Open Government: Which Way Africa?

Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)
September 2011

The Kenya government scored what many billed a first in Sub-Saharan Africa, when it launched an open data website in July 2011. To put it plainly, the government opened itself to greater scrutiny from citizens and oversight institutions by providing them better access to information in its hands, including on expenditure and procurement. Increasingly, other African governments will be put to task to follow suit, as progressive governments the world over move to embrace the concept of open government, of which open data is a crucial element.

South Africa seems to be leading the pack in Africa in embracing open government, a benchmark on which governments should increasingly be evaluated in terms of their commitment to be accountable to their citizens. In fact, South Africa is the only African country that is part of what is set to become a powerful and popular global movement to place openness at the centre of governance and development.

Who is in The Open Gov Partnership?
The Open Government Partnership (www.opengovpartnership.org), or OGP, is a new multilateral initiative that aims "to secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance". The African countries currently eligible to join the OGP are Kenya, Liberia, Ghana, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda – and of them, by September 20, 2011, only Tanzania and Uganda had not indicated their plans to join the OGP. These countries derive their eligibility from their "demonstrated commitment to open government" in the key areas of budget transparency, access to information, asset disclosure by politicians and officials, and citizen engagement.

Overseen by a steering committee of eight governments and nine civil society organisations, the Partnership launches in September 2011, when the eight governments on the steering committee will embrace an 'Open Government Declaration' and announce their country action plans. More countries will subsequently be invited to join the partnership.

OGP Steering Committee countries:		
Brazil	Indonesia	Mexico
Norway	Philippines	South Africa
United Kingdom	United States	

Many African governments score dismally on most governance, anti-corruption and transparency indicators. For instance,

according to Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perception Index (CPI) which measures the extent of corruption in the public sector in 178 countries worldwide, Botswana is the only African state that measures above 5 – the halfway mark from being a corrupt toward clean state. Countries are scored based on the extent of bribery among public officials, kickbacks in public procurement; embezzlement of public funds, and the strength and effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts.[1]

Taking Corruption by The Horns
Kenya was ranked at 154 while Burundi came in at 170, earning the two states the dubious distinction of 'most corrupt' in East Africa. At position 66, Rwanda was the 'cleanest' state in East Africa. Southern African boasted the least corrupt African states: Botswana [33], Namibia [56] and South Africa [54]. Uganda took position 127, Tanzania 116.
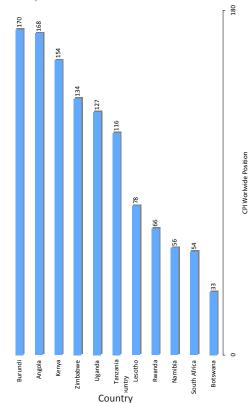

Figure 1: East and Southern Africa Corruption Perception Index Position
(By author, source Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2010.)

1 The 2010 Corruption Perception Index, Transparency International,
http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010

In governance, the picture appears equally worrying for many African states. The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) project covers perceptions of the quality of public services; the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures; plus the quality of policy formulation and implementation and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies. In the 2009 survey, only three African countries hovered over the mid-way mark.[1]

Access to Information Laws

Similarly, many African governments have been reluctant to pass Freedom of Information (FOI) laws, and many that have such laws are reluctant to effectuate them – besides having planted wide-ranging exemptions to the kinds of information which may not be accessed by the public. Among the continent's 54 states, less than 10 have FOI laws, a scenario that handicaps citizens' efforts to keep their governments accountable and which give bad governments undue excuse to stay closed. Uganda is among them; Kenya and Tanzania have drafts, which their governments have for years dragged their feet passing into law.

African countries with FOI laws:

Angola	Ethiopia	Liberia
Niger	Nigeria	South Africa
Uganda	Zimbabwe	Guinea Conakry

How Open Gov Helps With All This…

Corruption, poor service delivery and undemocratic governance survive on systems that keep information hidden from the public, and bureaucracies which place near-unfettered power into the hands of the few public officials that control this information. Becoming open would require the currently closed African governments to briskly get online in service provision and in pro-actively placing a wide array of information in the public domain.

Moreover, citizens need to be empowered to hold their leaders and public service institutions to account. The countries which have taken a lead in this area recognise that freedom of information represents the citizens' right to know; and that access to government information enhances public participation, while enabling more robust scrutiny and discussion of government actions.

For Africa, passing and effecting progressive legislation that guarantees access to information is crucial. So is the need for public bodies to enter and respect citizens' charters. Besides, concerted efforts to create civic awareness and to enable citizen's active participation in fighting corruption and monitoring democracy will be crucial. And smartly embracing ICT would catalyse all these efforts.

Aid Transparency

Many African countries receive aid. But how it is used, what determines the sectors and geographical areas where it is invested, the conditions that come with this aid, and how it performs on its objectives, are issues the public often does not

know. The aid money thus needs to be tracked to minimise corruption and enhance its effectiveness. Both African countries that receive aid, and developed countries that give it, should become more transparent.

Publish What You Fund, the global campaign for aid transparency, observes that at the moment no one knows exactly how much aid money is being spent, where or on what; and that in most cases, not even governments receiving aid have a full picture of where all the money goes. It adds that with more information, citizens in both donor and recipient countries could know whether aid money is having the best possible impact.
Additionally, if aid agencies published information on who is doing what and where, duplication could be minimised.

For African countries eligible to join the OGP, there are real benefits to be reaped by increasing transparency. For instance, post-war rebuilding in Liberia, farm land redistribution in South Africa, and navigating the latent resource conflicts in Uganda, would all be managed more smoothly if there were better transparency. And ICT could help open transparency in these key areas, thereby improving the governance of resources and

The need for greater access to and usage of public information is hence a crucial link in empowering citizens and in having ICT meaningfully contribute to improving transparency and empowering citizens and government departments in fighting corruption and bad governance. Increased transparency and accountability should then help African states achieve improvements in service delivery in key sectors such as education and health.

ICT as an Enabler of Open Gov

An increasingly large number of people in Africa are accessing modern communication technologies such as the internet and mobile phones. Indeed, at the citizen-to-citizen level, a lot of conversations and actions are taking place via ICT. Many of these ICT-enabled interactions and discussions are empowering citizens, enhancing civic agency and promoting participation in various ways which democratic governments need to nurture.

Table 1: Mobile/internet access statistics among African countries eligible to join OGP

Telecommunications statistics [2]

	Mobile subscribers	Teledensity (per 100 inhabitants)	Internet User (%)
Kenya	24.9m	61.6	21
Liberia	1.57m	39.3	0.07
Ghana	17.4m	71.5	8.5
South Africa	50.4m	100.5	12.3
Tanzania	21m	46.8	11
Uganda	12.8m	38.8	12.5

In East Africa, more so in Kenya and Uganda, social media is hugely popular, and has been proved to be a great mobilising tool

1 World Governance Indicators, http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.asp

[1]ICT Data and Statistics, http://www.itu.int/en/pages/default.aspx
[2]Africa4All Parliamentary Initiative, http://www.africa4all-project.eu/

which open government promoters should promptly embrace. More generally, given the central role ICT can play in enabling the attainment of the key objectives of open government, Africa needs to enable more of its people to access mobile phones and the internet. And governments must take a lead in using ICT to improve openness, while also supporting civil society ICT-for-Open-Government initiatives.

Such initiatives include the Africa4All parliamentary initiative operational in Lesotho, Namibia, Tanzania and Uganda, which leverages on web 2.0 technologies to support collaboration and active engagement of MPs and citizens in the decision making process[1] and the East Africa ICT4Democracy programme that is working in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

Table 2: Social Media Usage

Social media website traffic ranking[1]			
	Facebook	Twitter	Blogger	Wikipedia
Kenya	1st	8th	6th	7th
Ghana	1st	15th	12th	10th
South Africa	2nd	7th	8th	6th
Uganda	2nd	10th	8th	9th

1 Website Traffic Rankings, http://www.alexa.com/

Kenya Leads the Way on Open Data
The Kenya Government's Open Data Web Portal launched in July 2011 was lauded as the first time citizens were being handed such a powerful tool to monitor government activity in this way. Hosted at www.opendata.ke, it made large government databases available publically in an easy-to-search and view format. There are maps to explore, interactive charts and tables for deeper understanding, and raw data for technical users to build their own applications and make analyses.

The portal is one of the first and largest government data portals in Sub-Saharan Africa. Initially, 290 sets of government data were published – on health, education, access to infrastructure, poverty levels, water and sanitation services, and total government spending on each of the country's counties.

"Apart from offering citizens a big mirror of what the government has been doing with their taxes, the data constitutes a good pointer as to how the national landscape might look 10 years down the line should the current expenditure patterns continue in the medium or longer term," commented The Business Daily.

It was also expected that tech entrepreneurs and innovators would use the large government open data sets to develop applications that could reach a great number of users but also which addressed some of the development challenges that would be revealed through interrogating the data sets.

Some First Steps Towards Embracing Open Government

A couple of proposals are being developed by civil society to encourage citizen engagement. States are for example being lobbied to ensure opportunities for early and effective public participation in all governmental decision-making processes, be it in particular relating to planning, budgets, finance, education, agriculture, water, health, public transportation, women, children, indigenous people, the poor and marginalised, extractive industries and the environment.

- Governments should proactively seek public participation in an inclusive and transparent manner, including efforts to ensure citizens are given sufficient opportunity to express their views.
- Ensure that all information relevant for decision-making is made available in an objective, open, and timely manner to concerned members of the public.
- Governments and civil society actors should undertake civic education, awareness raising, and capacity building on open government and the role citizens and citizen groups play.
- Pass and implement liberal access to information laws
- Enact whistle blowers acts that give incentives and protection to those who lift the lid on impropriety in governance and public service delivery.
- Pilot programmes to allow grassroots and marginalised communities to access ICT and participate in fighting corruption and poor service delivery.
- Empower independent oversight bodies to demand and to publish information on budgets, procurement and expenditures
- Government officials should blog too while departments should be out there on Facebook and social networks informing, consulting, engaging!
- Initiate programmes to digitise public domain information and make it available through websites, public library systems and other appropriate dissemination media.

CIPESA ICT policy briefing series

Initiatives of Interest

o   The Open Data Foundation, www.opendatafoundation.org
o   The Open Government Partnership, www.opengovpartnership.org
o   Africa Centre for Open Governance, http://africog.org/
o   Kenya Open Data Web Portal, www.opendata.go.ke
o   Twaweza, www.twaweza.org
o   ICT 4 Democracy in East Africa, www.ict4democracy.org
o   Africa Technology and Transparency Initiative (ATTI),www.africatti.org
o   Africa Freedom of Information Centre, www.africafoicentre.org
o   International Budget Partnership, http://internationalbudget.org/
o   www.openthegovernment.org
o   Publish What You Fund, www.publishwhatyoufund.org
o   The Omidyar Network, www.omidyar.com
o   The Access Initiative, www.accessinitiative.org
o   Transparency Accountability Initiative, www.transparency-initiative.org
o   Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency
o   Make Aid Transparent, www.makeaidtransparent.org
o   Open Society Institute (OSI), www.soros.org

About CIPESA