Chapter 17

Conceptualization of E–Parliament in Promoting E–Democracy: Prospects for the SADC Region

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ABSTRACT

With the SADC e-Parliamentary Forum providing a good institutional framework for advancing the e-parliament agenda, an enabling environment is being created for the proliferation e-parliament applications in the SADC region. This chapter presents an exploratory study of the current status of e-parliament adoption in the SADC region. It discusses the different visible interventions that have been put in place at both the policy and implementation level.

The chapter posits that although some appropriate interventions to encourage proliferation of e-parliament in the SADC region have been put in place, still a lot more has to be done in this agenda. Further, it argues that the implementation of e-parliament, despite presenting an opportunity for SADC countries to participate in the global knowledge economies, further excludes marginalized individuals who may not have the requisite ICT platforms and/or gadgets to participate in e-parliament. A comparative study of SADC and Brazil is also presented.

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INTRODUCTION

We are entering a new era where parliaments should not be looked at as ‘policy formation’ bodies but also as institutions which can offer high-level engagement with the general citizenry on national development issues. The advent of proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) adoption all over the world presents a ripe opportunity that can be pursued to advance engagement in the form of participatory democracy. This opportunity is exacerbated by the use of ICTs to promote what is called ubiquitous government paradigm with e-parliament being one of the core platforms. Effective implementation of e-government entails that the different sub-domain applications such as electronic commerce (e-commerce), electronic parliament (e-parliament), and electronic democracy (e-democracy) are part and parcel of the implementation strategy.

One of the major motivations of e-parliament has been to encourage participation of citizens in the democratic and socio-economic platforms. Participatory democracy is crucial in placing a country at a competitive edge in the contemporary socio-economic value chains as it gives citizens and businesses a chance to participate in the different democratic processes (Bwalya, 2009). The use of ICTs in the interaction endeavors between the members of parliament and the general citizenry (e-parliament) may be one of the core characteristics of any democratic institution in this contemporary world. With Africa’s governance conundrums and massive corruption levels in public institutions (Matlosa, 2008), e-parliament, which is implemented in the realm of e-government, presents a hope for the next generation. This is because, apart from ushering in a paradigm of openness, e-parliament facilitates efficient public service delivery, enhances social inclusion, allows transparency in the public service, and facilitates cost savings in government’s bid to involve citizens in its governing processes.

E-parliament encompasses the harnessing of ICTs into the government value chains, thereby promoting large-scale citizen engagement across the different socio-economic sectors. It is worth noting that e-government is the bedrock for the motivation to use ICTs in the public service delivery value chains. It is for this reason that this chapter discusses some of the major characteristics of e-government and outline the different benefits that effective implementation of e-government brings forth.

ICT, in its entirety, promises to be an effective tool used in collaboration platforms for enabling people from different strata of the societal setting to participate in decision-making without any regard to their socio-economic standing. Thus, ICTs present an opportunity which ushers in an environment where government decisions and policies are informed by citizens’ input. Generally, e-parliament is defined as the use of ICTs by parliamentarians and citizens to communicate and interact with each other in a view to exchange ideas on national governance. It is anticipated that with full development of the e-parliament institutional framework, the focus will include not only interaction between citizens and parliamentarians but also collaboration amongst different parliaments from different countries. This will enable important decisions to be made through ICTs, anywhere and anytime and may be a good vehicle towards regional integration as solicited in the SADC (Southern African Development Community). Such a scenario would indirectly culminate into cost savings on the part of governments as huge public service entourages will not have to travel for meetings at central venues. People can stay in their respective offices and contribute to debates through different ICT platforms (e-meetings).

E-parliament acts as an ICT podium where the members of parliament and citizens meet for constructive exchange of ideas such as the involvement of ordinary citizens in governance value chains. It is possible that the SADC region can empower parliamentarians and its citizens with
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