Botswana Speaks Parliamentary Initiative: paving the way towards better constituency services in Botswana

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Abstract: Recognizing the long-standing traditions of democratic consultation at the local level in Botswana and the leading role of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools in participation and decision-making processes, this paper focuses on a real-life case study that matches the implementation of an innovative ICT tool that allows citizens to participate in online and offline consultations with their elected Members of the Parliament (MPs) in Botswana on issues of major concern. Botswana Speaks Parliamentary Initiative is an ongoing pilot research project that aims to improve parliamentary efficiency by ensuring sustainable capacity building around the use of an online platform and enhance transparency by opening deliberation and debate to citizens.

1 Introduction

This paper introduces the Botswana Speaks Parliamentary Initiative, an eDemocracy project launched to introduce advanced methods of eParticipation and enhance transparency of political and institutional processes in Botswana by fostering communication between the Members of Parliament (MPs) and citizens in four constituencies (Nata/Gweta, Boteti North, South East South and Maun West). The project develops an online platform through which citizens and MPs can share opinions and concerns, therefore advancing participation in the decision-making process.

This pilot project aims to ensure eParticipation, transparency and accountability in decision and policy-making in Botswana, and effectively meets citizens' need for improved constituency services and policy responsiveness. This first section shortly introduces the initiative; the second develops its conceptualisation based on Botswana's theoretical considerations, socio-political realities and established IT infrastructures. A survey conducted in the framework of the project reveals the need for better communication between MPs and constituents in Botswana; the third section focuses on the innovative solutions that the parliamentary initiative offers and discusses the sustainable partnership with local partners by putting an emphasis on capacity building. Finally, the expected outcomes of the initiative and its sustainable solution are presented.

2 Socio-political context and existing IT infrastructure as motivational drivers for the conceptualisation of Botswana Speaks

2.1 Theoretical considerations

Lessons learnt from ICT for Development (ICT4D) initiatives launched in past decades were considered for Botswana Speaks' conceptualisation, design and implementation. The socio-political tradition of Botswana, its established democracy, its existing local consultations ("kgotla"meetings) define a new, innovative and adjusted framework that cannot be compared with what we can see in ICT4D projects in most developing countries. The case of this eDemocracy initiative in Botswana comes in a different theoretical context of discussion than ICT and democratisation in developing countries. Structural, technical and organizational differences hinder direct comparisons. However, Heeks and Molla's model of good practice [He10] [HM09] for ICT4D project implementation is useful in conceptualising such project. Their focus on adaptation of the design, actors involved and governance, and the importance of sustainability have been equally sought in this project. Adapting to socio-political realities plays also a crucial role in ICT4D good practice. Botswana Speaks confirms the theoretical approach that ICT projects in developing countries can become successful only when they are adapted (design and implementation) to local conditions, local standards, values and existing IT skills and infrastructure [Va09].

In this context, the initiative seeks enhanced transparency and stronger participation in an already established democracy. The adaptation to socio-political realities comes with the consideration of traditional consultations at the local level – kgotla meetings – which are a good example of the establishment of traditional democratic processes. They have strongly inspired the conceptual framework of Botswana Speaks by considering an offline dimension to the project with the setting up of constituency meetings based on the kgotla model of consultation. The uniqueness of Botswana Speaks as an ICT4D initiative lies in this offline dimension. Such offline meetings should be seen in light of the lessons learnt from ICT4D projects conducted in developing and sub-Saharian countries. As part of any project in eDemocracy and eParticipation in such countries, it is essential to favour field promotion by establishing a strong communication strategy to enable the highest number of citizens to get involved. As much as constant promotion in local areas in the country is an essential part of the offline dimension of the project, the novelty with the Botswana Speaks Parliamentary Initiative lies in the socio-political context (importance of local consultations) and its implications in implementing an eDemocracy initiative that would prove successful.

2.2 Socio-political context in Botswana

Botswana has a notable history of democratic development where political stability and sound public policy have been ensured for many years. Its long established practice of popular consultation, democratic processes and its level of social cohesion constitute a unique context where traditional structures are taken into account and integrated within

contemporary administrative structures. After independence in 1966, the chieftainship system was maintained in Botswana, giving therefore a significant position to local representatives (chiefs) [Sh05]. Botswana's long-standing tradition of democratic consultation at the local level is worth looking into when considering the implementation of an eDemocracy and eParticipation initiative in the country.

Thus, an evaluation of the needs from both MPs and citizens based on a survey helped conceptualize the project's proceedings and set up its core elements (offline and online). The survey[1] was conducted prior to the launch of the initiative. 33 MPs (out of 57) and 620 citizens were interviewed on their perceptions of online and offline public consultation for parliamentary purposes. The survey results showed that 91% of interviewed MPs declared that they would prefer to communicate with their constituents (privately and publicly), 97% are interested in directly informing citizens about their views and latest efforts for the constituency, and all of them positively welcome citizens' input (preferences, opinions, suggestions) about their work on policy and legislation. 76% of interviewed citizens have never consulted their elected representative in the Parliament of Botswana to share opinions; 94% of them declared their willingness to communicate with their MPs via an online ICT tool which would be made available to them, and 74,6% foresee that such an initiative would make the political system more transparent and governance more open.

So, the conceptualisation was guided by: first, the significant role that local consultations play in Botswana through its chieftainship system and secondly the lack of communication between MPs and constituents revealed by the survey. While local consultations – kgotla meetings – offer a chance for people to get their voice heard, constituency services, where MPs represent their constituents' interests in the Assembly, remain underdeveloped. One way of addressing this is by fostering communication between MPs and constituents. Hence, recognizing the very limited interaction of MPs with their local electorate, Botswana Speaks encompasses a wide range of constituency meetings chaired by constituency officers with citizens, local council representatives and "kgotla" chiefs on behalf of MPs to discuss on ongoing legislative issues and record their opinions. This feeble relation is a source of concern and calls for the design of policies and the development of new methods and models of eParticipation with the support of innovative ICT tools responsive to citizens' needs.

Consequently, Botswana Speaks Parliamentary Initiative is an eDemocracy answer to the lack of public consultations on parliamentary business and to the public demand for effective access to information and need for consultation. It offers an added value to the democratic process of public consultation by enhancing the channel of a two-way communication between MPs and citizens via online and offline methods, by encouraging people to get involved in the decision-making and stimulating them to interact with elected representatives on legislation and governance issues. The effectiveness of the offline consultation with the online participation tool can support citizens' participation in the parliamentary business and transparency, fostering an open, democratic and accountable society, and legitimate, effective and responsive institutions.

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[1] The survey was conducted from February to April 2012 in Botswana.

2.3 Existing IT infrastructure and ICT use in Botswana

The previus section has emphasised the importance of traditional consultation methods in the country but Botswana Speaks remains an eDemocracy project, which means that the ICT dimension of the initiative is central to the conceptualisation. Therefore, ICT use and IT infrastructure in Botswana have a role to play.

During the latest decades, ICTs have made great progress and Internet plays a dominant role globally. Nearly 5 billion people in developing countries now use mobile phones, more than 200 million at the last decade's start, and the number of Internet users has risen 10-fold [Wo12]. The explosion of digital connectivity, ICT tools and the Internet opened up opportunities to transform the relationship between governments, citizens and businesses in new ways that can contribute to good governance. Thanks to innovative and interoperable ICT based services widely used by government bodies, people and business are enabled to get involved in the process of governance at all levels, thus making governance more efficient and effective [Mo05]. The IT infrastructure of Botswana and its e-readiness influenced the conceptualisation of the initiative. Botswana ranks second for e-government development in Southern Africa just after South Africa (0.3637 e-Gov Development Index in 2010 to 0.4186 in 2012 with a sub-regional average of 0.3934) [Un12]. Mobile penetration reaches 118% in 2011. As discussed in section 3.2, the importance of mobile penetration in Botswana has strongly influenced the technological choices made for the development of the initiative.

Current policies on new ICTs and public services are also of interest here. This initiative falls within policy developments that encourage new ICTs in public services and citizens' participation in the decision-making and policy-making process. For instance, the National e-Government Strategy 2011-2016, which aims to improve public services in Botswana, "outlines five major programmes and approximately twenty five interrelated projects that will, collectively, move all appropriate government services online, significantly improve public sector services delivery, and accelerate the uptake and usage of ICT across all segments of our society." [Re11] Moreover, the initiative falls within the broader Government's Vision 2016 Declaration that envisages citizens' active participation in the policy-making [Re97].

3 Botswana Speaks Parliamentary Initiative: enhancing transparency and establishing stronger constituency services

Botswana Speaks Parliamentary Initiative constitutes an eDemocracy project launched in partnership with the Parliament of Botswana to develop, customize and evaluate a robust, user-friendly, online platform in four peripheral constituencies of Botswana (Nata/Gweta, Boteti North, South East South and Maun West) enabling citizens to share their views and policy concerns with their elected representatives. Through this online platform (section 3.2), citizens can express policy preferences and provide feedback to policy implementation; MPs can view citizens' messages and aggregate them to determine policy, decisions and actions with wider societal impact. The project strongly considers innovation, strong participation and engagement of citizens in the online

platform, as well as capacity building as driving forces in a sustainable perspective. This section presents in details the initiative's main elements.

A pre-starting phase began in February 2012 when the Programme Director of the initiative (eGovlab) visited several constituencies in Botswana together with one MP and met with local authorities and youngsters. The visits' outcomes lay towards the strong interest into the implementation of an eDemocracy initiative in remote areas of Botswana. During Phase 0, the survey analysed in 2.2 was conducted. Phase 1 (6-month duration) started in September 2012 with the official launch of the initiative and focused on the platform development and training for MPs, staff members involved in the project and constituency officers. Information dissemination, training, feedback, evaluation and testing of the online platform were the main aspects of this phase. During that phase, collaboration with partners in the Parliament of Botswana enabled the design of the pilot phase (Phase 2). Started in April 2013, the pilot phase runs for 9 months in relation with parliamentary business in the Parliament. Phase 2 maintains training, for citizens in the four pilot constituencies. The online platform is available and used for both deliberation and enhanced constituency services (Speak4Yourself and U-Speak applications) during this 9-month period. The final phase (Phase 3) is dedicated to feedback, evaluation and exploitation of the initiative as a whole and will run from January to March 2014.

3.1 Ensuring eDemocracy, eParticipation and transparency through offline consultations for citizens in Botswana

As for today, there is no mechanism allowing a wide transparency on parliamentary business in Botswana. As an answer to citizens' demands for efficient parliamentary services, an offline component completes the online platform developed in Botswana Speaks. In the four pilot constituencies, constituency officers will conduct constituency meetings with citizens, local council representatives and "kgotla" chiefs on behalf of MPs to discuss and debate ongoing legislative issues and record their opinions. Thus, constituency meetings are designed as open discussions (based on the same design of kgotla meetings) on specific issues that are to be discussed in session in the Parliament. So, during the pilot phase, a piece of legislation on a specific theme (i.e. Health, Education, Water supplies, etc.) will be selected by the Parliamentary Services and will be discussed in several villages in the four constituencies involved. The establishment of such offline meetings requires the creation of a mediator/officer role in the project. Therefore, training "constituency officers" who will chair and monitor public discussions on legislation, is an essential part of project's implementation and fosters capacity building throughout the project. Once constituency meetings have taken place, constituency officers are also in charge of putting citizens' input into the online platform.

As already analysed in section 2, the Botswana Speaks Parliamentary Initiative concept is based on a mix of theoretical, social and technological drivers. Its offline dimension refers to the constituency meetings organised with citizens in order to discuss and debate ongoing national legislation at a local level. As part of any such project in developing and sub-Saharian countries, a strong communication strategy encourages the highest number of citizens to get involved. This strategy includes regular constituency meetings,

constant promotion of the initiative in local areas in Botswana conducted by project partners.

3.2 Developing a Parliamentary Communication System: an online consultation tool with positive impact for both MPs and citizens

Botswana Speaks Parliamentary Initiative aims to build, evaluate and standardize an innovative online platform that supports MPs and citizens at the local level in their effort to execute their social contract and increase policy responsiveness. The pilot phase started in April 2013 and two online components are in use: a case tracking system that favours constituency services in the four participant constituencies (U-Speak) and an online deliberation system open to all citizens in the country (Speak4Yourself). The specific objectives of the project in operational terms is to develop and customize the online platform; pilot, evaluate and standardize the application by deploying the two-fold platform in the whole country, establish constituency meetings and implement the platform in four constituencies for improving constituency services; and finally, to promote and replicate the Botswana Speaks platform by analysing the results of the pilot phase and lessons learnt throughout the project in order to expand the online platform to a larger population of users in the country and the Sub-Saharian region, in general.

From the citizens' perspective, the platform enables users to submit messages on two different tools. First, citizens from the four constituencies can send messages via the online platform (or via SMS) directly to their MP to share an issue, a concern, an opinion or simply request information. Second, Speak4Yourself, an opinion poll application that enables any citizen in the country to share opinions on on-going polls on specific issues that concern them. From the MPs' perspective, the platform offers a decision support system that authorize them instantly generate statistics and export tables and graphs in order to analyze and visualize citizens' input and preferences by policy areas and by constituency, over any given period of time.

Given the high level of mobile penetration and the growing mobile broadband in Botswana, the online platform has an SMS component to the communication platform so that a mobile version has been also developed. Thus, citizens from the four pilot constituencies can text their issues to their MPs. The mobile version of the platform encourages the use of the platform by a greater number of citizens in the country, while it also improves constituency services quality and efficiency.

3.3 Key to success: sustained capacity building and training

A lot of reasons explain why eDemocracy and eParticipation projects in developing and sub-Saharian countries tend to fail, i.e. lack of proper design, capacity building, etc. [He10][Da06]. This section presents one essential variable for Botswana Speaks case that is highly considered as a key to success: capacity building.

Various aspects of the initiative (online/offline, online platform/SMS functionalities, fostering deliberation/improving constituency services) are presented. In order to ensure

the success and the sustainability of the initiative, sustained training of Parliament staff, MPs and constituency officers is indispensable. Moreover, training for citizens in the four pilot constituencies is foreseen in order to increase chances of participation. Hence, a two-fold training has been implemented: first, a conceptual training that raises partners' full awareness (MPs, members of staff involved in the project and constituency officers) on the project's implications and expected outcomes in their day-to-day work as elected representatives and civil servants in the National Assembly. By rejecting the donor-recipient dynamic and encouraging partnership, the initiative is more likely to lead to successful results and sustainability in the long-term. Second, technical training for users and participants throughout the project's period is also provided to ensure the project's sustainability from an ICT perspective.

The low penetration of the Internet and the considerable low level of IT skills in Botswana needs to be addressed for the sustainability of the project. Regular constituency trips by MPs and their staff ensure that citizens in remote areas are well-trained on how to use the online platform (also via the mobile version of the platform). To maximize its regional impact, the initiative aims to encourage and promote the exploitation and replication of its innovative online platform, leverage the results and develop a software exploitation toolkit with the associated training material. A "train the trainer scheme" will instruct constituency officers on how to conduct training sessions as a way to ensure that local actors involved in the initiative are familiar with the online platform and to train the constituents how to improve their IT skills on using the tool and enhance participation.

4 Expected outcomes and conclusion

The Botswana Speaks online participatory platform goes beyond accessing information, recording and storing; ICTs are used for the enhancement of transparency and access to information through citizens' participation in decision- and policy-making. eParticipation implies contact between citizens and their elected representatives, access to public information, monitoring government's work and participation in public decision-making [De12]. Consequently, we realize that ICTs, including Internet and mobile telephony, support eDemocracy and eParticipation by ensuring enhanced consultative processes, accountability and transparency.

Furthermore, Botswana Speaks platform can be viewed in line with e-governance initiatives. As Misuraca mentions when discussing the Ghana case study, tradition and posterity were integrated with ICTs, as well as indigenous and modern forms of governance are mixed. He assumes that this process can enable local governments to "re-invent" themselves, and maintains that "a good deal of the promise of democratic governance can be more readily accomplished through the embodiment of networked electronic facilities in local government administration" [Mi07].

Botswana Speaks Parliamentary Initiative is an innovative research project that, through the use online and offline eParticipation tools, aims to fill in a communication gap that exists between MPs and their constituents in Botswana regarding issues of major

concern that are under the legislative process. Offering a two-way communication system for MPs and citizens, the interactive online platform will advance citizens' eParticipation in the decision-making and enhance their awareness on ongoing parliamentary issues. New ICT developments and political traditions in Botswana have been considered for the project's conceptualisation and implementation. Offline (constituency meetings) and online (platform) participation are expected to ensure a sustainable communication system in the long-term. Constituency services and political, efficient responsiveness of MPs to the important issues will be improved. Also, the relationship between elected representatives and constituents will be stronger and decisions made in the Parliament of Botswana will be democratically and representatively informed. Thus, Botswana Speaks is awaited to become a best practice for all citizens not only in the four constituencies as now but in Botswana entirely.

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