

E-Government & Public Service Delivery: Enabling ICT to put “People First” – A Case Study from South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The literature on the effectiveness of e-government in developing countries towards improving public service delivery is littered with failure stories. Notwithstanding, the failures have not stopped most governments in developing countries from increasingly turning to ICT, most notably internet based models, as the preferred channel for citizen-centered service delivery. This paper investigated e-government within the developing country context of South Africa. We used the interpretive paradigm primarily because we wanted to increase our understanding of the phenomenon of e-government for public service delivery within the local South African context. The investigation focused on one of the governments primary service delivery programmes – social grants. The analysis of findings suggest that e-government in South Africa is not aligned to the service delivery philosophy, Batho Pele, and is hence not effective in delivering on the public service delivery mandate. Batho Pele which literally means “people first” is similar to the UNDP Human Development Indicators for development. The contribution of this research can be extended to both practice and IS theory. The research highlights the need for ICT4D, particularly e-government in developing contexts, to firstly be aligned to the current over-arching government philosophies if they are to have any effective impact on service delivery. The practical contribution of the research is a possible framework that could be used to align e-government in South Africa to the government philosophy of service delivery.

Keywords: E-government, Public Service Delivery, Batho Pele, ICT4D

1. INTRODUCTION

Batho Pele & Public Service Delivery in South Africa

Batho Pele is South Africa’s constitutionally mandated public service delivery philosophy. The essence of Batho Pele is to transform the way of working of public servants from the lethargic style which was typical of the previous unpopular apartheid system of government into an inclusive and participatory model where citizens can hold public servants accountable for the levels of service they receive from government [1-3]. The expected transformation in service delivery is better comprehended on the reflection that South Africa has only been a

democratic country since 1994. 14 years is arguably a short time to expect transformation.

The path of service delivery transformation formally began in 1995 with the release of the White Paper on the Transformation of Public Service [4]. The WPTPS established the institutional framework that could guide the introduction of new policies and the implementation of the new constitutional mandates. It was shortly followed in 1997 by the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery, labeled as the Batho Pele White Paper [5]. The Batho Pele White Paper specifically aimed at promoting integrated and seamless public service delivery. These two policy papers set the stage towards radically transforming the previously dysfunctional apartheid system. It is from the latter white paper that the Batho Pele philosophy of service delivery was adopted.

Batho Pele advocates nine principles to guide public servants; consultation with citizens, setting service standards, increasing access to information, ensuring courtesy, providing information, openness and transparency, redress and value for money.

On the other hand South Africa, through its Center of Public Service Innovation (CPSI), places significant importance to initiatives to transform government’s way of working through ICT – a notion commonly known as e-government / e-governance.

E-Government & E-Governance

The terms e-government and e-governance are often used to describe a government’s use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to render services to its citizens. Within the research community there is a debate on the correct use the two terms.

E-governance can be defined as “*the use of emerging information and communication technologies to facilitate the processes of government and public administration*” [6] E-government can be defined as “*the use of information technology to support government operations, engage citizens, and provide government services*” [7].

While the e-governance definition focuses on the use of ICT to assist in the administration or management of government, the e-government definition focuses on the use of ICT to provide services in support of government operations. While there is still no definitive outcome to for the use of the terms, the term e-government will be used as per the second definition, thus focusing on government or public services through the use of ICT.

The dominant models for e-government find their roots in public management models and e-business models. While researchers of e-government differ on the rights, privileges and obligations of clients, customers and citizens [8, 9], they generally concur that e-government moves through stages to reach maturity.

Notwithstanding, the successful initiatives are hard to come by. This realization led to the very important and underlying concern: are government ICT technological innovations adhering to the principles of 'people first', so to say, are the government ICT technological innovations enabling the improvement of service delivery in South Africa?

This research sought to acquire an understanding to this concern by focusing attention on the government agency responsible for one of the key service delivery programs – the South African Social Security Agency, SASSA.

The remainder of the paper is formatted as follows; the next section discusses the research approach and setting where the justification for using an interpretive research approach is made as well as the setting where the investigation was carried out, SASSA. The next section discusses the findings of the research. It is followed by the implication of the research to IS theory and practice before the final section where conclusions are drawn.

2. RESEARCH APPROACH

Research Philosophy

IS research and IS practice are worlds apart which brings into question the relevance in IS research to inform IS practice and vice-versa [10]. Benbasat and Zmud [10] define relevant research as, "*one that is potentially useful for, as well as accessible by, its intended audience*" Benbasat and Zmud (p.12). There are three generally over-arching means of inquiry to establish what constitutes relevant research; positivism, interpretivism and critical theory [11]. Each of these paradigms is based on some underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions about what constitutes relevant research [12]. The choice of research paradigm as such has considerable implications on the findings, the interpretation and the analysis of the findings, and the resultant inferences. This realization amplifies the significance of reflectively and diligently selecting an appropriate means of enquiry to conduct research.

The underlying philosophical paradigm that will be used during the research will be that of Interpretivism. The

reasoning behind this is to create a greater understanding of the phenomenon of e-government and public service delivery through the interpretation that humans assign [13]. The central ontological focus in interpretivism is the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon being studied [14]. Reality is a result of individual subjective interpretations and/or of inter-subjective constructions shared between individuals. Epistemologically, facts and values cannot be separated and knowledge is viewed as ideological serving the interests of particular social groups [15]. The investigative processes employed in interpretivism can either be qualitative or quantitative with the method being determined by the phenomena under investigation. Good interpretive research is therefore dependent on bringing out as full an understanding as possible of the phenomenon while addressing any personal bias that the researcher may bring into the study [16, 17].

This research adopted the criteria for conducting and evaluating interpretive research proposed by Klein and Myers [13]. Their criteria are based on the principle of the Hermeneutic Circle which suggests that a deeper understanding of a text (e-government) in relation to its context (Batho Pele & Public Service delivery) can only take place through a back and forth movement of renewed understandings.

A case study of a government department, the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA), was adopted to investigate the phenomenon of e-government will be studied in the context of Batho Pele [18]. Since each e-government service is measured against the same principles defined in Batho Pele, Lee [19] suggests that generalizations from the case study can be drawn from the unit of analysis and its applicability to other government units. Data was collected through structured face-to-face and telephonic interviews with people involved in delivering an ICT system to the business units of the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA). The next section gives an overview of SASSA.

The Case Study

SASSA was established as an extension of government delivery arm that administers the delivery of social grants to the poorest of the poor in South Africa [20]. SASSA's vision and mission is aligned with several Batho Pele principles, namely to "provide world class social security services" (Service Standards principle) and to deliver "innovative, cost effective and efficient services to individuals" (Value for Money principle), "their families and community groups via multi-and easy access channels using modern technology" (Increasing Access principle) [21]. In essence the service delivery of social grants to beneficiaries is the sole mandate of SASSA. This research focused on SASSA's use of ICT as a service delivery enabler to achieve its vision and mission, and ultimately comply with Batho Pele principles.

Role of the Researcher

The selection of the case was based on the thrownness [22] of the first author as a government agency employee working on a project to deliver a focused ICT service to SASSA. This places the researcher in the position to gain access to interviewees and system information. Approval from interviewees was of high importance, and was obtained by following professional and ethical protocols approved by the University.

Research Design

In order for the research to be effectively contextualized, the principles of Batho Pele which are aligned to SASSA were used as the source for the measurement criteria to determine the impact of e-government initiatives as described next.

Setting service standard: Batho Pele aims for government departments to benchmark the standard of delivering a service or product to the public. This will assist the public to measure the department’s services, and play an important role in service improvement plans. The aim of service standards would be to measure public satisfaction with the products or services being delivered. Relating this principle to ICT support, would imply if the government department or agency has specific measurable service standards. Questions during the interviews included probing as to how ICT assisted or improved the delivery of the product or service.

Increasing access: Many South Africans do not have direct access to public services supplied by the South African government. Batho Pele aims to equally distribute those services to the public. Access to information and services empowers citizens and creates value for money, quality services. It reduces unnecessary expenditure for the citizens. Questions that can generally be answered during the interview can revolve around what ICT initiatives are being used to increase the accessibility of the service or product and how accessible these initiatives are to communities who don’t have the required ICT infrastructure. Another area to investigate would be in what ways this initiative would reduce unnecessary expenditure for the public.

Providing information: Availability of information with regards to products and services should not only be at the service point, but should also strive to increase the availability of products and services to the public who are far away from those service points (DPSA, 2001c). The main area of focus would be to increase the availability of information to the public who are far away from service points. Questions that can be asked during interviews would be how ICT supports the provision of information as part of the service or product delivered to the public, how accessible is this information as supplied by the e-government initiative to communities and how often is information updated to ensure correctness of information.

Value for money: Improvements to service delivery should not come at a premium to the public. Incorrect information provided or processes reengineered could result in the public having to spend more time, effort or even money to receive a product or service. Service delivery improvement should strive to be done with the same amount of resources or even less. E-government should support the public to receive cost-effective services and products. Questions during interviews could range from how e-government is ensuring that the public spends fewer resources to receive a product or service, to how it is improving the processes within government to render that service or product.

Based on the criteria, a measurement matrix with a three-point of assessment was derived as follows:

- Y: The initiative supports the principle
- N: The initiative does not support the principle
- P: The initiative partially supports the principle

Table 1: The Measurement Matrix

Batho Pele Principle	Government’s ICT Use	Measure
Setting service standards	Comments	Y, P, N
How is ICT assisting or improving in the delivery of the product or service?		
How is ICT being used to measure service improvement?		
How is ICT being used to measure public satisfaction?		
Increasing access	Comments	Y, P, N
What ICT initiatives are being used to increase the accessibility of the service or product?		
How accessible is this ICT initiatives to communities who don’t have ICT infrastructure?		
In what ways would this ICT initiative reduce unnecessary expenditure for the public?		
Providing information	Comments	Y, P, N
How does ICT improve the provisioning of information about products and services?		
How of accessibility of the information to communities		
Value for money	Comments	Y, P, N
How is ICT supporting the public to spend fewer resources in obtaining the product or service?		
In what way is ICT supporting business process reengineering?		

3. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The set of principles as proposed by Klein and Myers [13] were used as a point of departure to discuss the interpretations of the collected data.

The **principle of contextualization** tries to highlight the meaning of the text, as different audiences could differ in their interpretation of the text. What is needed is to establish the historical background of the text or subject, in order for interviewees and readers of the research to interpret the text in the same manner. Thus it is needed for the researcher to consciously reestablish the understanding of Batho Pele, e-government and service delivery to the reader and the interviewees via its origins, definitions and related concepts.

In this light the interview subjects were well habituated to the meaning of service delivery and Batho Pele. The vision and mission of SASSA is founded on the principles of Batho Pele and the constitution of South Africa. The interviewees, being public servants, were also well informed of the service delivery principles as part of their induction at SASSA. In contrast, not all interviewees understood the definition of e-government. Only after explaining that the use of ICT to support government operations constitutes e-government, which includes the use of a transversal system like SOCPEN, were the participants able to contextualize e-government within SASSA.

The **principle of interaction** between the researcher and the subjects places the research done in a social context, which explains that the subjects become interpreters themselves of the research subject. The interviewees will interpret what and how the research subject is presented to them, and how that could possibly affect them, before responding to the interviewee. The researcher acknowledges that the relationship between the researcher and interviewee and the social interaction of how the interview questions were presented, could influence the responses from the interviewee. However, the principle of abstraction and generalization was used to generate factual themes throughout the interviews.

The theoretical abstracts of Batho Pele and e-government were understood by the participants, as well as the context that these abstracts have within SASSA. Interviewees understood the foundation principles of service delivery. This could be ascribed to the fact that many of their performance contracts are linked to improving public service delivery. ICT is used as a business support tool, and since the business of government is to deliver a public service, ICT supports public service. The implementers of these ICT services will thus be measured against the benchmarks of how well the public service was delivered.

The **principle of diabolical reasoning** urges researchers to deal with their own preconceptions that guided the research design when the research data emerges (Klein and Myers, 1999e). This would imply that the researcher

has to manage the possible inconsistencies found between his ideas of how e-government supports Batho Pele within SASSA and the actual findings during the case study.

The **principle of multiple interpretations** suggests that researchers should be sensitive to the possible interpretation differences that participants might have. The interviewees own understanding, interpretation and meaning to the Batho Pele principles, what constitutes e-government or their own emotions with regards to the use of SOCPEN became evident during the interviews.

This was in contrast to their interpretations of what e-government constitutes, and in turn constituted their different interpretations of ICT use to support services and products. Some interviewees only focused on the use of ICT as a supporting tool that was intranet based, while others included the use of satellite and mobile technology.

The **principle of suspicion** requires researchers to be sensitive to biasness from research interviewees towards the subject of research. The researcher would thus have to carefully analyze the interviewees' support or resistance to the use of ICT within the government department or agency. This sensitivity would greatly influence the interpretation of the text collected during the interviews.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The use of e-government as a service delivery enabler will definitely support government's service improvement philosophy of Batho Pele, thus putting people first. ICT can put people first, but only if the use of ICT is supported by the underlying business processes. For e-government to be effective, all e-government initiatives in South Africa should be integrated. E-government will only truly be effective if it is managed from a single portfolio in government, and not from silos within each government department.

Another important outcome of this research is a set of guidelines, which can be used as a way to measure whether ICT implementations for service delivery conform to the Batho Pele standards (Table 2).

Limitations and areas for further Research

The DPSA is the custodian of the Batho Pele project. But this does not guarantee that the DPSA manages e-government in South Africa. This is in contrast as to how other countries leading in e-government initiatives handle the implementation of e-government.

The United States Government under the Bush Administration has created a separate portfolio that manages the implementation of e-government. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is developing what it calls the "Federal Enterprise Architecture" that will manage the way in which the United States Government does business and particularly through the use of e-government (US Office of Management and Budget, 2007)

The State Information Technology Agency (SITA) was formed in 1999 according to the SITA Act (Act 988 of 1998), when three government IT entities merged. These entities were: CCS: Chief Directorate to the Department of State Expenditure; Infoplan: Provided ICT services to the Department of Defence; and SAPS IT: IT department of the South African Police Services.

Table 2: Guidelines to Measure ICT Implementations

Batho Pele Principle	SASSA's ICT Use	Measure
Setting service standards	Comments	Y, P, N
How is ICT assisting or improving in the delivery of the product or service?		
How is ICT being used to measure service improvement?		
How is ICT being used to measure public satisfaction?		
Increasing access	Comments	Y, P, N
What ICT initiatives are being used to increase the accessibility of the service or product?		
How accessible is this ICT initiatives to communities who don't have ICT infrastructure?		
In what ways would this ICT initiative reduce unnecessary expenditure for the public?		
Providing information	Comments	Y, P, N
How does ICT improve the provisioning of information about products and services?		
How of accessibility of the information to communities		
Value for money	Comments	Y, P, N
How is ICT supporting the public to spend fewer resources in obtaining the product or service?		
In what way is ICT supporting business process reengineering?		

SITA's mandate is to "consolidate and coordinate the State's information technology resources in order to achieve cost savings through scale, increase delivery capabilities and enhance interoperability" [23]

The DPSA has tasked SITA to provide ICT solutions to the Batho Pele Gateway Project. In 2003, the tender to implement the first phase of the project, was awarded by SITA to T-Systems South Africa (Pty) Ltd and their partners. There are a couple of reasons why there has been

slow progress in implementing a single portal for government services. These reasons include a lack of coordination between various departments and agencies as well as lack of project management skills in the departments. (Harris, 2006a)

Is there anyone managing all these projects, which are aimed at the same goal: implementing e-government? It appears as if various government departments and agencies are implementing e-government initiatives, without anyone managing the projects as a whole. From this it is clear that South Africa needs a portfolio within its government that drives the implementation of e-government. This will include policy, legislation and implementation standards. This is where the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) also plays a role to smooth the progress of the use of ICT in government. It consists of three components, namely: ICT Programme Management, Government Chief Operations Officer and E-Government Architecture and Integration.

The case study was focused on only one area of e-government within the public service of South Africa, namely the Department of Social Development and its service delivery component, the South African Social Security Agency. Similar studies should be done with other departments to ensure that the use of ICT is effective at all government departments. It is proposed that studies be done at departments that often come under fire for their lack of service delivery, such as the Department of Home Affairs (ID book and passport applications), Department of Transport (license applications and vehicle registrations) and the South African Revenue services (tax returns).

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