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Electronic Governance Tools as Support Systems for the Public Service in South Africa

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ABSTRACT This paper uses a secondary study approach to examine electronic governance tools and their contribution to the South African public service. The primary objective of the paper was to explore on the experiences of electronic-governance as support systems on service delivery in the public service. Through the secondary study approach, the paper reveals that electronic governance is one of the primary means of supporting social and economic development. The paper concludes that for electronic governance to be a sturdy support system it should take into account the needs of society, the developmental goals of government as well as the empowerment of citizenry in the public service.

INTRODUCTION

The power of technology is undoubtedly taking over traditional methods of carrying out tasks either in the private sector or public sector within developing nations because people are looking for better and faster means of service provision. The vision of e-governance is to ascertain the optimization of public services so that the government can achieve its goals of governing through efficient delivery of public services (Pardo et al. 2016). Simultaneously electronic governance does not bring new public services, but it provides a support system for the existing public service with the ultimate benefit for both the government and the public. The government of South Africa is in the process of making a lot of investments by extending the communication infrastructure to the remotest parts of the country so as to bridge the gap in the quality of service provision that has been built on racial public service from the pre-1994 era (DPSA 2015). There however continues to be high expectations to the government with respect to improved public service as proven by the recurring public service delivery protests (DPSA 2015). Such expectations are not unique to the public service and in this regard there is a need for the South African government to recognize that the implementation of e-governance will afford them the opportunity to enhance service delivery for the benefit of the general populace.

The implementation of e-governance has been extensively commended in that it provides innovative momentum to deliver services quickly and efficiently (Evans and Yen 2006). In recognition of these benefits, various arms of the South African government have already embarked on a number of e-governance initiatives including the Batho Pele portal, the South Africa Revenue Services e-filing system, the e-Natis system, electronic processing of grant applications from remote sites and several departmental web portals (StatsSA 2015). Although the South African public service is committing to the delivery of electronic services, they are still not accessible to the regular and marginalized citizen. This is coupled by the fact that South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world due to the increasingly widening gap between the rich and the poor as proven by the Gini co-efficiency of 63.1 (World Bank Data 2016). Areas with high poverty rates lack access to most public services since these areas are economically backward and they also lack extensive development of various interlinking networks and infrastructure to public services (World Bank Data 2016). This implies that increasing e-governance in the public service as a support system will leverage the infrastructure to ultimately assist the marginalized citizens through the provision of local electronic services (Ijeoma and Nwaodu 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is characterized by the fact that the researcher attempts to get multiple

meanings and interpretations from what exists rather than imposing one dominant interpretation as done through the quantitative research design (Rosnow and Rosenthal 2008). Hence, through this qualitative desktop approach the researcher was able to draw data from various sources of relevant existing literature. This was a qualitative study informed by an in-depth literature review to assess the role of e-governance as a support system for service delivery in the public service. The authors analyzed the secondary data through thematic and content data analysis by organizing it into categories on the basis of major themes that emerged from the within the literature.

RESULTS

Current E-governance Tools and Initiatives in South Africa

The freedom day of the South African government in 1994 to a democratic nation marked the occurrence of several transitions aimed at addressing the public service delivery backlog, which was racially established in the pre-1994 era. The post-1994 era resultantly witnessed the launch of legislative frameworks that led to the establishment of e-governance initiatives and tools, which range from primitive to very advanced forms of technology as discussed below.

SARS E-filing System

The South African Revenue Services (SARS) e-filing system is among one of South Africa's notable e-governance initiatives, which was created to provide a way to conduct transactions related to tax returns on the Internet between the government and businesses (Mutula 2010). SARS e-filing system is a free online service that allows individual taxpayers, businesses and tax practitioners to register and submit tax returns, make payments and perform a number of other interactions with SARS in a secure online environment (SARS 2013).

Provincial Portals

Nationally, South Africa provides some electronic services for citizens to access through government portals. Although the range of public services offered on the web portals are not very extensive it offers citizens an opportunity to comment on several public forums pertaining to the quality of public services rendered in the diverse government departments and reporting of any fraudulent activities (Cloete 2012). South Africa has nine provincial governments and each province has its own provincial portal (Stats SA 2015). The most notable functioning portals are those of the Gauteng Provincial Government and the Western Cape Provincial Government (Rasool 2011). Subsequent efforts have also been made to ensure inclusiveness and the removal of language barriers that may affect other target groups, particularly the previously disadvantaged. Resultantly, the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality web portal page enabled an isiXhosa language option to promote effective communication since isiXhosa is the primary language in the Eastern Cape Province (Rasool 2011).

Presidential Hotline

The State President of the Republic of South Africa, Jacob Zuma through the office of the Presidency created a hotline for citizens to register challenges to the Department of Presidency on matters of corruption, fraud and all public service delivery challenges. This hotline plainly presented pragmatic evidence of the scale of frustrations within the citizens of South Africa concerning public service delivery through a flood of calls, which jammed the network (Mpinganjira 2013).

Digital Communication (iPads, Notebooks and Smartphones)

The 21st century has witnessed the technology trend vibe harder, and this has not gone unnoticed in the public service sector. The Makana municipality in Eastern Cape purchased iPads for its municipal councilors (Mpinganjira 2013). The intention was aimed at moving towards paperless council meetings as well as saving photocopying and reprinting expenses. Ladysmith Municipality in KwaZulu Natal purchased notebooks for city councilors (Mpinganjira 2013). The aim was meant to reduce the cost of paper purchasing and printing for municipal

meetings, which was calculated at an approximate two million rands per annum (Mpinganjira 2013: 19).

Smart Identity Document Card

The Department of Home Affairs started replacing the green bar-coded identity documents (IDs) with smart ID cards in 2013. The new smart ID cards have better security features and are argued to be extremely difficult to forge (DPSA 2015). The ID body is secure and durable, made of high quality a polycarbonate material, which is meant to prevent tampering from fraudulent activities.

Smart Cape Access Project

The Smart Cape Access project and the Digital Business Centers project were supplemented by the Khulisa Youth Development Program by focusing on equipping the youth from previously disadvantaged communities with ICT technical skills to operate in the new globalized electronic economy (Cape Gateway 2004).

E-procurement for the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)

In terms of the new e-procurement system, all IEC registered and approved suppliers including emerging businesses would be informed via e-mail or fax of any auction taking place to enable them to openly bid to provide their services. All submitted bids could then be viewed by all approved suppliers at any stage during the bidding process and thus suppliers could compete transparently for tenders thereby eliminating fraud and corruption (Mutula 2010).

E-NATIS (National Traffic Information System)

E-Natis is used in the application for driving licenses and the registration and licensing of motor vehicles, notification of change of ownership or sale of motor vehicles as well as application for learner's licenses (DoC 2015). The transactions and services can now be provided by most transport offices with upgraded network services across the nine provinces in the country (DoC 2015).

Electronic Health Strategy

Chapter 5 and part 1(a) of the National e-Health Strategy attests to the principles underlying the Electronic Governance Value by confirming that "Departments shall manage information technology effectively and efficiently and ICT shall be used as a tool to leverage public service delivery by the public service for the public good". Consequently, the use of ICT in the health sector has shown assurance as an effective means to support the public health system service functions like data collection and surveillance for monitoring and evaluation purposes (DoC 2015). To this effect, officials and partners in the health sector have initiated pilot projects for the mobile health initiative in twelve districts in South Africa in an attempt to test the feasibility of ICT in the public health sector (Cloete 2012).

Electronic Learning

E-learning is generally a term broadly used to describe any type of learning that utilizes ICT to assist in the learning and teaching process. As early as 1996, the Telecommunications Act (Act 103 of 1996) contemplated an education network to link all schools, for learners to be electronic savvy. In October 2011, the Department of Basic Education then published an Action Plan for 2014, named Schooling 2025 and the details of the Action Plan alludes to twenty-seven national output goals, of which four of these goals are closely intertwined to e-learning prerogatives (South Africa's Children 2013).

Integrated Financial Management Information Systems (IFMIS)

An IFMIS is an information system that tracks financial events and summarizes financial information. It seeks to support the adequate management reporting, policy decisions and the preparation of auditable financial statements (Chêne 2009). In general terms, an IFMIS refers to the automating of financial operations through the use of ICT enabled mechanisms. In the public service, the IFMIS refers to the computerization of all the public financial management processes, from budget preparation, execution to accounting and reporting, with the help of an

integrated system for the purpose of efficient and effective financial management. According to the Public Finance Management Act (Act 1 of 1999), it is mandatory that the Ministry of Finance creates a strategic financial management system, and hence the South African public service implemented an IFMIS tailor suited for the State.

DISCUSSION

The contribution of e-governance as a support system in public service delivery has seemingly transcended over the turmoil associated with the public service delivery backlog in South Africa. The discussion of findings on the contribution of e-governance in this section of the paper were aligned to the four pillars of Public Administration, which are efficiency, equity, effectiveness and economic. This is because e-governance operates in this context and it was essential to espouse on the content in that manner.

Efficiency

Efficiency is essentially a comparison between inputs used and the produced outputs in a certain activity. When given a certain amount of resources an organization should attain a certain level of outputs that are maximum and attainable under the existing technology (Parham 2012). The innovative IEC e-procurement system is meant to eliminate paperwork and human intervention through ensuring that registered companies tender for services through fax and emails. This is aimed at ensuring efficiency through cost recovery in time and travel costs for both the IEC and all the relevant suppliers involved. The time taken to process the information is much quicker than the traditional method, which normally took months (Doc 2015). Consequently, the risk of losing tax returns and supporting documents in the postal system is also eliminated, through the efficiency of this electronic system. Hence, it is rational to note that the e-procurement system particularly displays the benefits inherent in the e-governance system.

DPSA (2015) notes that the new Smart ID book takes only three days, whereas the turnaround time on the old green barcoded ID took about fifty-four days after application, which is a visible efficient move in light of the infrastructural backlog aligned to the public service. The Department of Home Affairs noted that it is now able to produce three million of these smart ID cards a year as compared to a lesser output on the old ID card, which took fifty-four days to be processed (DPSA 2015). It is also imperative to note that before the e-NATIS was launched in 2007, its predecessor the NATIS only managed an average of three hundred thousand transactions per day (Mutula 2010). With the inception of the e-Natis system the average rate of daily transactions rose to six hundred thousand (Mutula 2010). The e-learning initiative is also an efficient means of supporting the slowly lagging behind the education system of South Africa. The education system can never be mentioned without alluding to the Limpopo book shortage scandal of 2012, which inconvenienced several learners, thereby denying them their right to adequate learning material as per the Bill of Rights. As a result to reveal the significance of e-learning, the 2012 textbook scandal clearly highlighted the inefficiency of textbook distribution, notwithstanding the high cost of printing and transporting materials, which always inconvenienced learners.

Effectiveness

Effectiveness is the extent to which the stated objectives are met and hence the policy achieves what it is intended to attain (Parham 2012). The new smart ID cards have better security features and are argued to be extremely difficult to forge. The smart ID body is secure durable and made of quality polycarbonate materials, which prevents tampering (DPSA 2015). Hence, any personalization with laser engraving of demographic details and photographs makes the new card extremely difficult to forge or tamper with thus the smartcard will cut down on the fraudulent use of fake or stolen IDs, which is an apparent major concern in South Africa (DPSA 2015). The inception of the smart ID card was an effective measure to address fraudulent activities and clamping down on corruption in the public service. It was also effective in addressing the inefficiencies of red tape incurred by citizens in the application process of the old ID book as compared to the new Smart ID card, which takes less than a week upon application.

Cape Town is a city where more than sixty percent of residents have never used a computer and the Smart Cape pilot project enabled the

installation of over thirty computers in six libraries (Cape Gateway 2004). The computers resultantly attracted five thousand and six hundred new users and an average of seven thousand users each month. The Smart Cape Access project was the first to provide free computer and Internet access to patrons in disadvantaged neighborhoods who may not otherwise have had such access (Cape Gateway 2004). In view of the above, the project has achieved success in its implementation of provincial policy mandates and objectives. The IFMIS is also an effective e-governance initiative to the financial sector of the public service in South Africa, which ensures accountability in the public expenditure programs. This is done through tracking financial events through an automated financial system. It makes it easier for management to control the expenditure with more transparency and accountability in the budget cycle as espoused through the Public Finance Management Act (Act 1 of 1999). An IFMIS also provides timely, accurate and consistent data for management and budget decision-making by computerizing the budget management and accounting system (Rodin-Brown 2008).

Economic

Economic impact is measured in terms of the increase in net benefits, which encompass productive, allocative and dynamic value for money (Parham 2012). This implies that an economic option ensures that no other option can provide a higher net benefit. Public services should always be bound by the value for money it offers to the citizens because resources are scarce and yet the demands for quality services are ever increasing. Efforts should be made to deliver public services through using cost-effective strategies considering the public service is under starved from funding. In the context of e-governance being a support system for public service delivery, services that carry value for money are essential because the theory is that demands and needs always supersede the ability of the public sector to meet those particular needs.

Equity

Johnson (2011) defines equity in public administration as the fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract. Equity involves the fair, just and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy, and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy (Ijeoma and Nwaodu 2013). The Batho Pele principles acknowledge the essence of equity through the exercise of courtesy by public servants to the citizens to whom they are mandated to equitably deliver services. This simply implies that public servants must treat citizens with respect as customers of public services irrespective of their social statuses. It is plausible that e-governance services are non-discriminatory, faceless and consistent since there is no face-to-face interaction. The government portals and the Presidential Hotline seek to attain and promote social equity in the South African public service that was previously racially established. This is because face-to-face government services are associated with harsh, crude and inconsiderate public servants. This crude behavior normally deters the general public from acquiring public services and they resort to private institutions, which normally offer the same services at a better quality but for a higher price. This is evident mainly in the health and education sector in which public institutions that are mandated to offer such basic services are suffering a huge backlog, part of which was inherited from the apartheid regime, which rendered racial public services, as argued by Ijeoma and Nwaodu (2013).

CONCLUSION

The authors conclude that the ability to provide e-governance services and information online is becoming a benchmark for the governments in both developed and developing nations. This is because e-governance brings out improved service delivery, access to public information as well as the promotion of an open and transparent form of government. In the provision of efficient and effective public services, e-governance is an essential component of good governance, because it involves new, better, faster and cheaper ways of delivering information and public services. This implies that the government should cater for every citizen from the general populace in terms of accessibility of available electronic public services. It becomes

essential that even those with disabilities should also be able to enjoy the convenience of some of the advanced e-governance tools and initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is essential to make electronic services accessible to people with disabilities because there are several barriers with e-governance tools and initiatives that obstruct people with disabilities from making good use of e-services as much as the general able-bodied populace can do. South Africa currently has eleven official languages. This implies that as a democratic nation, the information accessed and delivered through e-governance should be representative of the population in the ration of all the language divisions. E-governance is non-functional without the provisions of either electricity or internet to ensure the successful implementation of e-governance tools and initiatives. Therefore, for e-governance to be fully functional and effectual as a strong support system for public service provision, the entire electrical and technological infrastructure must be present. The successful establishment and implementation of e-governance as a support system for the public service is essential and viable but however more needs to be done to tackle the challenges that might hamper the implementation of e-governance.

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