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THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION
Transparency and accountability online



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Introduction

The Ethiopian information and communications technology (ICT) sector has shown substantial growth in the last five years as a result of massive investment in the sector. Mobile subscription has grown from less than a million subscribers in 2005 to over 14 million in December 2011. It is estimated that there were about 500,000 internet users in Ethiopia in 2009, which implies that only 0.6% of the population has some kind of internet access.¹ The new five-year Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) is widely expected to boost economic growth and demand for communication services. To this effect, the GTP acknowledges that for effective, efficient, transparent and accountable civil service as well as to increase their contribution to institutional transformation, it is important to support the reform process using ICTs.²

Implementation of the Ethiopian ICT policy started in 2005. Among its priority focus areas, ICTs for governance or e-government services were set up in government institutions. E-government broadly implies the use by government agencies of ICTs such as the internet, wide area networks or mobile computing to exercise their functions in an efficient and effective manner, and in doing so, to transform their relations with citizens, businesses and other government entities. The resulting benefits can be less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth and/or cost reductions (which this report tries to explore by focusing on some specific cases).

Policy and legislative context

Ethiopia is a federal republic under its 1994 constitution. Article 12 of the constitution specifies that “the conduct of the affairs of government shall be

public and transparent. Any public official or an elected representative is accountable for any dereliction of the duties of office.”³

Cognisant of the need to institutionalise transparency and fight corruption, the Ethiopian government established the Federal Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (FEACC) in May 2001 (and set out its powers in the revised Proclamation 433 of 2005) with the main objectives of taking forward a series of preventative measures and establishing powers of investigation, prosecution and research.

Although the Ethiopian ICT policy was approved by the Council of Ministers in August 2009, as suggested, implementation of the policy started in September 2005 with the establishment of the then Ethiopian ICT Development Agency (EICTDA). E-government is one of the six focus areas of the policy. To this effect, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology has engaged PricewaterhouseCoopers in designing the national e-government strategy and implementation plan.⁴ The e-government strategy document became functional in January 2011 with a five-year implementation plan.

With support from the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the government has also prepared a national draft law to govern e-commerce.

Key issues

The recently conducted second corruption perception survey, commissioned by the FEACC, found evidence of opaqueness and lack of transparency especially in the manner in which public institutions in Ethiopia interact with business enterprises. Respondents from the business sector as well as public employees reported a lack of transparency and corruption in areas such as customs clearance, taxes and revenue collection, application and interpretation of regulations, as well as government procurement procedures. Both past and recent surveys indicated that both petty⁵ and

- 1 Adam, L. (2010) Ethiopia ICT Sector Performance Review 2009/2010: Towards evidence-based ICT policy and regulation, Vol. 2, Policy Paper 9, Research ICT Africa, Cape Town.
- 2 Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED), Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (2010) Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) 2010/11-2014/15, MoFED, Addis Ababa.

3 Proclamation No. 1/1995, Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE).

4 Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (2011) E-Government Strategy and Implementation Plan – Report January 2011, Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa.

5 Petty or low-level administrative corruption involves small sums and typically more junior officials, such as, for instance, citizens handing over a small sum of money or other gift in order to get a junior public servant to actually do his/her job.

grand corruption⁶ were on the increase. However, the more common type was petty corruption, whereby a junior public servant (e.g. a customs officer, police officer, court prosecutor or municipal clerk) attempts to derive illegitimate benefits by subverting the law or established procedure. Petty corruption also tends to be diffuse across all regions of the country, affecting all levels of public institutions from federal to regional to local government institutions. It was also revealed that the public institutions that were said to be particularly susceptible to corruption were regional government institutions and municipal offices, as well as all levels of the judiciary and the police.⁷

According to the above-mentioned survey results, the majority of the respondents in each sample category felt that corruption had been contained or was better than it had been some five years before. For instance, between 40% and 57% of the respondents in each sample group felt that corruption was now better or much better than it had been five years back, while a further 8% to 20% said it was about the same as before. On the other hand, between 31% and 47% of the respondents in each sample group felt that corruption was now worse or much worse than it had been some five years before.

This, to a great extent and as widely recognised by many, is due to the government's commitment to combating corruption through various mechanisms and through legislation, including the increased modernisation of government services using ICTs. One of the main government programmes to this effect is the Public Sector Capacity Building Programme (PSCAP) which has been dealing with six focus components to build the country's capacity. Among the six components of PSCAP is ICT capacity building. The others are civil service reform, urban management capacity building, district level decentralisation, and tax and justice system reform. PSCAP's specific objective in the national ICT capacity-building programme, which is funded by government and development partners, is to harness ICTs for the development of human resources, democratisation, service delivery and good governance. The performance analysis report⁸ of the ICT for public service delivery and good governance sub-unit of the PSCAP programme published in June 2009 indicates

that the programme enabled the establishment of information portals for several ministries, including the education, health, trade, industry, finance, mines and energy, culture and tourism ministries. Over 215 local area and 39 wide area networks were developed, both at federal and regional levels, with over 69 websites developed for regional bureaus to make information accessible to the public. It is also reported that some 512 data centres (two at the federal level, 22 at the regional level, seven at the zonal level and 481 at district level) were established.

Furthermore, the current e-government strategy envisages the implementation of 219 e-services, comprising 79 informational and 140 transactional services, over a five-year period. The implementation is proposed to be done through 12 priority projects using four communications channels (portal, call centre, mobile devices and common service centres). The delivery will be facilitated and strengthened through six core projects, including a national payment gateway, an enterprise e-framework, the development of key public infrastructure, the development of a national data set, a national enterprise service and a national integrated authentication framework.⁹ To this end, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology's priority projects will facilitate development of these services based on life-cycle based service requirements of customers. The key priority projects include agriculture services, benefits management, education, e-health, a trade portal, services for employment, transport, tourism and tax, e-courts, e-municipalities, and online passport and visa services. When completed and operational, some of these e-services would be able to address the key areas where corruption and accountability challenges are being reported.

Implementation of the e-government strategy is underway with online applications for five ministries that are ongoing and at different stages of development. A bid is floating for the development of online applications for four additional ministries and organisations. A number of services have already been evaluated. Among them is a student registration and placement service, which has also won the 2011 UNECA Technology in Government Award (TIGA). When first launched in the 2010/2011 academic year, there were one million and 130,000 students enrolled to take the 10th and 12th grade national exams respectively. However, the student registration and placement online service received

6 Grand corruption refers to corruption that involves substantial amounts of money and usually high-level officials. It typically includes kickbacks to win large public procurement contracts, embezzlement of large sums of public funds, irregularities in public finances and in political party and campaign financing, political patronage, etc.

7 Federal Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (FEACC) Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (2012) Ethiopia Second Corruption Perception Survey, Volume 1 – Main Report, prepared by Kilimanjaro International Corporation Limited, FEACC, Addis Ababa.

8 Public Sector Capacity Building Programme Support Project, November 2004 to April 2009, Result Analysis, Volume 1, June 2009.

9 Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (2011) E-Government Strategy and Implementation Plan – Report January 2011, Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa.

over 1.8 million and 450,000 views of the 10th and 12th grade national exams online services respectively, which shows the success of its effective use. The university placement system enabled universities to be aware of their prospective new students in a timely way through the website, which was a process that previously took a long time. This latter initiative will help address concerns around transparency issues when placing students in universities, as the universities are in different locations and levels of development in terms of the quality of teaching, learning and experience.

This shows that in the last decade there has been a strategic move towards growing ICT applications and services spearheaded by high-profile government projects that aim to connect schools, districts, health establishments, academic institutions and government offices.

One of the successful examples of the improved public service delivery achieved is at the Documents Authentication and Registration Office (DARO). DARO was established under its previous name – Acts and Documents Registration Office – in April 1996 as an autonomous institution under the city government of Addis Ababa. It was among the offices that were decentralised in 2003, accountable to the Ministry of Justice. DARO provides services to its customers at the head office and four branch offices in the city. As part of its strategy, it focuses on addressing three critical strategic issues: improving effectiveness and efficiency, reducing the service time to clients, and eliminating corrupt practices and other offences. To this effect, among others, the office actively implements the automation of all services delivered and the introduction of a zero tolerance approach to corrupt practices. This has enabled the office to be recognised by a number of national and international organisations for its outstanding public service delivery.

A study undertaken on the impact of decentralisation and reform in this office based on a sample survey among customers before and after the introduction of the reform shows a major decrease and change in corruption practices as perceived by customers (i.e. from 31.42% to 2.85%).¹⁰ This shows the successful implementation of the office's transformational strategy to enhance public service delivery coupled with the leadership commitment and recognition in using ICTs in enhancing services delivered.

¹⁰ Tedla, L. A. (2009) Impact of Decentralisation on the Provision of the Document Authentication and Registration Service in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Masters thesis on Urban Management and Development, Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Since September 2011, DARO¹¹ has been online and clients are no longer required to queue to get their documents processed. Instead, clients can fill out the form they need online¹² and receive a reference number to access their form and be notified of the fee payable. They will then be required to be present in person at an agents' window at the DARO office to sign up and pay the required service charge. All the seven branches of the office are networked and the service is available in Amharic and English. The office confirmed that this service will reduce the misplacing of client's documents. Such improvements in efficiency will enhance transparency and reduce corrupt practices. Furthermore, it has enabled the office to increase the number of people served per day from 30 to over 2,000.

This best practice can be replicated in most organisations that are reported to be highly affected by corruption and a lack of transparency.

Conclusion

It is evident that ICTs can improve transparency in the public sector by increasing coordination through integrating the different government institutions, and increasing the administrative capacity of the public sector generally. ICTs also improve service delivery. However, the poorer members of society could be affected negatively when it comes to both of these benefits. Firstly, corruption falls disproportionately on the poorer members of society, who are hindered from accessing scarce services.¹³ Secondly, given the limited ICT penetration and lack of access to ICTs by poorer communities, they tend to be marginalised from the benefits of ICTs when it comes to combating corruption. However, access is rightly identified as one of the key objectives in the government's Growth and Transformation Plan with respect to expanding the rural universal telecommunication access programme, and it is expected that access to ICT services will not be an issue for the large number of e-services planned in the e-government strategy.

ICTs can also facilitate the collection of digital footprints and a complete audit trail which increases the opportunity to hold individuals accountable and ultimately increase the possibility to detect corrupt practices. As a result, as is the case in many

¹¹ www.ethiopianinvestor.com/index.php?view=article&catid=1%3Alatest-news&id=2462%3Adocument-authentication-goes-online&option=com_content

¹² www.daro.gov.et

¹³ Gronlund, A. et al. (2010) *Increasing Transparency and Fighting Corruption Through ICT: Empowering People & Communities*, Swedish Program for ICT in Developing Regions (SPIDER), Stockholm.

countries, there will be challenges in government institutions which may resist change and be less than helpful in facilitating the implementation of e-government platforms. To this end, the commitment of the leadership as is evident in the case presented above is necessary to successfully implement ICT-based applications.

Finally, ICTs can facilitate information sharing and social mobilisation, and ultimately provide digital platforms where citizens can report incidents anonymously. In this way the Federal Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission can utilise new ICT tools to enhance its activities, by disseminating information and educating the public as well as increasing the public's participation in combating corruption.

Action steps

The Growth and Transformation Plan recognises the importance of ensuring transparency and combating corruption at its source by supporting the reform process using ICTs. Therefore, there is great scope for the use of ICTs in enhancing public service delivery and transparency and reducing corrupt practices. To this effect, multi-stakeholder action will enhance the success of this objective. The implementation of the e-government strategy needs to prioritise all sectors of the economy, including the informal sector, when it comes to using ICTs for transparency and fighting corruption.

It is recognised that making government information available to the public is important for an informed citizenry and an accountable government, including for enhancing opportunities for participation. To this effect, the government needs policies based on open government principles to make information accessible through the implementation of the already identified e-services in the e-government strategy.

The participation of civil society organisations is of paramount importance in advocacy work when it comes to realising such policy initiatives and in promoting the use of ICT applications for combating corruption. ■