

ICT and Democratic Parliament in Africa: State of the Matter

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ABSTRACT

Modern legislatures across the world are utilizing ICT to strengthen the hitherto weak citizens-representative interactions. For the legislative institutions of many African countries however, effective platforms for citizens-representative dialogical interaction for the purpose of making informed decisions and exercising influence on behalf of the represented are largely non-existence. The product of this is a disconnect between citizens and their representatives with its concomitant public distrust of political institutions and a decline in citizens' loyalties and attachment to the government. This research paper draws from case analysis and literature search to examine the extent of electronic parliament implementation for re-engaging the electorate in the democratic states of Africa. Findings also reveal that despite such challenges as inadequate infrastructural facilities and capacity building in most African States, the exponential growth of ICTs in the continent, has the potential for strengthening interactive deliberation between citizens and their representatives and thus reduce citizens- representatives' estrangement and make democratic processes more inclusive and transparent. This paper therefore argues that with effective ICT strategic planning and management and a mechanism for ICT skill training and development for all stakeholders, e-parliament presents a glimmer of hope for responsive and accountable governance in Africa.

Keywords: *e-parliament, Political Representation, Governance, Democracy, Africa.*

INTRODUCTION

Developed democracies all over the world are utilizing Information Communication Technologies to strengthen parliament engagement with

the citizens (Chadwick & May, 2003; UNDP, 2006; Leston-Bandeira; 2007). This is in recognition of the role of the legislature as citizens' representatives that allow for the representation in governance, the diverse interests and differences in a multicultural and subnational democratic polity (Cook, 2003). As an assemblage of the representatives of the people, the legislature serves as intermediary between citizen concerns and government policy (Fish, 2006, Gerber, 1996; Johnson, 2005; Heywood, 2007). In fact, the legislature is important to the extent that weakness in its representative capacity poses a significant threat to democratic advancement (NDI, 2001). As averred by Awah (2013), there can be no workable democracy without a vibrant legislature.

As citizen's representatives, the legislature requires access to information and a continuous communication, interaction and dialogue with the citizens. That is why developed democracies across world are utilizing ICT to strengthen the capacity of the legislature to engage the public in dialogical interactions (Leston-Bandera, 2012). Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has been identified as having the potential of enhancing parliament's engagement and collaboration with the citizens through the provision of new and multiple communication links in the political process, thus making democratic processes more inclusive and transparent (IPU, World e-parliament Report, 2008).

While legislative institutions around the world have embraced ICT to strengthen the hitherto weak citizens-representative interactions, its introduction and implementation are often a difficult process, particularly, in developing countries (Leston-Bandera, 2007). For the legislative institutions of many African countries, effective platforms for citizens-representative dialogical interaction for the purpose of making informed decisions and exercising influence on behalf of the represented are largely hitherto non-existence (Rosenthal 2009; Awah, 2013). The legislative institutions of many African countries lack the ability or effectiveness to inform and interact with their constituents (Pantoja and Segura, 2003; Edigheji, 2006; Oni, 2013). The product of this is a disconnect between citizens and their representatives with its concomitant public distrust of political institutions and decline in citizens' loyalties to the government (Azevedo-Harman, 2011; Mattes & Mozaffar, 2012; Oni, 2013).

Many scholarly research works have been conducted by researchers, academic institutions and regional/global organizations such as the United Nations Agencies on the potentials offered by ICT for democratic legislature, the geographical focus of these studies have always been mostly dominated by America and Europe (Scully & Farrell, 2001; Leston-Bandera,

2007). Moreover, the results of these research output have not adequately impacted on democratic governance in Africa as far as strengthening African parliaments for effective dialogical interaction with the citizens (Bwalya, Plessis, & Reinsleigh, 2012; Maphephe, Balkaran and Thakur, 2014; Oni, 2013). It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the potentials and challenges of engaging ICT for re-engaging the citizens in African democratic states. This is very important at this juncture in order to avert the crisis of democratic legitimacy and accountability pervading African states.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political representation is generally recognized as a necessary condition and a hallmark of democracy (Dahl, 1989; Mill, 1994; Brown, 2006; Rosenberg, 2007; Setälä, 2011). As the means through which democratic government is made possible, political representation is necessary for a pluralistic society (Weymans, 2005), and is indispensable for a functioning democratic practice (Dahl, 1971, Scully & Farrell, 2001).

The primary mechanism and institutional arrangement for political representation in governance, of the divergent interests in a plural society is the legislature (Heywood, 2007; Barkan, 2009). In this regards, the legislature is seen as a representative institution that exercises sovereignty on behalf of the people and the platform for the articulation and expression of the shared will of the people (Bernick & Bernick, 2008). It serves as a vital link between the government and the citizens (Jewell, 1997; Okoosi-Simbine, 2010). The representative role of the legislature helps in bringing divergent views into the policy-making arena (Scully & Farrell, 2001 & Johnson, 2005). The legislature is responsible for ensuring good governance through citizens' representation in the decision making process particularly in heterogeneous societies (Johnson, 2005). The legislature thus, occupies pivotal place in democratic governance and performs the crucial role of citizen's representation for the promotion of public interests (Leston-Bandeira, 2007). It is in view of this that Bishin (2009) sees political representation embodied in the legislature as an important and indispensable principle of any democratic state. Effective governance therefore, requires legislatives effectiveness in performing the vital role of citizens' representation which is essential for democratic sustenance in complex and diverse societies.

The representative role of the legislature involves interacting with those represented and making decisions and exercising influence on their behalf (Goodin, 2004; Brown, 2006). Paradoxically however, the history of political representation in most independent States of Africa has been characterized by

absence of the institutions of vertical and horizontal accountability leading often to political instability (Edigheji, 2006; Azevedo-Harman, 2012).

An essential requisite of a democratic society is the freedom of citizens to engage with elected representatives to improve the quality of life. In most parts of Africa however, communication links between state and the citizens are weak and government policies and actions rarely reflect the high priority concerns of the citizens (Veit et al, 2008). The common positions and needs of the poor and the marginalized minorities are often not recognized or incorporated into government decisions and public policy (Azevedo-Harman, 2011).

Despite wide recognition of the representative role of the legislature, parliaments in many countries of Africa have been historically weak institutions and lack the capacity to meet their role of effectively representing constituents (Edigheji, 2006). The legislative institutions of many African countries lack the ability or effectiveness to engage their constituents in a dialogical interaction for the purpose of making informed decisions and exercising influence on behalf of the represented (Edigheji, 2006; Oni, 2013; Awah, 2013). Citizens in most African states have limited information about their parliaments. While they are committed voters, they are not able to demand political accountability from their representatives largely due to their unawareness of their political institutions thus resulting in serious citizens-representatives disengagement (Azevedo-Harman, 2011; Mattes, & Mozaffar, 2012; Oni, 2013).

With the exception of very few countries such as Ghana, Kenya and Uganda where parliaments have made significant efforts towards developing their capacity for representation, African legislatures have not been able to fulfill its role as a representative body for the diverse states of the continents (Mattes & Mozaffar, 2012). They have limited skills and knowledge on setting implementable goals and interacting with constituencies and citizens to promote sustainable development (Oni, 2013). For the legislators to effectively fulfill their representational role, they require regular communication and easy access to their constituents in order to exchange views (Rehfeld, 2005). In African countries, inadequate, inaccessible meeting facilities and insufficient time for legislators to regularly interact meaningfully with constituent serve as hindrances to legislature-constituent relations. For instance, while in many western democracies, legislative buildings are accessible and parliamentary proceedings, and parliamentary debates open to the public, in Africa, it is not uncommon for legislative buildings to be barred by blockade and armed securities, making it difficult for the ordinary citizens to access (Gberevbie, 2014).

Parliaments are the branch of government closest to the citizens hence, it is required that they are aware of the needs and aspirations of their constituents and respond accordingly. Their representation role involves dialogical interactions with those they represent and making decisions and exercising influence that reflect the will of the people. Moreover, the practice of electing members of the legislature from single member districts, prevalent in most African countries, means spending considerable time in their districts with their constituents (Mattes, et al., 2012). Most African countries are however, faced with dysfunctional constituents with the larger population with limited understanding of the workings of the legislature (Nwanolue, & Ojukwu, 2012). Moreover, many African legislators do not operate constituency offices (Edigheji, 2006; Oni, 2013). The rare citizens-representatives interaction, thus resulting in a deep gulf between legislators and the people they represent (Okoosi-Simbine, 2010; Oni, 2013). This pervasive contemporary estrangement is manifested in public mistrust of political institutions and a decline in citizens' loyalty and attachment to the government and its institutions (Pantoja and Segura, 2003; Rosenthal, 2009). When opportunities for citizens-representatives engagement are ineffective in affecting government policy or when citizens feel that public institutions do not represent them, support for democracy is eroded and such society could risk individuals or groups resorting to extra-legal mechanisms to ventilate their views. New strategies for re-engaging the electorate by interacting with citizens, informing them and providing multiple channels for receiving and disseminating information is, therefore, imperative in order to avert the crisis of democratic legitimacy and accountability in African states.

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study employed case analysis, web content analysis and systematic literature search to collect and analyze data on the potentials and challenges of ICT for strengthening parliament-citizens dialogical interaction in the democratic states of Africa. The sample is made of seventeen (17) democratic states of Africa carefully selected to have a complete view of the extent of e-parliament implementation across Africa. These countries include Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Morocco, Ghana, Angola, Madagascar, Burkina Faso, Malawi, Zambia, Sengal, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Somali, Lesotho. Case study approach is considered appropriate for this type of exploratory research because it enables in-depth study of a small number of samples and help to generate findings of relevance beyond the individual cases (Fidel, 1984; Burnham, 2008). The parliamentary websites of these countries were analyzed for information content and interactive tools in order to determine their usefulness in achieving dialogical

interaction with members of the public. According to OECD (2001) and IPU (2009), parliamentary website is useful to the extent to which it can provide basic information about the legislature and as well provide platforms that encourage interaction between members and the public such that will enable the citizens to share their views and engage them in the policy process. The web analysis was conducted in March, 2015.

ICT AND DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION IN AFRICAN STATES

Electronic parliament, otherwise known as e-parliament, refers to the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to support legislature's fundamental roles of representation, legislation and oversight more efficiently and thus, be empowered for transparency, accessibility and accountability (United Nations, 2008; Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, 2008; Bwalya *et al*, 2012). Leveraging on the capability of ICTs, e-parliament can increase and strengthen deliberative and interactive dialogue between citizens and their representatives (Loukis, 2011). ICTs create new forms of engagement and collaboration through the provision of new and multiple communication links in the democratic processes to make it more inclusive and transparent (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2005; Dai & Philip, 2007). As observed by Loukis (2011), ICTs have been found to strengthen the parliament to be more representative, transparent, accessible, accountable and effective. It empowers the people in all their diverse forms to be more involved in political life by providing greater access to quality information and parliamentary documents and activities (United Nations & Inter-parliamentary Union, 2014). Strategic utilization of information communication technologies (ICTs) has been identified to enhance parliament's roles in democracies by strengthening linkages among legislators, their constituents, and civil society (UNDP, 2006). E-parliament therefore has the potential to reduce citizens-representatives estrangement (Lusoli, Ward and Gibson, 2006; Oni, 2013).

According to the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament (2012), the growth and penetration of ICT has continued unabated with total mobile-cellular subscriptions reaching almost 6 billion by end of 2011, corresponding to a global penetration of 86 per cent. The report revealed that developing countries particularly, African countries accounted for more than 80 per cent of the recent subscriptions. Most countries around the world, particularly the western industrialized countries, have leveraged on the exponential growth of ICTs to foster new relationships between citizens and their representatives (Dai & Philip, 2007). The growth and penetration of ICTs has considerably transformed the environment in which parliament operates (Loukis, 2011).

In developing countries such as Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) countries however, e-parliament implementation is still at the introductory stage (Leston-Bandeira, 2012; Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, 2012; Oni, 2013). It is important to note that e-parliament is not just about whether parliaments are using the Internet or not, but in the way this is happening and its impact on parliamentary activities (Leston-Bandeira, 2007). This is because the implementation of ICT in parliament is not just about deploying ICT tools, it is also a comprehensive understanding of the way in which parliaments operate and about using the tools in changing the procedures and culture of parliaments (Leston-Bandeira, 2007).

Like the developed countries, most African nations have established e-government implementation strategy and have given their legislative bodies online presence (Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, 2012 & Leston-Bandeira, 2012). Most of these countries are however, currently using the Internet as a medium to provide information on legislatures' activities to the citizens. Our investigation shows that the parliaments of Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Cameroon, South Africa, Rwanda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Botswana, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Morocco,

Madagascar, Burkina Faso, Malawi, Senegal, Somali and Lesotho have their Websites populated with information on parliamentary functions such as members of parliaments, Acts, Bills, Order papers, Hansards, Votes and Proceedings. The parliaments of South Africa, Zambia, Rwanda and Zimbabwe provide information on access to their parliamentary buildings, educational visits and access to plenary sessions. Many of the sampled countries provided information on the history and role of committees and commissions of their parliaments. Somalia and Lesotho however have no information on the composition of the committee members.

The parliamentary websites of Nigeria, Angola and Lesotho provided relevant information on the various themes on their websites. Angola and Lesotho however, provide only text of constitution on their parliamentary websites. Documents on these parliamentary businesses are available for download in Portable Document Format (PDF) on their Web sites. With respect to parliamentary administration, only Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Malawi provide information on this theme. Information on electoral procedures and previous parliamentary election results by seats could only be found on the parliamentary websites of Angola, Malawi and Senegal. Inter-parliamentary Union (2009) recommends that information on parliamentary websites should include legislation, budget and oversight. The web content analysis revealed that only parliaments of South Africa and Tanzania have information relating to budget on their websites while South Africa, Tanzania, Ghana, Malawi,

and Zambia provide oversight information. The studied cases except Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Morocco, Malawi, Rwanda and Lesotho however, provide information on legislation.

It is important to reiterate the fact that e-parliament implementation goes beyond information provisioning. Equally if not more important is its usefulness for a two-way relationship where citizens interact with their elected parliaments and have opportunity to give feedback on issues (OECD, 2001). The implementation of e-parliament for citizen's engagement purposes in our studied cases showed that online interaction between citizens and parliaments in Africa is low. In fact, only the parliaments of Angola, Zambia Tanzania provided online submissions platforms such as petitions and questions or comments to the speaker. While the Angola Parliament has a fully implemented online petition submission, Zambia Parliament merely generalized its electronic submission platform. The constitutional provision for petitioning the National Assembly and the National Council of Province is made available on the South African parliament. This also includes Information on the types and procedures for writing, presenting and submitting petition to either of the legislative bodies is available. The process of submission is however, completely manual. For the parliamentary websites of Nigeria and Kenya searching, viewing and downloading PDF version of published petitions can be done but submission is offline and its process is not available on their websites. In South Africa and Rwanda, consultation process can be initiated electronically and adequate information on submission and petition are provided. The two participatory outlets however, cannot be concluded electronically. The Parliament calls for public consultation online while submission can only be made to a designated office or via email or fax. The website of Ethiopia's Parliament provides online forum on topics which can only be created by the administrator. The parliaments of Ethiopia, South Africa and Senegal also made Real Simple Syndication (RSS) feed available.

It is obvious from this analysis that adequate provision has not been made for members of the public to have easy access to or communication with their representatives in our case studies. Very few of the parliament Websites visited have means for electronic interaction with the legislatures including the Federal Republic of Ethiopia House of Federation web site which has a functional online forum and Real Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds and provision for chatting. Kenyan parliament web site also allows searching and viewing of petitions but the process of submission is manual. Phone numbers and emails address of the parliamentarians cannot be obtained from the websites except for South African which gives the official emails of the parliamentarians alongside their names. Kenya, Zambia and South Africa

give details of committee activities including their sitting time. Zambia however goes a step further to include details of time, venue and accessibility status to the public.

The foregoing analysis shows that online interaction between citizens and legislative institutions in Africa is still at the information provision stage. This analysis supports the works of Leston-Bandeira (2012) and World e-parliament Report (2012) which revealed that in developing countries such as Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), e-parliament implementation is still at its introductory stage. It also validates the findings of the Global Centre for ICT in parliament report (2012) that most African countries falls into the category that least use variety of ICT tools for citizens-representative communication and interaction. Parliaments in Africa need to do more, in order to promote accessibility and interaction with citizens by taking advantage of the Internet. Using Web 3.0 for instance, parliament can provide online streaming of parliamentary session, advance search parliamentary business documents, extraction of all debates on specific bill, online submission of petition/document upload from citizens, online discussion and many more. According to the e-parliament report (2012), most African countries belongs to the least group in the use of document repositories, mobile communication devices, mobile communication application for citizens, speech -to-text dictation software, TV broadcasting of plenary sessions, open standards such as XML and webcasting and ranked second to the last in e-parliament score. It is evident that African parliaments have not adequately employed the Internet as a medium to give voice to the people and making them to be part of their decision making process.

CHALLENGES OF E-PARLIAMENT IMPLEMENTATION IN AFRICA

Most African nations like the developed countries have given their legislative bodies online presence. The implementation of ICT in parliament however, is not just about introducing electronic tools and using emails, it is also about changes in procedures and culture which should include communication and engagement with citizens (Leston-Bandeira, 2007). It is about openness, transparency, accountability, technology services for members, management of parliamentary documents, and others. There are hindrances to deriving the full potential and benefits of e-parliament in African states. Prominent among these challenges include poor vision and lack of strategic plan for, and access to best practices in ICT. Orchestrated largely by poor governance and corruption, most African States lack the capability to provide necessary infrastructural facilities for e-parliament implementation. Inadequate

infrastructure occurs in two ways; citizens limited access to ICT tools needed to take advantage of multiple channels of political participation that e-parliament offers and government incapacity to drive full-fledged e-parliament implementation by not giving enough resource allocation to full implementation of e-parliament (Bwalya *et al*, 2012).

According to World e-parliament Report (2012), mobile broadband has become the single most dynamic ICT service, recording more than 1 billion subscriptions worldwide. Developing countries however continued to witness dismal penetration in terms of 3G coverage accounting for paltry 8% of the world's total subscriptions. Similarly, the report shows that despite the growth in fixed (wired) broadband subscriptions in developing countries, the penetration remains low in the region of Africa. Furthermore, while the rate of individual's usage of the Internet continues to grow worldwide including African countries, report shows that, with exceptions of few countries like Lebanon and Malaysia with 62 per cent and 61 per cent of households with Internet respectively, over 70% of households in developing countries do not have Internet access (World e-parliament Report, 2012; Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, 2012). This dilemma of digital divide continues to pose great challenges for successful e-parliament in Africa. According to the World e-Parliament Report (2008), the level of a country's income determines the extent to which ICTs can be adopted in that country's parliaments. The developing countries are at the top in inadequate financial resource. According to the economic classification of Global Centre for ICT in Parliament (2012), most African countries except South Africa and Libya are within the low middle income and low income category. Inadequate financial resources thus, constitute a big challenge for some parliaments in Africa.

To a large extent however, finance is not the "real" issue but a consequence of lack of "vision" and strategic planning and implementation (Sobaci, 2012). While some African countries are financially incapable of driving full implementation of e-parliament, some are suffering from lack of vision and strategic planning to adequately finance projects that will bring about sustainable development. Successful implementation of e-parliament dependent not on resources alone, it also requires strong political leadership, a continued commitment to the strategic e-parliament planning and implementation and a vigorous commitment of Members of Parliament to engaging ICT in its legislative process Leston-Bandeira (2012). Most political leaders in Africa do not actually appreciate the strategic role of ICT in parliament, thus ICT is seen as for publishing and not for interaction with the citizens (Vitali & Zeni, 2006).

According to the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament (2012), one of the challenges to e-parliament implementation not just in Africa but the world, is inadequate staff capacity. E-parliament requires skilled secretariat and well-trained ICT technical staff. Most African parliaments lack quality and adequate ICT knowledge and skills which make them resist the adoption of ICT in their legislative setting (Bwalya *et al*, 2012). These aforementioned factors pose great challenges to successful realization of e-parliament potentials in African states.

CONCLUSION

For African democratic states, ICT can help parliaments be more responsive to the concerns of their constituents and improve their representative capacity to take into account, the variety of views of the people. ICT enhances transparent and accountable legislature and citizens' engagement in parliamentary work which are recognized as cornerstones of healthy democratic representation. With most African states among the poorest countries however, there is the need for more effective ICT strategic planning and management so as to judiciously utilize available resources to address the inadequate infrastructural facilities in the continent. Political leaders in African states must be committed to addressing the issue of corruption and misappropriation of fund if the goal of democratic representation is to be realized. African parliaments must also be seen to be genuinely committed to the adoption of ICTs in their mandated representative responsibilities. Importantly also, since capacity building is indispensable to successful e-parliament implementation, it is imperative that African parliaments embrace personal ICT skill acquisition while government should put in place programmes for ICT skill training and development for the administrative staff.

As observed by Leston-Bandeira (2007), the Internet opens up the possibilities of interactive communication with citizens, with pressure groups, between parliamentarians, and with governmental bodies. Capitalizing on the benefits of ICTs, Parliaments can enhance their interaction with the public and collaborate with other parliament. As documented by Leston-Bandeira (2012), the Internet provides more opportunities for direct channel of communication to exist between parliament and citizens, effectively bypassing traditional party machines with the effect of creating a level playing field in terms of opening up access to parliament. In this regards, e-parliament has the potential of boosting citizens' participation in the democratic governance in African states. With Africa's governance challenges and massive corruption in public institutions, e-parliament serves as catalyst for facilitating openness, efficient

public service delivery, social inclusiveness, transparency, accountability and citizens' participation in public decision process (Bwalya, et al., 2012; Leston-Bandeira, 2012; United Nations and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014). With appropriate measures aimed at addressing the factors hindering the full realization of the potentials of the application of ICTs to parliamentary democracy in Africa, e-parliament presents a glimmer of hope for enhancing citizens-representative dialogical interaction and deliberation and other forms of inclusion for the purpose of exercising influence on behalf of the represented in Africa. This will reduce the present citizens' apathetic political involvement, public distrust and aversion towards their elected representatives. This will ultimately avert the crisis of democratic legitimacy and accountability for the African states.

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