

Improving Service Delivery through eGovernment

POLICY BRIEF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As economies become increasingly knowledge-based, investment in information and communication technology (ICT) has come to the fore. Shifting to an eGovernment approach has the potential to improve and expand service delivery, reduce corruption and costs, and overcome the spatial divisions that persist in South Africa. Although government allocates significant public resources to ICT, the spending is neither coordinated nor strategic. Issues that need addressing include: identifying a lead government department that will be responsible for driving eGovernment, clarifying roles and responsibilities among the different role-players, ensuring implementation is closely aligned to policy objectives, and improving access (and ease of access) to services, e.g. through the Thusong centres. To improve government operations through the use of ICT, the Financial and Fiscal Commission recommends simplifying the ICT policy and regulatory framework, clearly delineating roles and responsibilities, identifying the lead department for eGovernment, finalising a fully costed implementation plan and making eGovernment services more attractive and accessible to citizens.



BACKGROUND

As economies become increasingly knowledge-based, investment in information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure has come to the fore. An ICT-led approach to public service delivery (also referred to as electronic government or eGovernment) can result in greater efficiencies, better value for money, more connected government departments and citizens, employees with better tools to do their jobs, a leaner public service and an overall enhanced public sector capability. For South Africa, eGovernment is particularly attractive, as it can help overcome spatial divisions and build a capable state. Notwithstanding these benefits, some drawbacks include the high costs of changing over to an eGovernment system and the resources required to maintain the system.

In 2011/12, a total of R17.5-billion was allocated to ICT-related spending across the three spheres of government. At the local level, the bulk (65%) of ICT spending occurs in urban areas, particularly the better-resourced metropolitan municipalities. This distinct urban bias carries the risk that the large rural population¹ may miss out on the benefits and opportunities of eGovernment, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities in the access to services. Given the strategically important role that an eGovernment approach can play in a spatially divided country such as South Africa, the Financial and Fiscal Commission (the Commission) explored the status of ICT institutional arrangements and the barriers to adopting a full eGovernment approach.

¹ Where the poorest of the poor are located. >>

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In 2014, the relatively converged ICT sector was restructured: the Department of Communications (DoC) was split into a newly created Department of Telecommunications and Postal Services (DTPS) and a new DoC. These changes have resulted in uncertainty over roles and responsibilities. For example, the DTPS is responsible for ICT policy, but the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), through the Public Administration Management Act (No. 11 of 2014) regulates the use of ICT in government and determines norms and standards around the use of ICTs in the public sector. In addition, the new DoC is responsible for communication policy and strategy but, according to the Electronic Communications Act (No. 36 of 2005), the DTPS makes policy and policy directives relating to electronic communications and broadcasting, such as digital migration. The reconfiguration of the sector has also raised regulatory oversight issues. The Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) is the sector regulator and now reports to the DoC but regulates entities in the DoC and the DTPS.

In 2012, the government embarked on an ICT review process, which produced an ICT policy that is currently at the Green Paper stage, a Broadband Policy (finalised in 2013) and an eGovernment Policy (which has been in draft form since 2001). Despite the progress made by government, the ICT goals in the National Development Plan (NDP) are unlikely to be met within the given time-frames, as certain areas first need some attention. In particular, clarifying which government department is responsible for finalising and implementing these policies. Policy uncertainty and duplication in the sector will continue unless a lead department is identified that will fast-track the eGovernment policy. Priority should be given (and funds allocated) to the finalisation of an eGovernment policy, strategy and implementation plan, so that government departments/entities can have a clear idea of their role in an eGovernment approach to service delivery.

A successful shift to an eGovernment approach to service delivery ultimately depends on improved access (and ease of access) to services. Citizen demand for such services could be stimulated through Thusong multi-purpose community centres, whose purpose is to improve service delivery and increase access to government services for the poor and previously disadvantaged. However, various challenges must first be addressed, i.e. connectivity problems, security and maintenance of hardware, inadequate e-skills and operational skills among management, and reluctance of communities to participate. The Thusong centres also need to have a higher profile, be clearly branded and be allocated designated funding.

CONCLUSION

Significant public resources are being allocated to government's ICT, but the spending is neither coordinated nor strategic. Key policy framework issues must be addressed before funding arrangements can be finalised. The restructuring of the sector and the existence of multiple role-players have created uncertainty about the responsibility for various functions. To improve government operations through the use of ICT, the Commission recommends the following:

- The policy and regulatory framework underpinning the ICT sector is simplified, and roles and responsibilities are clearly delineated.
- The department responsible for finalising the eGovernment policy is identified.
- eGovernment services are made more attractive to citizens, by offering a wide range of services and ease of access.



eGovernment can help build a capable state and overcome spatial divisions.

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