EDITORIAL: PERSPECTIVE ON A DECADE OF E-GOVERNMENT IN AFRICA

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This issue of The African Journal of Information and Communication (AJIC) raises, in interesting ways, a number of issues that have become core to the debate about the role of new ICTs in the African context. These are both theoretical and practical. In simple terms, it is the perennial, but not unimportant, issue of how theoretical assumptions measure up to not only practical considerations, but practical applications in a particular context. In turn, what we learn about and from what is happening, may enable us to develop theories in practice.

The critical issue in relation to ICT is the potential of these technologies to advance democratic practices that enable wider participation in decision making, through interactive channels. At a practical level, how spaces are opened through interactive technologies can lead to reform of, and improved delivery and access to, government services in ways that not only meet practical needs, but enhance democratic citizenship. Multiple issues are critical to realisation of the potential of ICTs for e-government and e-governance, including reform of political systems and cultures; trends in economic factors, including development of, and access to, infrastructure and e-services; as well socio-cultural factors that enable or hinder the uptake of technologies.

The aim of this issue was therefore not just a tracking of the development and state of e-government in Africa ie delivery of government services to citizens through ICT, but an exploration of e-governance, which involves multiple dialogues and seeks to empower citizens to be actors, not mere recipients, of information or services. Regrettably, there is little evidence that points to real e-governance, with countries and economic systems requiring a greater evolution of governance systems and institutions, and advances in democratisation.

This issue is also therefore about engaging in theoretical and methodological debates, as well as developing theories and methods through studying the development of e-governance and e-government in Africa.

Governments have often been keen participants in countries that have successfully transitioned to higher-yielding, industrial or services economies, supporting technological innovation through policy, financing and innovation adoption. It is therefore opportune for a review of a decade of e-government in Africa.

Burke sets the stage by reviewing the state of research in e-government in Africa. A key finding is that the impact of e-government on citizens and the economy remains little-researched.

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Given the limited ICT infrastructure and generally low ICT skills levels, particularly in rural areas where the majority of the population lives, it is important to assess such impact nationwide. This is so as to ensure equity of access in terms of infrastructure, price of services, and benefits to vulnerable persons, whether from a disability, gender or other perspective. Indeed Ochara discusses this need for strategies focusing on the citizen and grassroots communities, so as to avoid further increasing the divide between the haves and have-nots. In addition, Godem and Hallberg promote a user-centric approach to the design of ICT access through their review of the telecentre models in Cameroon and Kenya.

Not only can ICTs be used by governments to improve service delivery, but they can also be used by both government and citizen alike to monitor service delivery, as well as enhance transparency and accountability. In this regard, Wray and van Olst's review of the convergence of geographical information systems and the Internet to create more effective government interaction with citizens is timely. This also calls for open access to government data to spur the development of even more e-government applications and services.

In addition, we do need the tools to gauge the quality of e-government service so as to continually improve upon it. Twinomurinzi addresses this need by adapting a retail, customer, quality-of-service model to an e-government setting. Such quality-measurement tools may serve as guides to further innovation in the use of ICTs to enhance public service delivery.

As highlighted by the case studies from Zambia, South Africa and Egypt, e-government is not only about infrastructure, legal/institutional environments, and computerising government administration, but also very much about citizen engagement. In this too, it is always important to ensure gender equity in design and access to e-government, as well as promote opportunities for widespread e-participation.