E-Participation: Empowering People through Information Communication Technologies (ICTs)

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Empowerment and E-Participation: Policy Recommendations

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1. Introduction

Global trends in the use of ICTs are positive, almost 40% of the world population is connected to internet, and the world mobile subscriptions are approaching the world population of 7 billion[i]. It is realised that the gap between ICT adoption is increasing between developed and developing countries, and further between urban and rural of the developing countries[ii]. Best practices on the use of ICT for empowernment and e-participation are emerging from countries that have successfully crafted policies to facilitate opportunities, an evidence that the creation of the right policies for appropriate technologies to thrive is among the main task for policymakers. This discussion intends to provoke a dialogue that would focus on what is needed to make ICTs and e-Participation an effective tools for empowering people. The recommendations to be made are expected to identify ICTs tools and means needed to empower people for social inclusion and improve quality of life.

2. Enablers of ICT

This part looks into a simplified of enablers of ICT, focusing on infrastructure, content, regulatory framework and capable human resource. It is presumed that ppropriate policies are required to nourish ICT development and growth, responding to specific needs of the society and creating a multiplier effect that eccelerate ICT services offered and adoption by users establishing an e participation and social inclusion situation . Critical thinking is required to establish as to which policies are a priority for ICT to grow.

2.1. Infrastructures:

Existence of support policies that encourage investments in ICT infrastructure, computer hardware and software is crusual. Extended ICT infrastructure reach out to rural and marginalised areas , support the youth and PWD. Access to broadband connectivity is associated to more marginalization of those in urban compared to those in the rural areas in developing countries. Investment in mobile technologies is lower compared to broadband infrastructure and fixed telecommunication networks bringing new avenues where many in rural areas are able to access mobile enabled services.iii. Mobile phones create more opportunities as the require only basic literacy, making the barriers to entry much lower than with other modern ICTs, and roll out of mobile services much easier. Mobile money transfer has grown fast in areas where cash e-economy was dominant. Linkage between farmers and markets in urban areas prove to support increase the bargaining power of farmers over price due to accessibility of information on market trends. Appropriate policies enable ICT adoption and growth, examples of tax waiver on computers in Tanzania and Korea, inclusion of clear Public Private Partnerships (PPP) in ICT sector and creating a fair competition in the market enable the marginalized youth and PLD to benefit due to friendlier and cheaper solutions brought through innovations.

2.2. Content

Generation of relevant content that engage communities, encourage knowledge generation and transfer is a must. Gaps exist where technology increase disparity due to language barriers in addition to lack of infrastructure. Services offered in health, education, agriculture, business and trade establish clear benefits and encourage end users to appreciate the use of ICT. Governments generate interfaces that open up information for citizens to know their roles and take control in managing online services the require hence creating more benefits to end users and minimise the end user service burden to governments.Information made available to the public online including downlodable ducuments that were earlier been collected from government offices are an example of initial stages of a service shift to the society. Further developments inclove online services that ivlove trasactions and interaction with recepients of services who inturn enjoy providing feedback on how best they would prefer to be served.

Engagement through games-approach make service offering through technologies fun, and easier for the youth, PWD and those who are on the move through mobile applications. Users freely contribute content and enjoy doing it. More friendlier technologies enable convergence of content generated through a multiple of means including online portals, mobile devices, tele-centres and a choice of the best combination that can reach the right community. Radio and TV linked to mobile phones have worked in areas where radio broadcast enables larger communities to acquire desired knowledge and provide feedback through telephoning back. FM radio prices become much cheaper for municipalities, NGOs and faith groups to own. Empowerment increases as more and more technologies are rolled out into individuals, ranging from computers, mobile devises and tele-centres fuelled exponentially by free social media.

2.3. Regulatory framework

Policies that drive effective regulations are required to establish a balance that attains a level necessary to promote rapid growth of new services and applications and to minimize barriers to entry. Effective regulatory frameworks minimize licensing hurdles and adopt technological neutrality, allowing competition between different delivery platforms and greater end-user access. Appropriate policies to harness ICT development are necessary to ensure protection of infrastructutre, intellectual property rights on content and technologies developed and consumer protection. Most importantly, legal and regulatory framworks that bulid trust on investors, technology developers and end users.

2.4. Human Resource

Developing a critical mass of people who can drive the use of ICT for development is a must. It all starts with the type of leadership that buys in into the use of technologies, champion policy implementation, attract ICT investments and drive development of capacities to innovate and utilise technologies. Individuals, organisations and corporations secure a presence on the web, creating job opportunities in the ICT chain industries. New opportunities emerge on development of mobile applications, irrespective of ones location, hence providing opportunities for many who may otherwise be marginalised. PWD are engaged in at different levels in developing countries as retailers of mobile phone airtime and conducting mobile

based transactions, empoerered through special toll-free numbers to contribute in issues of their interest, report crimes or link to people providing them support.

Social media has developed to be a tool linking people beyond boundaries. Platforms like face book and mobile chats are linking millions of people of common interest, creating a powerful tool for social engagement and mass demand for accountability[iv]. Governments and corporates utilise the opportunities created by the social media to identify critical issues needed to be addressed, as well as engaging communities in a special way that provide personalised space, flexibility on prefered time to engage and epected feed back in a timely manner.[v]Appropriate policies are required to ensure requesite human capacity is developed to become active players in ICT leadership[vi], ICT innovation, ICT services recepients and increasingly openning opportunities that technologies bring for PWD. ,

3. Conclusion

ICT innovations are on the increase while policies and regulatory frameworks take longer to develop and implement for countroes lagging behind. Given the interdependent nature of the global information society, cross-national common standards and guidelines are needed to achieve interoperability guided by appropriate policies and implementation strategies. This paper focused on main areas required to create appropriate environment for ICT develpment in order to challenge thinking and draw appropriate policy recommendations that will foster ICT develpment and social incusion.

[i] ICT facts and Figures, 2013 provide estimates for ITU's key telecommunication/ICT indicators

[ii] According to the Measuring the information society, the ICT Development Index (IDI) presents comprehensive attribute in raking ICT adoption, showing countries leading, but also those that are more dynamic. Some of the developing countries like Ghana and Rwanda are ranked highly.

[iii] Mobile Technologies and Empowerment: Enhancing human development through participation and innovation

[iv] Facebook statistics gathered by Social Bakers, it was found that just over 50 million in Africa are users of the site. When put into perspective, that means 5% of the continent's total population of roughly 1 billion is registered and active on Facebook

[v] The Tanzania Commission for a new constitution is engaging social media including facebook, twitter and blogs, allowing dialogue among citizens and opening an opportunity to share their opinion transparently
[vi] ICT Leadership is considered to be a prerequesite to bring the desired technological drive in developing countries in order to brigde the incresing gap on ICT adoption.

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