

E-GOVERNMENT IN AFRICA  
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“Risks arise because the contexts of industrialised and of African countries differ in various ways that can be summarised using the ITPOSMO checklist. The list is drawn from findings presented above and from research literature on ICTs in Africa (Lind 1991, Ojo 1992, Woherem 1993, Haque 1996, and Berman and Tettey 2001):

- Information: formal, quantitative information stored outside the human mind is valued less in African countries than in the West.
- Technology: the technological infrastructure (telecommunications, networks, electricity) is more limited and/or older in Africa.
- Processes: work and decision-making processes are more contingent in African governments because of the more politicised and uncertain environment.
- Objectives and values: African public sector organisations are reportedly more likely to have cultures that value kin loyalty, authority, patron-client relations, holism, secrecy, and risk aversion.
- Staffing and skills: African governments have a more limited local skills base in a wide range of skills. This includes information systems skills of systems analysis and design, implementation skills, and operation-related skills including computer literacy and familiarity with the Western languages that dominate computing. It also includes a set of broader skills covering the planning, implementation and management of e-government initiatives; and a yet broader skill set related to analytical and decision-making capacities of the bureaucracy.
- Management systems and structures: African public sector organisations are more hierarchical and more centralised.
- Other resources: African countries have less money. In addition, as noted above, the cost of ICTs is higher than in industrialised countries whereas the cost of labour is less.

Of course, these are stereotypes. One can find many cases in which they are reversed, and one can equally find vast gulfs within industrialised countries. Nonetheless, these differences are real, and partly the legacy of differences between the home and overseas bureaucracies created by the colonial powers (Berman and Tettey 2001). Thus, there are frequent clashes of context between Western design and African public sector reality that can occur in a number of ways.

The most obvious happens when Western stakeholders, such as consultants or IT vendors or aid donors, dominate the e-government design process in Africa. Those stakeholders often bring with them the "If it works for us, it'll work for you" mentality (Odedra-Straub 1995). They also bring their

context with them and then impose a design derived from that context that mismatches African realities.

Problems can even occur where stakeholders from industrialised countries are not directly involved, because the West is not just a physical location, it is also a state of mind that has now come to exist for increasing numbers of key figures in African public sectors. This transfer of context occurs directly through education in the West or even in Western-developed educational systems, and indirectly through the leverage gained by Western domination of economic, political and cultural resources and channels. These individuals therefore act as Trojan horses, devising Western-inspired designs within African organisations.

An example of country context gaps is seen in the automation of customs data in Ghana, which used a system developed by Geneva-based UNCTAD with some assistance from Western-educated Ghanaians. The system was "developed with assumptions which are embedded in a Western culture of compliance and rationality that is different from that obtaining in Ghana." (Tettey 1997:355). Although the system has automated some processes, it has failed to achieve many of its objectives. Only a "tiny minority" of departments within the Customs and Excise Service use it; it has not prevented continuing tax evasion and fraud; it is perceived negatively by the majority of staff; and its sustainability is open to doubt. “

# eGovernment in Africa: *Promise and Practice*

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## Abstract

eGovernment has already arrived in Africa, though it is essentially an imported concept based on imported designs. There are growing numbers of e-government projects, some of which are contributing to public sector reform and delivering gains of efficiency and/or effectiveness across a broad agenda. However, this positive picture must be set alongside significant challenges. eGovernment is only slowly diffusing within Africa because of a lack of 'e-readiness for e-government' that can be charted along six dimensions. There is widespread recognition that this challenge must be met by strategic building of national infrastructure.

Where e-government projects are introduced, they mainly end in failure; either partial or total. To address this tactical challenge, stakeholders must be sensitised to the large gaps that often exist between project design and African public sector reality. These large 'design—reality gaps' can be seen to underlie failure. They arise particularly because e-government concepts and designs have their origins in the West; origins that are significantly different from African realities. Some best practices are outlined that may help to close design—reality gaps and, hence, may help to improve project success rates. This will only happen, though, if they too are appropriate to African realities.

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