Chapter VII

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ABSTRACT

Many of African States are focusing on ICTs and developing e-government infrastructures in order to fasten and improve their “formalisation strategy”. This philosophy drives the South African State in its impressive efforts to deploy an efficient and pervasive e-government architecture for its citizens to enjoy accurate public services and for this young democracy to be “useful” to them. By focusing on the South African case, people will be able to understand the role of ICTs as tools to register, formalise and normalise, supporting the final objective of Weberian rationalisation. The author will consider the historical process of this strategy, across different political regimes (from Apartheid to democracy). He will see how it is deployed within a young democracy, aiming at producing a balance between two poles: a formal existence of citizens for them to enjoy a “delivery democracy” in which they are to be transparent; an informal existence of citizens for them to live freely in their private and intimate sphere. In this tension, South Africa, given its history, is paradigmatic and can shed light on many other countries, beyond Africa.
Numerous governments, particularly those of developing countries, have to deal with challenging economic, socio-economic and political realities. More challenging is to deal with unrealities, i.e. realities that do exist but that governments can’t manage because they don’t know about them. These realities are real but informal: one typical example is moonlight work. They all do exist but have no official, formal, legal-administrative and statistical existence. They are “parallel” to the official-formal world of public action and stay “underground”, in the shadow of public policies.

This problem of “informality” is particularly experienced by governments in developing countries. They face tremendous difficulties in terms of public action upon realities that they don’t and can’t know of. That is due to a lack of measuring resources and public management capacities. Various examples are: the absence of a satisfactory statistical machinery, the ineffectiveness of a formal civil status (for instance, the registry of birth), the inefficiency of tax rolls…

For governments to act upon realities, they need to know them and therefore to reveal and measure them. In other words, they need to formalise them so as to be able to control them. Governments have to normalise human activities, i.e. to put them into norms, into measurable and controllable frameworks. This explains, for instance, the importance of statistical machineries into the construction of nation-states (Desrosières, 1993).

This quest of formalisation has been growing with the strengthening of nation-states throughout time. It has been using various tools, the last generation of which being Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Governments consider these technologies as powerful instruments to formalize and normalize realities. The use of ICTs to rationalize reality and therefore public action is set along the deployment of electronic government (e-government). The ultimate objective is to make a society (individuals as well as groups) highly visible—some might say transparent—to the power in place. By formatting knowledge for the State, e-government is supporting a move towards genuine rationalisation: ICTs enable an extreme degree of accuracy and sophistication (data mining) so that everything and everyone can be labelled, measured, compartmentalised.

Obviously, such power of knowledge, based on the knowledge of power (Foucault, 1997), can threaten democracy: full transparency of individuals to the State is impossible, due to the absolute necessity of protecting the private sphere. Nevertheless, the development of the welfare State requires the administration to know most of personal data, so as to provide relevant services, for instance well-measured pensions or health care (Gilliom, 2001). This is all the more true when the welfare State is getting ICT-intensive, making the most of e-government to provide e-services. For such provision with efficiency and cost-recovery, the State needs to be scientific, somehow omniscient. That is why transparency of the society to the State is necessary (Lyon, 2003), but to a certain extent beyond which democracy is at risk.

Most of governments in African countries are confronted with informal realities, particularly in hard socio-economic contexts. They don’t have enough resources—financial, human, …—to know of realities that they nevertheless need to tackle with. That is why some African States are focusing on ICTs and developing e-government infrastructures in order to fasten and improve their “formalisation strategy”: by getting to know their society better, they can act upon it better (Cheneau-Loquay, 2005). South Africa is one of these and certainly the most advanced on the continent in that regard. The South African State is indeed deploying a remarkable e-government architecture for its citizens to enjoy accurate public services (Péjout, 2004; Péjout, 2007). The challenge is not just that of administrative efficiency but is also highly political: this young democracy needs to be “useful” to its citizens.

This chapter will highlight the role of ICTs as tools to register, formalise and normalize reali-