

Transforming Local Government: E-Governance in Uganda

By Davis Weddi

In response to the high costs and inefficient labour involved in running a government, some forward-looking Ugandans have developed the concept of e-governance to minimize the expenses involved in the local administration of the country's districts. Participants in various sectors are striving to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to prompt changes in the standards and delivery of local government services and, more importantly, in the way citizens interact and participate in governance. Voluminous paperwork, long service delivery times and stifling bureaucracy may soon be a thing of the past, if new ICT plans are implemented across the country.

Local Government Transparency via District Net

Uganda's e-government initiative, known formally as The District Administrative Network Project and more commonly as District Net, was designed for Uganda's Ministry of Local Government. As current National Project Coordinator Engineer Stephen Dagada explains, "This project was born during a round-table conference in 2002, when we realised that there was a need for transparent governance in the Ministry of Local Government." It immediately caught the imagination of central government and international donors who provided support for its pilot phase. Among the external funders were the International Institute of Communication for Development (IICD) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), who have followed this project from its start.

With external funding for one and a half years, District Net was initially implemented in 2002 in four districts - Mbarara, Lira, Mbale and Kayunga, representing the country's west, north, east and central regions, respectively - with the hope that, if

"Think big but begin small.
Piloting is the way!"

successful, it would be extended to the rest of the country. The project set out to remove obstacles to communication links among the district headquarters, central government agencies and other stakeholders working with districts, and to address problems of inadequate ICT basic skills among the district staff. The [Local Government Ministry](#) states that the District Net project was created "to improve performance in the Local Governments by establishing functional data/ information management and public communication systems for effective and efficiency service delivery in decentralised governance. Hence, this project [was created] under the slogan 'ICT for Rural Development!'" According to Constantine Bitwayiki, who has worked on the project, "Districts were faced with challenges in funding routine administrative expenses. For interoffice communication, staff travelled to Kampala, the capital of Uganda, to deliver and collect routine documents. In addition, data and information for planning and other decision-making functions were often inaccurate or unavailable when needed."

International observers have followed Uganda's e-governance developments closely. Major media and news teams have streamed to Kayunga District to interview people about one of the most successful pilot projects, and the District Net project has even been nominated for the Stockholm Challenge. By the start of 2005, the project had entered into a mainstreaming phase, and has now acquired private sector partners in addition to government, IICD and DFID. Today, Ugandans are coming to realise that e-governance can bring individuals into close contact with decision-makers and officials in the government. The Ministry is currently in the process of acquiring more funding to extend the project to other parts of the country.

Connecting Constituents

Soon after the District Net project's 2002 kick-off, implementers began installing Local Area Networks (LAN), Wide Area Networks (WAN), e-mail and internet systems, as well as data and voice communication links between District headquarters, the pilot sub-counties and the central government headquarters. Through the project, the Ministry of Local Government established computerised databanks and information dissemination systems, and initiated an extensive training programme for users (mostly district officials) in basic ICT skills and the use of basic computer applications.

So far, the districts where the project was implemented have made savings in administrative expenses, "freeing these funds to be used to other pressing economic activities geared towards economic development initiatives," says Bitwayiki. "In addition to improvement in communication channels, we are seeing that users are accessing useful information for planning purposes."

“In social terms, the communities in the districts covered by the project have been sensitised about the usefulness of utilizing ICTs and how these technologies can bolster development,” he adds.

One result, he says, is a “demand for accurate and timely information from technical staff by the politicians for planning and other decision making functions.” Thus, higher levels of ICT awareness are now helping development.

The success has been duly noted, and Members of Parliament have promised to roll District Net out to the rest of the country.

Positive Feedback

A project evaluation report released earlier this year indicated increased ICT awareness and knowledge empowerment.

A questionnaire was distributed to forty end users of the District Net: 83% were staff and the rest were Heads of Departments in the Ministry of Local Government.

In their answers, 50% of the respondents approved of the District Net project because they hoped to improve their ICT knowledge, 35% wanted to see an improvement in the flow of information and communications in the Ministry of Local Government, and 15% wanted to gain access to the Internet. When asked how they had so far benefited from the project, 38% said they had achieved these goals, 50% identified an improvement in their work and 50% claimed they had improved in handling ICTs.

In describing the positive impact of the District Net, 53% said the project had enabled them to improve ICT awareness while 25% claimed to have been empowered to make informed decisions in their departments using their new ICT skills. In addition, 25% thought they had been motivated by the decreased costs in their work, and 20% had seen an improvement in reporting, documentation and levels of transparency.

The Future of District Net

Implementers of the pilot phase have learnt an important lesson: “Think big but begin small. Piloting is the way!” The pilot activities are now being replicated in other projects and programmes and implemented in other districts.

In order for District Net to work, it must be supported by human capital and an enabling environment. “Change management is critical,” Bitwayiki stresses. Whether ICTs prove to be a sustainable solution for enhanced communication and information flow “depends on the willingness of the human capital to tackle the challenges in a sustainable manner.” Although the ICTs introduced are user-friendly, new technologies will inevitably require time for people to adapt to them. And, of course, the financial cost of implementation is daunting. While the local beneficiaries have tried to contribute, they have confronted difficulty because their tax base is still very small.

But the costs of failure would be greater. Dagada, the current project leader, emphasizes that ICTs are essential. “The challenge is that ICTs may be expensive, but they are necessary and useful. We need to find all means of mainstreaming the project in order to lower operating costs like transport and production of documents. Our ability to replace the traditional methods of operation and to beat the bureaucracy in local governments will extend the life of District Net.”

(October 2005)

For further information contact iConnect coordinator in Uganda

Davis Weddi, dweddi@newvision.co.ug