Chapter 9

Zambia and e-Government:
An Assessment and Recommendations

Neal Coates
Abilene Christian University, USA

Lisa Nikolaus
Abilene Christian University, USA

ABSTRACT

E-government can benefit developing countries by enhancing the economy, increasing access to health care, improving bureaucracy, and consolidating democracy. Sub-Saharan countries have lagged behind the world in adopting this system of communications. A variety of reasons explain the lag, namely lack of national resources and an illiterate population. Zambia serves an example of democracy on a continent where freedom and peace are lacking, but also as a country where e-government is only beginning. This evaluation is the first to examine e-government there, and is carried out at five distinct levels: Current communication systems; Zambia’s ICT policy; key central e-government websites; e-government at the provincial/municipal level; and at the individual level. As a result, this case study will evaluate how a developing country is struggling to provide government access and enhance the economy and suggests improvements needed if Zambia’s e-government will become adequate and sustainable.

INTRODUCTION

Many developed states now maintain an extensive electronic government structure, providing invaluable access to economic and quality of life information and greatly enhancing government services. Likewise, e-government is often heralded as the way forward in developing countries to increase their rate of development and allow for greater democracy (e.g., Bhatnagar, 2002; Krishna & Walsham, 2005). But developing states, desperate to enhance the economy, increase health care access, and consolidate democracy, have only recently taken steps to implement this internet-based tool, and these initiatives often lack the needed financing and proper infrastructure and face constraints such as an illiterate and poor citizenry (Basu, 2004; Ndou, 2004).

E-government refers to the use by government agencies of information technologies to provide
a wide range of services and programs via the internet, wide area networks, and mobile computing (About E-Government, 2005). It is sometimes referred to as “online government” or “internet-based government.” These initiatives have the ability to transform relations among citizens, businesses, and the various arms of government. At its most basic level, citizens have increased access to information and government services, such as acquisition of drivers’ licenses, voting registration, and renewal of passports. Another important aspect of e-government is the potential to boost the economy—businesses find their costs are diminished and they can operate with less paperwork. E-government also allows citizens to hold government officials more accountable by increasing transparency. One example is the ability of offices to publish their policies on the internet, helping set a uniform standard of regulations. Health clinics across a country can also be linked to a centrally-located physician for diagnoses, saving lives and much money from lost productivity. Finally, countries are in favor of e-government because of the significant cost savings. Use of this service by citizens and businesses saves large amounts of face-to-face and telephone contact by local, provincial, and national bureaucrats, making government more efficient.

This chapter evaluates the current status of e-government in a peaceful though poor African state, Zambia, asking what problems need to be addressed to better provide e-government services there. This is a vital question as many citizens and businesses in Zambia already understand the possible benefits of e-government and want it to succeed (Kasumbalesa, 2005; Mupuchi, 2003). For example, Zambia’s banks are modernizing by offering e-commerce services to their customers. Several thousand customers of Finance Bank and the Zambia National Commercial Bank are now accessing their accounts from anywhere in the country or the world, verifying their bank balance, learning exchange rates, confirming the status of checks, and receiving statements. Computer-based and cell phone-based banking are reducing time for customers and enabling the banking sector to cut costs by reducing the amount of labor involved in processing transactions (Malakata, 2007).

It has further been established that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can help transform the lives of rural Zambians. For example, the women of Kalomo District are, with support from the International Institute of Communication and Development of the Netherlands and Step Out, a private firm, using the internet to market their goods. In 2004, they formed the Kalomo Bwacha Women ICT club, generating annually 1.5 to 2 million Kwacha. They distribute to 32 area women’s’ clubs five KGs of seeds such as maize, groundnuts, beans, and sunflowers. After harvest, 50 KG bags are returned in payment. The group of 11 women in Kalomo has an office assistant and trains others how their operations would be enhanced with the internet. Mushinge (2005) reports that the club now markets dry food stuffs, vegetables, baskets, clothes, and crafts, and the women sell the produce via email and a digital camera to clients in the area and even in some neighboring countries.

It is estimated, though, that only 231,000 Zambians use the internet, out of a population of 11,500,000. That two percent is very low, although how it compares to many of the world’s other developing states is unclear due to the lack of statistics from many countries. In neighboring and stable Botswana, the rate is three percent, but in wealthy South Africa the usage rate is 12 percent. By contrast, the United States rate is 68 percent (Background Notes—Zambia, 2007; World Factbook—Zambia, 2007). In short, the internet is not an integral part of daily life in Zambia, nor is it tied to the delivery of government services. This is significant because many scholars explain that utilizing the internet to improve living standards is crucial for lifting persons out of poverty. In fact, other than education, Adesisa (2001) claims that ICT use is the fastest method of moving Africa toward the 21st century. Although cell phone us-