UNESCO Training Workshop on Information Ethics and e-Government

in Sub-Saharan Africa

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A. BACKGROUND OF THE CHALLENGES

Before drawing conclusions or making recommendations, it is first important to take note of key elements of the Africa e-Government Context and Challenges (the background) so that the conclusions and recommendations will be clearer and will provide opportunities for continued discussion.

- **Unique African Challenges and Focus at the Local Level**

The national approach was presented by explaining the use of handbooks, discussion of national policies of individual countries' e-readiness, and other examples. In other cases, the local level approach was described by several participants, including highlighting case studies. Within the many, politically, economically and socio-culturally diverse African countries, small, rural, often remote, and largely agriculturally-based municipalities and villages pose unique and daunting political, economic, developmental, linguistic, and socio-cultural problems and challenges. While acknowledging the effects of globalization and the growing opportunities for individual citizens, business enterprises, governments, and other elements of society to access information and communication services worldwide, most importantly, the focus and origination of e-Government planning and implementation must be at the local level which is closest to understanding the needs of individuals, families, local communities and struggling

small enterprises. This may mean spending one and one-half to two years listening to individuals in the communities to learn from them, and thus acquire a more accurate and complete understanding of their needs, and to establish priorities before beginning the details of planning. We should not limit our initial research and thinking to the technological capabilities of ICT, but rather seek the empowerment of citizens to improve the quality of their lives, especially in the areas of employment, health, business opportunities, and in governance and citizenship improvements. An important question to ask before making any changes is: "What positive difference will this make for each individual person?" Therefore, the "e" in e-government might even be interpreted as meaning not only "electronic" but also "empowerment." Of course it must always be remembered that e-Government not only assists citizens, but also businesses, elements of the civil society, and government itself at all levels - - central/national, provincial/state and local. In each case, an in-depth analysis should be made to determine whether a national or local approach, or a combination of the two, is optimal. One significant question raised was whether there is a political will for e-government and e-governance. The answer from many of the participants indicated that there is a political will in most countries.

In short, instead of adopting a mindset that thinks in terms of e-government, or even of information ethics – important as those concepts are – we must first understand citizen needs and only then begin to develop strategies, approaches and models – after first considering some examples of, and lessons learned by others if they are relevant to citizens' needs.

- **Challenges**

    The challenges addressed covered a wide range of topics. Among those raised most frequently were: poverty, lack of infrastructure (electricity, bandwidth, etc.), lack of access for many people in rural and remote areas, exclusion of some groups (e.g., people with disabilities, women, etc.), high costs including taxes, the need for greater transparency and accountability, insufficient privacy and security protection, the need for education and training both at the basic literacy and the information literacy level, the lack of sufficient content in languages and forms appropriate for that community's needs and culture, freedom of expression and censorship which may result in the lack of independent and responsible media, protection of children using ICT, the protection and use of intellectual property while recognizing different cultural perspectives, defining civil society, preserving the cultural record including Indigenous Knowledge, and other topics.

    Information should be provided in conformance with each country's laws and traditions, and citizens may need to guard against unnecessarily politicizing their feedback, and interactions with government. This must be balanced with the roles of the citizens to provide information to governments about their needs and views and to participate in

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government. Also, governments need to listen to their citizens if e-government is to help transform government to be more citizen-centric. Questions of the impact of censorship in some countries on citizens and on responsible, independent media were raised.

- **The Central Focus of e-Government in Africa should be on Development**

The central focus of e-Government in Africa should be on helping to accomplish Development goals and objectives, which includes improving the quality of life of individuals and families, strengthening institutions in both the private and public sectors, and enlarging the role of elements of the civil society so that the civil society can partner more effectively with the other elements of the public sector and with the private sector. Development, in short, encompasses not just social and cultural goals, but governance/political and economic, business and industry strengthening as well. In short all sectors of an African society are embraced by development goals and objectives. If an e-Government team is considering an application that cannot be linked more or less directly to a development goal or objective, in all likelihood it should be accorded a lower ranked priority

- **Inclusivity**

The accurate identification of, and inclusion of all stakeholders in e-Government visions, mission statements, policy, plans and strategies is essential, again, starting at the most local level, referring first to institutions and organizations, with existing groups – whether formal or informal, and then extended upwards to provincial/state, then national, then sub-regional, then regional, and, finally in some instances even international stakeholders (e.g. international intergovernmental organizations such as ITU, UNESCO, WIPO, UNDP, and even international non-governmental organizations such as the International Federation of Information Processing Societies (IFIPS), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and others.

But inclusivity does not just refer to institutions and organizations, it also refers to sub-populations of the general population that have special needs. For example, ensuring the inclusion of both women and men, youth (girls and boys), diverse linguistic and cultural groups, elders, people with disabilities, literate and illiterate people, the unemployed, underemployed and migrant populations, minority ethnic, racial and religious groups, etc. While women are often active participants in the workplace and in local communities, they are too often unable to read and write, and are not always fully included in decision-making by governments. It needs to be noted that the exclusion of women is not limited to Africa. For example, in the U.S.

there are only 14 women out of 100 people in the Senate. The empowerment of all people, regardless of gender, socio-economic status, and cultural group, is essential.

- **Emphasis on Existing Technologies in the Broadest Sense, and Existing Cultural Traditions**

Emphasis should be placed on utilizing existing technologies and traditions (such as storytelling, radio, "word of mouth" sharing – for example during taxi rides, information talks at local gathering places, etc.) as a starting point. Sometimes this has been referred to as the "information and communication culture." Existing resources, such as paper documents, can be transformed into learning tools, and presented via radio or oral demonstrations with the community, for example, using the simplest tools, technologies and other capabilities such as the human voice, hand signals, or radio.

B. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Now we will move to the major findings and conclusions that were drawn by the participants and expert-presenters at the meeting.

- **Social and Professional Networking**

  The participants and expert-presenters at the first-ever Information Ethics and e-Government conference held in Africa comprise a unique, new and extremely valuable portfolio of human expertise that could and should play a lead role in advancing and advocating e-Government programmes in Africa. Therefore, the organizers of the conference should take steps to facilitate this group remaining in contact with each other, with the organizers, and with other stakeholders in the e-Government arena. Already participants and presenters have bonded socially and professionally and a website has been built. What remains to be done is to expand the existing website, add functionalities (e.g., a wiki and a blog), and translate the website into French, Portuguese, and Swahili. Many excellent examples of successful projects, key factors leading to success, mistakes made with information on how changes were made,

challenges facing communities, and other useful ideas and examples were shared. Building on this information sharing can provide many benefits. It is important to note that e-government does not just mean generating more electrical power – although is very important. It also means generating more people power to support and sustain a more citizen-centric society!

- **Additional Resources Needed**

More and better resources are needed for continuous and sustainable development, if at all possible to be generated by the local or national economies, so that the people are empowered, instead of risking relinquishing power to external funders because of the possibility that they may impose too many and too arduous conditions on their willingness to fund and assist national e-Government programmes. However, because local or national economies are, by definition, more limited, countries should next explore the possibility of partnering with other countries in the same sub-region to pool their resources to developed shared e-Government applications which all of the countries could then enjoy. Finally, if the required funding is still inadequate, countries should approach (again, ideally sub-regionally, or at least multi-laterally) international institutions and organizations, considering both political and economic, and both public and private (such as foundations).

These resources that are needed and solicited are not restricted to just financial resources. They should also include appropriate tools, mechanisms, and the expansion of existing resources to help cope with e-government and development challenges. For example, resources might include: 1) Establishing new or strengthening existing education training centers of excellence (perhaps one per country, region, or sub-regional to start); 2) Collaborative models among countries or regions faced with similar challenges to share ideas, approaches, case studies, etc.; 3) Methods to conserve limited human resources, build on experiences from pilot projects, etc.; and 4) A single, comprehensive (i.e. All Africa) authoritative e-Government clearinghouse, perhaps related directly to the Website, (proposed by the rapporteur, but not formally recommended by the participants) to collect, organize, index, translate, preserve, and provide information resources management tools and techniques to serve practicing professionals, policy makers, educators and trainers, etc., thus providing services to

enable people to find, retrieve, evaluate, preserve and use information they need. In addition, the clearinghouse could maintain or arrange for the updating and maintenance of the Website, the African Toolkit, and as well, could provide access to existing valuable tools, such as the UNESCO Tool Kit, reports of pilot project and studies, etc.

These resources are for use by all stakeholders, not just those within government that are leading and managing e-Government programmes, participating private sector components, academia (which is providing research and education/training needs), large NGOs which specialize in responding to the needs of disadvantaged sub-populations, etc. In addition and VERY IMPORTANTLY, resources for local communities should be made available using appropriate technologies. These might include, for example, radio and local television broadcasts, reports in a multitude of languages and delivery mechanisms for possible adaptation and use by local villages and other communities. The development of infrastructure, as well as the use of additional resources, should not be at the expense of the environment. An appropriate balance must be established and maintained, and the focus should be on renewable energies.

- **Collaboration, Partnerships and Alliances**

  E-Government programmes led by government ministries should consider various kinds of collaborations, including partnerships with NGOs, where appropriate private sector large and small businesses, neighboring communities and countries with the same language similar cultures, type of application interests, development needs, etc., because such alliances can provide many desirable benefits. This effort should, again, begin at the local level, then proceed to the national, then to the sub-regional and regional level, and, finally, to the international levels (e.g., UNESCO, ITU, ISO, UNDP, WIPO, etc.). Both formal channels and liaisons to these groups and, even more importantly, informal networking and collaboration with the individual and with practicing professionals (peer-to-peer), and organizational/institutional level (e.g., "sister" universities, communities, government agencies, NGOs, etc.) will permit information sharing and learning from experiences. It is important to consider the need for cultural sensitivity and adaption to each culture.

- **Public Awareness Campaigns to Explain the Relevance, Benefits and other Details of e-Government Programmes**

While discussion of e-Government and Information Ethics among professionals is important and should continue, all publicity, descriptions, planning and implementation of projects should focus on the local priorities, such as availability of clean water, farming concerns, education, health care, etc. and development – using the language of the local community and language pertinent to the local priorities. This needs to be explained, clarified and amplified if needed to all intended elements of the population to be served by the e-Government programme. But, a word of caution! The phrases, "e-Government," "Information Ethics," etc., while technically accurate, should not be used, in public campaigns because they are not meaningful and understood by laypersons, especially by illiterate and under-educated persons. E-government, with appropriate IE discussions, is simply a means to the end goal of improving the quality of people's lives and empowering them to make informed decisions that can affect their lives.

- **Additional Conferences, Workshops and other learning and Information Interchange opportunities**

As has been mentioned above, this conference has been the first to conjoin two important paradigms - - e-Government and Information Ethics. Surely, however, additional opportunities must be crafted so that "best practices" and ideas can be extended and expanded, and built upon by an ever-widening audience of participants who are involved in e-Government programmes, academic research, and so on.

UNESCO, for example, should follow-on and not lose the momentum created by this first-ever EG-IE conference. Both pan-Africa as well as regional, sub-regional and application-focused (e.g., education, health care, etc.) workshops should be planned, again with the partnership with appropriate public and private organizations and institutions. The participants at the Mount Grace meeting feel strongly that a diversity of sectoral workshop sponsors is highly desirable because each brings to the meetings and discussions their own unique strengths and viewpoints. It is from that cauldron of diverse opinions and views that more deeply "vetted" courses of action and next steps emerge, than otherwise would be the case if such learning opportunities were dominated by a single bias or point of view. Replicating the kind of workshop held at Mount Grace, including both format and content, on a sub-regional, regional, or

national level (as well as future Pan-Africa), inviting key stakeholder groups, should be encouraged.

Leading countries in the different regions and sub-regions of the continent should also continue to play a lead role in advancing and advocating the e-Government and Information Ethics "partnership of ideas and paradigms" so that its neighbors, both in Sub-Sahara Africa, and even in North Africa, can benefit from their investment in moving forward.