Promoting Transparency and Strengthening Public Trust in Government through Information Communication Technologies? A Study of Ghana’s E-Governance Initiative

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine Ghana’s quest to use ICT as a tool to enhance transparency and build public trust in government. The questions the paper attempts to answer are: what are the main challenges confronting the government’s e-governance initiative as a tool to ensure transparency and citizens’ trust in the public sector? What steps are being taken to address these challenges? We argue that while Ghana seems to have made remarkable progress in this endeavour, it still faces a number of significant obstacles, which must be addressed if the objectives of its e-governance project are to be fully realized. Key challenges include infrastructure development for the growth of ICT, the huge gap in access to ICT (or what may be described as the digital divide), and the change in organizational culture to enhance easy accessibility to public documents.

Keywords: eGhana, ICT, Public Sector, Transparency, Trust

INTRODUCTION

The question of trust has become the focal point of modern governance. Loss of faith in government in recent years is unprecedented (Cook & Gronke, 2005; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). While some believe that the level of trust may be climbing rather than declining, others points to substantial evidence that citizens around the world have lost confidence and trust in the public sector, partly due to the perceived remoteness of government from its citizens (Van de Walle, et al., 2008; Peters, 2004). Consequently, governments continue to search tirelessly for new ways to build and enhance trust in the public sector. These new ways include the building of government websites with information about government and other public institutions, and the passing of Freedom of Information (FoI) laws and the strengthening of existing ones (Hazell & Worthy, 2010), for the promotion of...
a “wider pro-active disclosure of information by government” (Worthy, 2010: p.561).

A consensus has been reached among scholars, politicians, public servants and citizens that to enhance public trust, governments need to be more transparent in their activities (Fung et al., 2007). Transparency requires governments to make available and accessible relevant information pertaining to their functions. Public officials should be as open as possible about all decisions and actions they undertake on behalf of citizens, as well as give reasons for their decisions, and restrict information only when the wider public interest demands it (Blanton, 2002; Fenster, 2010).

Trust and transparency problems are much worse in developing countries. In fact, their underdevelopment has been consistently attributed to them. It is, therefore, not surprising that the recent focus on good governance is seen by many as the way to enhance and ensure greater transparency that will promote and consolidate trust in public institutions. Doing so will make governments in these countries more accountable to their citizens.

While in years past ensuring such transparency was quite difficult, the emergence of information communication technologies (ICT) and, especially, the Internet seems to have paved the way for governments to be more open, transparent, and accessible to citizens. Many thus believe that the advent of ICTs has given governments the opportunity to be more open, transparent and trustworthy than three or four decades ago and that taking that opportunity will enhance their development (Parent et al., 2005; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Commenting on the growth of e-government in Africa, for example, Heeks (2002) noted that it has a key role to play in Africa’s current and future development. To him, e-government may offer critical improvements to the efficiency and effectiveness of government, and probably critical future legitimacy.

It was in this belief that in 2003 the World Summit on the Information Society Action Plan enjoined all governments to promote e-government as a developmental strategy in their development. By the time this resolution was passed, Ghana had already begun to integrate ICT into its developmental agenda; it accepted the challenge, and moved beyond the e-government phase to embrace e-governance (Wilson, 2004). As a result, Ghana developed an ICT for Accelerated Development Policy (ICT4AD), with 14 priority areas for transforming it into an information rich and knowledge based society and to make government open and accessible to its citizens, and strengthen citizen trust through e-governance.

This paper attempts to examine Ghana’s quest to use ICT as a tool to enhance transparency and build public trust in government. The questions the paper attempts to answer are: what are the main challenges confronting the government’s e-governance initiative as a tool to ensure transparency and citizens’ trust in the public sector? What steps are being taken to address these challenges? We argue that while Ghana seems to have made remarkable progress in this endeavour, it still faces a number of obstacles, which must be addressed if the objectives of its e-governance project are to be realized. Key challenges include infrastructure development for the growth of ICT, the huge gap in access to ICT (i.e., the digital divide), and the change in organizational culture to enhance easy accessibility to public documents. Thus, the benefits of ICT cannot be realized if these problems are not given serious attention by the government.

Information used in this research was obtained through documentary analysis and is qualitative in nature (Bowen, 2009; Labuschagne, 2003). Documentary analysis is “a systematic procedure for reviewing documents—both printed and electronic material” (Bowen, 2009: 27). The benefits for both approaches have been well discussed in the literature and so there is no need for us to repeat them here. We chose these approaches because not a single study has been done on this subject on Ghana. Second and as cogently argued by Labuschagne (2003), we were mainly concerned with the properties, the state, and the character of the phenomena, and were, therefore, interested in looking at the processes and meanings of
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