

Boosting Local Authorities: E-Governance in Zambia

By Kabukabu Mambwe

Countries around the world are striving to incorporate e-governance as a means of improving transparency and good governance in the public sector. Sadly, this trend has eluded the Zambian public sector, where the potential for e-governance is not being fully utilised.

Promoting Efficiency and Transparency

In order to promote efficiency and transparent governance in the African public service, UNESCO and the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) conceived a three-year pilot project on “E-governance for African Municipalities,” which began in 2001 and involved selected municipalities from five African countries: Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Tanzania, and Zambia. Lusaka, Zambia’s capital, was the country’s representative in this project.

The project’s promoters noted that African municipalities are often heavy bureaucratic structures with unclear procedures and processes for treating requests from city residents. Furthermore, these municipalities tend to function in isolation and fail to benefit from the experiences and best practices of other municipalities within their country or region. The project aimed to ensure transparency and citizen participation in governance, and, while building on existing community facilities, also involved developing websites so that municipalities could share and exchange experiences. To meet these goals, the pilot emphasized two major components: developing a multimedia training package for municipal personnel; and developing pilot applications in the selected municipalities. The equipment and training necessary to achieve these goals also formed a critical element of the project.

The Lusaka City Council Project

The Lusaka project, involving the Lusaka City Council (LCC), is headquartered in the city’s civic center building. According to LCC IT Manager Judy Beene, also the LCC project supervisor, the project’s objective is to promote free flow of information and thus to open dialogue among municipalities and the local communities they serve. In addition, the project strives to improve access to information required for decision making, to communicate effectively with citizens and to establish a municipal information system using ICTs.

“There has been a spirit of teamwork on the project from representatives of the departments within the City Council,” says Beene. The e-governance project has transformed the LCC into a knowledge hub and could be used as a tool for service delivery and revenue generation, as well as a teaching and learning centre for e-commerce, she says.

As the local government has a profound impact on the lives of citizens, the governance processes and structures that accompany it must be – and are becoming - participatory, transparent, and accountable. “These objectives are becoming a reality in Lusaka City Council through the newly-built website, which will open dialogue between the Council and the community it serves,” Beene says.

The LCC can now use ICTs as a means of improving responsiveness and reliability in its services. As Beene explains, ICTs could improve economic opportunities, lower the cost of delivery of public and private goods, help streamline bureaucracy, enhance the transparency in the institution’s administration, and improve productivity. For instance, internet connectivity has boosted the Council’s operations by improving communication among the workers, about 50% of whom are now using ICTs. The local network has also streamlined the operations of the Rates Department, as they are able to update their records on a regular basis.

In the past, citizens had to walk to the LCC headquarters to access information; today, Beene says, the project has opened municipal services to the city’s population. In time, she says, the minutes for the full council meetings will be posted online, enabling members of the public to know what transpires in these meetings. Through the website people can come to know their councilors in the wards, to learn of development projects and to explore the Council’s delivery of services. However, the website has not yet been launched for full public access.

Funding Challenges

Unfortunately, the LCC project suffered a set back when the funders did not release the last parcel of funding for training council workers in e- governance. According to Beene, there has been little feedback from UNESCO and DANIDA, the project’s initiators. The shortage of funds has also stalled the creation of the

Public Information Center, and further budget constraints, owing in part to escalating prices of equipment, have meant that staff was not properly trained for network administration and web design maintenance. "The project has ended because there has been no feedback from the funders and the Council has taken up the duty of paying the Internet bills," Beene says. The LCC is searching for financing alternatives to help establish an Information Centre to improve interaction with the public and to enlighten people on the benefits of e-governance, still very much in its infancy in Zambia. Although e-governance has opened a window on new opportunities for the LCC, its workers need training sessions both to improve their basic computer and ICT skills and to help educate the public on how to use ICT to interact with the LCC effectively.

Project Results

The project has achieved significant results as the Council can now communicate with other countries through the Internet. "There are noticeable changes," says Chansa Makanta, the LCC Public Relations Manager. "We are able to speak to other countries and to discover what other municipalities are doing about certain issues."

John Kapenda, Acting Director for the Engineering Department, says Internet access has improved his work as he is able to conduct extensive professional research and to download relevant materials. In addition, he notes that the Engineering Department can use its site to provide updates of activities, such as posting maps showing which roads are closed for maintenance and where new road construction is taking place. Kapenda, who checks his e-mails three to four times in a week, notes that Internet access is available to all of the 530 workers in his department -- provided one knows how to use it and is working at the Council headquarters.

According to LCC Senior Software Developer Johns Kafwilo, the project has improved the operation of the Council as most of the communication is done through the Internet. "Research is done easily and we are up-to-date with technology," he explains. "As an individual I am also benefiting. And the more I improve my skills, the more the City Council improves." The internet has opened many resources to Kafwilo, enabling him to contact other specialists to find solutions to their shared problems. Such discussions are a two way process as he is also able to give advice on technical matters in which he is well-versed. "There is an increased demand for the use of the Internet," he notes. "However, the bandwidth has remained static, which has to change if the service is to be used efficiently."

The LCC has about 1500 workers but so far only those who work at the headquarters have access to the Internet. "We require more computers for use at other sites, so we will need supporters to come to our aid," says Makanta, who explains that the City Council intends to use the website (www.iicd.gov.zm) to post calendars of events and other initiatives that would assist donors who wish to help the LCC in expanding the e-governance initiative.

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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.
