Chapter 18

Promoting E-Democracy and Citizen Participation through ICT Initiatives in Parliament: The Malawi Case

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes an experience-based model for the low-ICT resource countries that promotes the use of multiple ICTs, both traditional (radio, television) and contemporary (computers, mobile phones, internet), as a way of enhancing citizens’ participation towards issues that are deliberated in parliament. In general, the technological change pace is slower in developing countries. For this reason, e-democracy can not be achievable using contemporary technology alone. Based on the Malawi experience, where ICT availability and access is still low, this chapter argues that use of multiple ICTs may be an appropriate approach in low-resource context.

INTRODUCTION

Citizens and aspiring members of parliament (MPs) interact frequently during the campaign process; however, after the campaign, parliaments “in most developing countries tend to be closed institutions” (Ahmed, 2008). In developed economies, however, parliaments use information and communication technologies (ICTs) to modernize parliamentary processes and to communicate with the world (Dandjinou, 2002). Recently, both developing and developed countries have promoted the use of ICTs in democratic processes because they enhance the free flow of information, ideas and knowledge.

Some have portrayed the ICTs as a solution for improving democracy, legislative processes and citizens’ participation. This is because ICTs have changed the way information is gathered, stored, processed and disseminated. The ICTs promote participation and openness, thereby saving as a pushing force for democratic change. ICT initia-
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tives help to open up parliaments and facilitate a democratic process in developing countries. Citizens are empowered with information from parliament and MPs use the inputs from the citizens (Ahmed, 2008). Elected officials [MPs] remain open and accountable in their activities, behaviour, and decision-making by using ICTs (Wimmer, 2008, p. 48). Thus ICTs have a great impact on parliamentary (e-)democracy. Not only do the ICTs enhance legislative functions and internal democracies, the technologies are believed to help the countries respond to the international calls and thus be accountable and transparent. They also give more room for participatory governance where citizens are able to add their voice and views. However, there is more to e-democracy than just a website on the Internet (Backus, 2001).

Parliaments must therefore ensure that regulatory frameworks exist to give access to technology and incorporate ICTs into different thematic areas and sectors represented in democratic institutions (SADC-PF, 2009). As noted by Hon Sisulu, “rural and marginalized people are not aware of the services which governments offer” to utilize technologies for social and economic development goals (SADC-PF, p. 6). The opportunities that different ICTs offer are essential because “parliament is the representative body through which people finds expression, in which their diversity is manifested, and in which the differences between them are debated and negotiated” (Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, 2008, p. 8). Parliamentarians can no longer ignore the world of technology, and parliaments should be more “innovative and creative about how to interact with the constituencies” (SADC-PF, 2009).

Despite the rapid pace of technological change and the emergence of new capabilities for individuals to communicate and share information, this change is not equal across developed and developing countries and within societies. Most of the ICT initiatives in developing countries are funded by donors (Dandjinou, 2002) and based on the models and experiences of the developed world. However, this approach ignores the fact that the ICT infrastructures and the cultural, political and economical situations in developing countries are different.

It is not sufficient for researchers to know that ICT is a crucial tool in development; they must look critically at which ICT is available in a particular environment depending on the country’s resource base. For example, by the end of 2002 there were 625 million Internet users worldwide (Beetham, 2006). However, only 2% of these estimated Internet users were in Africa. This finding clearly indicates that the rate of Internet penetration is not the same across the globe.

Malawi, is largely an agricultural country, with a population of about 13 million. Only 17% of the population is urban based and ICT infrastructure (such as computers and internet) is enabled in urban areas (Kanjo & Lwanda, 2008). Although Malawi has high mobile phone area coverage (85% of the population could access a network), there is a low subscribers rate of 4.1% penetration due to affordability of handsets (Intelecon, 2007). However, the Internet infrastructure is characterized by high charges, poor service provision because of low bandwidth, and low penetration levels in Malawi. Regarding internet services, one or two internet cafes available to the public at each of the 27 districts’ headquarters -this is mostly at the urban centers of the district (Kanjo & Lwanda, 2008). While the world average Internet penetration is 23.8% and average for Africa is 5.6%; Malawi’s Internet penetration is at 1% (Kanjo, 2009). As in most developing countries, ICTs are often non-existent in poor and rural areas in Malawi. Poor information flow in the country and slow e-democracy processes are caused by the obstacles explained above. As a result, few e-governance and e-government initiatives exist in Malawi. Most of the e-democracy practices are held by individual non-governmental initiatives (Kanjo, 2009). Consequently, this leads to a delay in the implementation and acceleration of e-democracy initiatives. However, lack of