

The Government Portal Project: E-Governance in Ghana

By John Yarney

In Ghana today, anyone can sidestep the hindrances associated with bureaucracy and access government information such as the country's budget statements via the Ghana government's portal at www.ghana.gov.gh. This access is one of the benefits of the government portal project, according to Alphonse Koblavie, Deputy Director of information of Ghana's Information Services Department and leader of the team implementing the portal project. "The public can access government information anytime and anywhere provided they have net access," he explains.

Government Services Go On-Line

The portal project has operated on a pilot basis since 2003, when Ghana's Ministry of Information entered into an agreement with the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) to enhance the existing official National website at www.ghana.gov.gh, creating online delivery of government services to the people. The portal's managers are now on the verge of executing the first phase of the actual portal project, which will include enhancing the content of the portal, adding more pages, and networking all the regional information offices of the Ghana's Information Services Department.

The project's implementers defined two objectives for the pilot: first, to demonstrate how the government of Ghana could make effective use of web technologies to disseminate government information; and secondly, to examine the potential demand for government information and other e-government services among citizens and to consider how that demand could best be met at the local level. The project leaders would then advise government on appropriate strategies and actions to be taken to extend e-governance at the national and local levels.

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Currently, the portal provides briefs on all branches of government and links to institutions that have websites. It also has an archive of draft policies, reports, speeches and other official documents in addition to its news pages. And it displays general information on events, visiting, investing and studying in Ghana.

Citizen Interest vs. Cost Barriers

According to the project's implementers, the reaction of the Ghanaian citizenry towards the Ghanaian government portal has been favourable. On average, at least 15 enquires are directed daily to the government through the portal.

Increasingly, the portal is also serving as a link between would-be foreign investors and Ghana's Investment Promotion Centre (GIPC). Managers of the website say they receive a significant number of investment enquiries, and they suggest that foreign investors find the site credible because it originates from the national government.

But despite these positive reactions, the bulk of the citizenry cannot access the service because of illiteracy or lack of connectivity to the Internet. Most Ghanaians receive information via the radio. A survey -- the third round of the Afrobarometer survey conducted in Ghana by the Ghana Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) -- confirmed this reality. The survey, which measures indicators such as governance, economic reform and quality of life, found out that 67 per cent of respondents received their information from radio, and 83 per cent of respondents said they trusted that source, and especially the national broadcaster. Newspapers and TV followed radio respectively.

"A lot more people have access to radio than to other media. We did not even include the Internet [in the survey], but if we had it would have made a poor showing," said Edem Selormey, Afrobarometer Team Member. Selormey notes that very few people have access to the Internet, whereas radios are inexpensive and people can listen to programmes in their local dialect, thanks to community radio and local language programming on most FM stations.

Ghana's portal project has made some arrangements to deliver its services to citizens who do not have Internet connectivity, but so far these plans do not reach far enough. However, all of the country's ten regional information offices can use the portal to locate and provide information to disseminate by other traditional means in their jurisdictions.

Alternatives from Abroad

Lessons from best practices at other destinations can bolster the Ghanaian effort. For instance, Colombia linked its portal project to developing connectivity¹. In 2000, the office of Colombia's President developed its "Connectivity Agenda," with six key objectives: expand access to information infrastructure; promote use of ICT in education and training; promote use of ICT in business; promote development of national ICT industry; generate national content; and create a government presence online.

"As a result of this Internet initiative, Colombia's citizens now have access to a huge volume of public information related to budgets, government plans, purchasing, etc. All government regulations since 1900 are available online. In addition, businesses (and citizens) can access government procurement information online," say the case study authors.

The Kothmale Community Radio Internet project is also worthy of scrutiny. This project, implemented by UNESCO, was the first pilot experiment in Sri Lanka to develop a suitable access model to address most of the same concerns now facing the Ghanaian implementers. The Kothmale project used community radio as an interface between the community and the Internet through a pioneering "Radio-browse" model, introducing an indirect mass access to cyberspace through a daily one-hour interactive radio program. "The Kothmale project was the first experiment of its kind that successfully combined traditional and new media to bring the benefit of ICTs to a marginalised community in South Asia," the case study authors report.

Project Challenges

There are fundamental issues beyond combining traditional and new media to deliver government information and services to the citizenry. Of course, funding remains a key issue. According to the portal's managers, the first phase has stalled because of the delay in receiving funds from partners.

Human resource issues also remain critical to the project's survival. According to managers, remuneration and motivation for staff of the project could be much better, and there remains the need to develop the technical competencies of the team. "You can bring new ideas," stresses project leader Koblavie, "but you still need a team to implement and sustain it."

Furthermore, equipment must be regularly updated to keep to the project afloat. Implementers reason that because of the 24-hour operation of the project, it is essential to replace equipment every one and a half years. Finally, gathering information from the relevant governmental institutions remains a significant challenge. However, the advances made to this point suggest that with support the project will continue to provide important benefits.

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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.

¹ <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/egov/>