

Can ICT improve public service delivery in Burkina Faso?

By Ramata Soré

In Burkina Faso, a country with very low ICT penetration, some government services have been put online, but the lack of access by the majority of the population means that e-government must be balanced with traditional means of disseminating public information. “I applied for the job of health agent, and saw the results while searching on the civil service website before these results were broadcast on national radio,” said Marion, an aspiring civil servant, illustrating the two-tier strategy that is a necessity in Burkina Faso.

Overcoming obstacles

Access to advanced ICTs in Burkina Faso is very low due to infrastructure limitations and a lack of training and financing for such tools. In less developed countries like Burkina, traditional media such as print, radio and TV are still indispensable for reaching the public and must be part of the government’s information and communication strategy. Otherwise, e-government will result in “two-tier” government, with a large part of the population left with less access to government information, not more.

The perception that Burkina Faso is not totally ready for e-government extends even to DELGI, the informatics ministry responsible for the overall strategy. One official there said that Burkina is responding to outside pressure in instituting e-government: it was “an international imposition. We had to put information [online] because the Westerners did it and asked us to do the same.”

To put the Burkina Faso online presence in context, a UNDP study of 190 countries showed that 169 of them had government websites. Of these, 17 were sophisticated enough to handle electronic payments, 32 of the sites were simply a web presence with information about such things as government ministers, and 55 sites allowed people to download documents and interact with ministries by email.

The Burkina Faso government’s online presence online falls into this intermediate category. Although it is not very interactive and does not include facilities for applying for identity cards and paying taxes, for example, the sites are nevertheless helping to improve transparency and efficiency. The Ministry of Finance has published on its website various useful documents including forms and information about its operations. Mahama, a law student, says “It is easier to get an answer from a government official by email than to visit the office.”

“E-government is in an embryonic state in this country,” says Augustin Coulibaly, a senior staffer at the Ministry of Finance. Complex transactions like online payment and applying for identity require a high level of security, confidentiality, and verification of identity. At the minimum, the information online needs to be absolutely accurate and up to date, or the web site is worthless, says Coulibaly.

DELGI is responsible for putting in place a programme of modernisation of government services. It is installing a public service intranet/extranet and rolling out a national network to respond to the communication and information needs of a public administration that is undergoing a decentralisation process and that therefore requires good information links between the capital and the regions.

The Ouagadougou infrastructure consists of an Internet server allowing 32 phone connections and a dedicated line with a capacity of 512 Kb/s. This permits Internet access, hosting of the government websites, and connections between local networks. Eleven public institutions now have Internet access. The more this resource is used to deliver better quality public services, the more ICTs will be appreciated by the Burkinabè public.

A tool for democracy

ICTs can make it possible to carry out participatory consultation processes with citizens and business regarding administrative and political decisions. For this to happen, Burkinabès would have to undergo a

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change in mentality. Representative democracy needs ICTs in order to enable a fluid public discourse. "ICTs can enable elected officials, to better fulfil their role as representatives of local constituencies by allowing them to monitor legislative processes from a distance," says Professor Augustin Loada, executive secretary of the *Centre pour la bonne gouvernance* (CGD).

In November 2005 there will be elections in Burkina Faso. Only four out of 136 political parties have websites. The information on these sites is similar: history of the party, an account of current activities... After the elections, parliamentary websites will be able to publish information about the winning candidates, including biographical and contact information. This objective information is not to be confused with the political websites posted by individual candidates and elected officials, which are designed to sell his or her message to voters.

ICTs are a tool for public participation. By nature the technology is immediate and facilitates a rapid, almost instantaneous public reaction to current events. "Discussion forums can have an impact on the evolution of legislation or public policy in general," says Professor Loada. Public commissions can use the online forum to monitor public opinion. Minorities and dissenting groups can use the Internet to make their opinion known and to lobby for change. ICTs do not create such freedoms, but they can bring about greater expression of diversity and difference of opinion in society. What's new about ICTs is their interactive nature, which enables each citizen to publish his or her opinion instantaneously and throughout the world.

ICTs are a goldmine of unexplored potential to improve the economic productivity and quality of life of Burkina Faso's citizens. They can transform government into governance and change the relationship between government and citizen from one of master and servant to one of service provider and client. This process is still proceeding slowly in our country. The State still has problems of capacity, content, management and regulation to overcome before it can fully adopt ICT into its operations.

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**For further information contact iConnect coordinator in Burkina Faso
Sylvestre Ouédraogo, <mailto:sylvestre.ouedraogo@univ-ouaga.bf>**

www.iConnect-online.org is a knowledge sharing platform for Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in sustainable development. iConnect draws content from its partners, links resources and expertise and encourages collaboration. For the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), the host of iConnect, this is a way to share experiences, lessons learned and ideas, and interact with communities and people with an interest in development and the applications of ICTs. These experiences can lead to a better understanding of the actual benefits of ICTs for Development (ICT4D). The core of iConnect will be a series of locally written articles on the impact and the use of ICTs for development. The articles have a strong focus on fact finding; objective information on ICT4D practices from a southern perspective: Southern content written by Southern people. i4d is the iConnect partner for Asia, and ECA is the iConnect partner for Africa, disseminating the articles to their public.
