

MING, A., AWAN, O. & SOMANI, N. (EDS) (2013).

E-GOVERNANCE IN SMALL STATES,

COMMONWEALTH SECRETARIAT, LONDON. (133 PAGES)

ISBN# (paperback): 978-1-84929-102-6

ISBN# (e-book): 978-1-84859-158-5

Koffi Kouakou,

Senior Lecturer, Graduate School of Public and Development Management, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

OVERVIEW OF THEMES DISCUSSED: E-GOVERNANCE AND SMALL STATES

With millions of people still remaining outside the net of sustainable development benefits, small states are searching for new governance paradigms to deliver development promises. How does one govern a small state efficiently by using new forms of technologies? Thirty-two of the Commonwealth's 54 member states are classified as small states, with populations of less than 1.5 million. This puts to the test ideas on the traditional governance of nations and forces their governments to look for alternative ways to fulfill socio-economic expectations.

The complex development challenges associated with governing small states include geographic isolation in small islands, population dispersion in small economies and human capital skills shortages. In the 21st century, we see the emergence of new approaches to dealing with these difficulties, noting experiences and strategies evident around the world for using ICT to improve governance and to create efficient and inclusive public service delivery. Furthermore, the deployment of ICT for "micro-governance" in "small developing states also improves the quality of institutions for service delivery, which in turn has been shown to improve political stability, raise the public debt threshold, decrease growth volatility and increase foreign aid and investment" (Ming, Awan & Somani, 2013, p. xi). Thus, e-governance, delivering public services and engaging with citizens via digital platforms may become imperative for small states who wish to foster greater social and economic accountability. The authors argue that, as governments are major economic stakeholders in most small states (Rwanda, Swaziland, other), the adoption and effective implementation of e-governance is likely to have a more significant impact on the economic and social development of small states than that seen in larger or developed countries. However, the access and use of ICT for governance is at a formative stage in small states, which face considerable challenges due to the high cost of technology, the absence of adequate electronic communications infrastructure, the absence of a sufficiently broad and sophisticated skills pool and a small private sector with limited investment capacity. According to the authors, 18 of the Commonwealth's 32 small member states are ranked in the bottom half of e-government indices.

The authors stress that e-governance tools must be integrated into wider good governance goals and e-governance strategy requires substantial political determination. Leaders must understand how to adapt e-governance projects to policy objectives, while chief information officers (CIOs) and their teams develop the underlying business processes, organisational structures and capacities, and robust data architecture needed to support constant adaptation. Hence the book provides insights to strengthen the understanding of policymakers, outlining the conditions and processes involved in planning and executing e-governance projects in small states.

The ultimate message of the book is that e-governance is a government transformation project, not a technology project. The various authors take into account wide development imperatives beyond the mere computerisation of government operations. The chapters consider elements of democracy and its ancillary service delivery components of good governance. When well implemented, the consequences of e-governance for beneficiaries can be revolutionary for the lives of citizens, especially in small states.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The book spells out the benefits of e-governance in six brief chapters, all of them well-argued by specialists, policymakers, government executives and renowned researchers of the Commonwealth. Case studies include a transparency portal in Brazil, a budget tracking tool in Kenya, community information centres in India, raising water pressure in Tanzania, Stop Stock-outs in Kenya and Uganda, the CU@SCHOOL in Uganda, e-governance in the Seychelles, ICT4GOV in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Ushahidi in Kenya.

The first chapter outlines a perspective on e-government and e-governance benefits, also explaining the design and implementation cycle and stages of maturity. Pillars for successful e-governance initiatives are a coherent national ICT strategy as an economic development priority, and the design and successful implementation of strategy. The second chapter considers the challenges experienced in common by small states, including geographic isolation of small

economies, high risk of natural disasters, income volatility, limited institutional capacity and absence of specialised and tested e-government practices. It suggests a framework and conditions essential for e-governance success in small states in the Commonwealth.

Thirdly, e-government strategy development process is analysed, noting the requirements for strong leadership; and championing sound financing, monitoring and evaluation practices. Only adaptable, reconfigured and efficient government processes can deliver value and accountability to society in small states. This discussion raises the fourth focus, on government process re-engineering (GPR), a methodology to analyse and redesign organisational processes. It observes that for e-governance and GPR to succeed as a process of change, the efforts must be accompanied by strategies for change management and communication.

Fifthly, effective implementation plans are required to integrate legislative, regulatory and policy mechanisms, ICT infrastructure, architecture and standards. Project cost remains a fundamental concern of the authors, as inappropriate costing and cost containment often leads to failure of e-governance projects. Finally, it is argued that e-governance will continue to evolve and new directions will emerge with particular relevance to small states. Specific attention is thus given to “m-governance” and cloud services.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

It can be argued that, in the future, public sector institutions will battle to survive without an efficient e-governance system and its foundation e-government platforms. In less than 150 pages, the authors offer a practical and evidence-based framework to conceptualise, design, implement and operate e-governance in small states. They propose a number of critical success factors including a clear vision, political leadership, administrative leadership, consultation with stakeholders, financing e-government, e-governance monitoring and evaluation, and ICT capacity building. There is little here that is new.

More relevant is the discussion of the tension between traditional human governance and e-governance in small states. One questions why the need for e-governance in small states, especially in the Commonwealth. The answer is clear. Small states, because of the significant challenges they face to deliver services and manage the multiple constraints of sustainable economic development, need powerful instruments of government. In particular, e-governance can provide the platform to strengthen economic development, stronger, open, transparent and efficient democratic public institutions.

The debate about the appropriate tools and technologies to help strengthen government service delivery shortages is not new. What makes this book interesting is the discussion of the choice available among the basket of readily available technologies and practice, which can enhance innovation and limit the risk of failure.

Who is this book really for? The technical nature of the book limits the scope of its audience to specialists, technologists and policymakers. For this reason, it will appeal only to a narrow selection of readers. Certainly those who access it will find the content directly applicable to what they need to do to make e-governance a success. At the same time, one would have wanted the book to strike a chord with a wider audience outside the scope of technicians and government officials. Clearly the book is for a specialist audience, to the detriment of greater audience appeal.

The case studies attempt to convince the reader that e-governance in small states is worth addressing as an effective tool of government. But there is no clear evidence that this is so. It may serve only to raise the importance of the issue and sensitise policymakers, government officials and practitioners in small states that they too can use e-governance for development purposes.

In Africa, ours is a race against poverty, inequality, unemployment, lack of distributed knowledge and individual learning competencies, and slow democratisation of governance systems. Can e-governance help rethink and fast forward Africa, and its peoples? Perhaps. But the book does not address these issues.

What do I, as reviewer, really think about e-governance? There seems to be too much emphasis on technologies, rather than on the human element of e-governance and its specificity in small states. Even if technologies are the necessary backbone for e-governance systems, human competencies remain the final arbiter of their success. Furthermore, e-governance seems costly in terms of design, technicality, implementation and management. e-Governance solutions are often no better than traditional governance tools, since there is a tendency to replicate existing government models by putting the old governance instruments in electronic format or on the Internet. Government officials and citizens transfer their old behaviours online. Unfortunately, that perception is difficult to shed given the experiences in small states as discussed in the book. Finally, the adoption of e-governance systems should be evidence-based as suggested in this book. However, policymakers and practitioners should be careful not to overestimate the value of the evidence that may not apply to their specific context.

The book offers no overall conclusion and it misses a few important themes. It fails to make a worthwhile comparative analysis between the small states of the Commonwealth and the world leaders in e-governance. The confined focus on small states and the particular selection of case studies does not allow a comparative analysis of e-governance success. Very little is discussed about e-governance private public partnership projects, leaving the impression that e-governance is exclusively public sector focused. Public-private partnerships could be useful in small states given budgetary constraints in the public sector, even where the private sector is weak.

Another missing theme is a discussion of the economics of e-government and e-governance. Besides the idea of financial viability that superficially recognises the inability of small states to allocate resources to sustainable e-governance, the book has neglected an opportunity to address the complex issue of the economics of e-governance, relating to demand and supply of infrastructure and particular services, minimum funding levels and resources needed to design, implement and manage sustainable e-governance projects in small states. There is limited attention to the types of funding necessary to start an e-governance initiative or to the particular economies of scale that can be reached in small states.

Also missing from the book is a discussion of the link between e-governance and the learning-by-doing curve that is necessary to entrench an e-governance project from inception to completion and constant innovation. Building a learning component into any e-governance project should be a mandatory systemic approach to success.

Completely lost in the book is the issue of the profile of e-governance project managers and officers in small states. What types of skills and competencies do they require to manage e-governance systems efficiently and effectively? Furthermore, there is limited discussion about the role of local languages; rather there is an assumption that the English language is the default language for the Commonwealth small states. Finally, besides the generic list of success factors, the book omits to discuss the performance management of e-governance that includes systems to measure these success factors and the impacts of e-governance in small states.

Despite its weaknesses, this book is worth reading and using as a starting point for small states, given its summation of many of the basic requirements for e-governance.

