Chapter 12

Setting the Foundation for E-Democracy in Botswana: An Exploratory Study of Interventions

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ABSTRACT

The process of establishing appropriate institutional frameworks and information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure backbones to support future development of e-democracy is not an easy task. Botswana has started building its e-democracy institutions as it accords citizens the opportunity to participate in the democratic process using appropriate ICT platforms out of the realization that participatory democracy is crucial in placing a country at a competitive edge in the contemporary global socio-economic value chains. Towards this goal, the first initiative has been the establishment of the e-government taskforce team, which has been mandated with the development of an e-government strategy commensurate with Botswana’s local context. The establishment of the e-government taskforce team has been done in tandem with putting in place appropriate ICT infrastructures and legal, institutional, or regulatory frameworks. This chapter presents an exploratory study that aims to discuss the different interventions that are being put in place by the Botswana government and its co-operating partners as setting the foundation for implementing full-scale e-democracy applications such as e-forums and e-voting. The chapter also presents obstacles and challenges that have not been met, insofar as building virtual public spheres in the realm of participatory e-democracy in Botswana is concerned. Attention
is given to how virtual public spheres should be used as collaboration and networking platforms both in the private and public sectors of Botswana. It is anticipated that the different approaches that have been employed by Botswana towards this course may prove useful to other emerging nations who may have intentions of implementing ICT infrastructure and encouraging virtual public spheres as a means to building viable e-democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual public spheres (VPS) have made it possible for people of different socio-economic status to participate in decision-making of public matters. They have also enabled marginal individuals to participate in the various socio-economic activities; a phenomenon called social inclusion. VPS is one of the pre-requisites for effective e-democracy implementation. E-government is the use of ICTs in the interaction between the government and citizens or businesses for effective public service delivery. VPS allow both the public and private sector to interact effectively and exchange ideas for socio-economic development. This being the case, we may look at VPS along with e-government as being the two main pre-requisites for e-democracy.

This chapter defines a VPS as an open environment which allows interaction of different actors for the purpose of deliberation about the issues through ICT platforms. A platform of relevance to Africa’s ICT users is that of mobile technologies. With the increase in the adoption and use of mobile technologies in Africa, it suffices to mention that more and more people will be able to take advantage and unleash the full potential of ICTs. Several African governments, with their goal to further promote decentralization to the household or individual level, have started implementing e-government, which, in turn, helps to promote the precursors to e-democracy. This public service delivery model of e-government has a huge promise for contributing to the socio-economic development agenda of Africa. In most parts of Africa, however, the potential of e-democracy is limited because of local culture’s propensity to resist change.

We define e-democracy as the use of ICTs for ordinary individuals to participate in policy and decision-making, which will have an impact on their future and that of their children’s. An example of e-democracy is e-Voting, which is defined as the use of ICTs in the voting process. E-democracy is an emerging phenomenon that makes it possible for ICT to be used in the formulation of policies and liberation of democracy (Stahl, 2005). E-democracy enables ordinary community members to determine their socio-economic course by enabling them to participate in decision and policy-making using ICTs at anytime and anywhere. It uses a bottom-up approach where participatory policy/decision making is the norm of the day and this ushers in a sense of ownership of the policies/decisions made. By allowing citizens to participate in the democratic processes using ICTs, citizens feel they own the policies that come out of government – citizen interaction and therefore buy-in to those policies.

The first step towards achieving e-democracy is successfully implementing e-government. Netchaeva (2002) argues that e-government ushers in a paradigm where transparency in public institutions is achieved; enables ordinary citizens to access public information freely and conveniently; and encourages wider participation of citizens in their democratic endeavors. ICT use in governance may intrinsically change relationships in society, help to achieve real democratic means and even transform people’s social and political consciousness. Democracy is the ideal society...