, health workers or other public employees can only use public meetings to interact with the community. However, the motivation and the incentive to use such traditional means of disseminating information is low. Public gatherings have become less popular as a means of disseminating and sharing information. With no alternative mechanisms (e.g. community radios), the community appears to have limited access to public information and services.

Inadequate public private partnership: The public-private partnership and partnership with NGOs in the general development exercise in the study *woredas* is very weak. Although the private sector can be a useful partner at least in the urban and semi-urban *woredas*, no effort is being made by the public offices to take advantage of these opportunities.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS.

The results of this pilot study underscore the critical importance of ICTs in making the operation of public offices at *woreda* level more efficient. Government offices can benefit from the applications of ICTs, provided appropriate tools are selected for each office according to its human resource and availability of infrastructure. The following may be considered as the main intervention areas to utilize the potential roles of ICTs.

Development of human capacity is indispensable if the introduction of ICTs is to lead to improved efficiency, accountability and transparency of public services. Both short and long term training to experts and management personnel on information management, general management practices, governance and on the preparation of plans and reports are important. A better understanding of participatory democracy, decentralization and governance, public administration and related issues is believed to change the attitude of the civil servants. The non-ICT training will serve as a stepping-

stone to the introduction of ICT. The training program should also be complemented by recruitment of new qualified staff and improvement in pay and working conditions.

Developing a new system of administration and management at *Woreda* level is critical to any decentralization process and to streamline operations and facilitate transition to ICT based services. The existing system is largely tradition bound, unresponsive to public needs and demands, highly bureaucratic and non-participatory. Plans and activity reports are poorly prepared and communicated to supervising bodies and stakeholders. The system of monitoring and evaluation does not ensure accountability and efficiency.

Identifying and applying appropriate ICT technology to the *woredas* that are found at different stages of development is also a useful approach. A full-scale computerized, Internet connected and networked system may not be a wise approach to begin the process of modernizing the process of information management and communication. The introduction of computers for word processing and spreadsheet applications in all the *woredas* in the initial stages would allow employees to get hands-on practical knowledge following or accompanying the training programs. Once electronic copy of major reports and documents (database) is established, the next step is to develop relevant and locally specific content to make the transition to a networked system and Internet connection.

Access to information at community level may start with the establishment of community-based information service centers, which might be located at kebele offices, mass-based organizations (e.g. Youth Associations), service cooperatives, etc. These computer-based centers will provide information on local government services, annual budget allocations for the different offices and activities, performance reports, etc. The centers will have Internet connections in the second stage and their service could be expanded to include market, health, agricultural, weather, and other types of information that are regularly updated. E-mail and browsing services could be considered in the third stage. The private sector should also be encouraged to provide similar services.

Modern community radio stations using new technologies and having access to the Internet are part of the media revolution in recent years. The convergence of media, computing and telecommunications has provided a voice to civil society and improved poor and illiterate people's access to information. Community radios could be considered as joint project of the community and the private sector once local capacity is adequately developed and the regulatory framework is improved.

Planning and implementing ICT applications in the key sectors such as education, agriculture and health could be an important area of intervention. ICTs help doctors and teachers to upgrade their knowledge and skills through improved availability of information. Telemedicine can link rural medical providers with urban hospitals. Weather and market information delivered over the Internet is extremely useful to farmers.

Improving and developing ICT- related infrastructure is a necessary condition if the country and the economy are expected to reap the full benefit of ICTs. The Ethiopian

Telecommunication Corporation (ETC) should improve its efficiency, expand its coverage and modernize its operations in order to accommodate rapidly changing advances in telecommunications and computer power. Remote *Woredas* would fall further behind unless special consideration is given to making electric power available, besides improving the telecom infrastructure.

Encouraging and promoting the development of hardware and software industry would greatly help in introducing and expanding ICTs. Special investment incentives are necessary to encourage ICT firms to set up branches in major towns that can also serve remote *Woredas*. Software firms should also be encouraged to design automated system of information management.

Encouraging public-private partnership would also contribute to the successful introduction and expansion of ICTs. Private ICT companies could provide training for public institutions employees at reduced prices if there is a sense of cooperation. Provision of some IC related services by private firms and NGOs such as sending and receiving fax messages on behalf of government organizations without such facilities could be important areas of cooperation.

Undertaking further research is also important in view of the fact that there are a lot of variations between the different *Woredas* in terms of organizational structure, availability of requisite infrastructure and manpower, as well as in terms of ICT penetration. Results based on only four *Woredas* may be too small a sample to generalize about the more than 550 *Woredas* in the country.