

# South African E-Government Policy and Practices: A Framework to Close the Gap<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** E-government in South Africa has a particularly important historical and social context due to the legacy of apartheid. As a result, a ten year e-government implementation horizon has been created from tested world wide practices. Thus far the plan is not being realised and a gap is appearing between what the policy says should be happening and what is actually happening. This gap is most likely a result of a lack of government capacity to meet the policy objectives. In this paper the author puts forward a framework – drawing on actor network theory (ANT) and the due process model – which aims to improve the current e-government implementation process and close the gap between policy and practices in South Africa.

## 1 Introduction

South Africa held its first multi-racial, democratic elections in 1994. This event can be seen as a watershed in the lives of South Africans. Before 1994 South Africans lived under the system of Apartheid which created a deeply divided society along racial lines. Post-1994 South Africa is home to the “rainbow nation” and a government that has the very difficult task of “addressing apartheid’s legacy of inequality and poverty.” [1]

The issue of e-government in South Africa has a very important historical and social context; consequently, any e-government initiatives have to contend with a number of realities. These include: a high level of inequality; a weak Information Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure (particularly in rural areas); a general lack of government ICT readiness; and other (apparently) more pressing demands in the public service which make ICT development a lower priority in budgetary terms. [2]

This paper briefly outlines the current policy of e-government in South Africa. It then looks at current practices and how these fall short of the policy objectives. Finally, an e-government implementation framework is proposed that could aid in rectifying the situation.

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<sup>1</sup> in Traunmüller, Roland (Ed.). "Electronic Government". *Proceedings 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference EGOV2003*, Prague, Sep.2003. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, Springer-Verlag: Berlin, 2003, pp.504-507.

## 2 E-Government Policy in South Africa

The Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) drafted South Africa's *E-Government Policy* in 2001 after an extensive two year consultation process with various private sector representatives, community organisations and public service officials. [2] The policy outlines a ten year implementation plan for implementing e-government in South Africa. According to the authors, the implementation plan draws on tested world wide practices and seeks to avoid the mistakes, and improve on the successes of other governments implementing e-government initiatives. [2]

### 2.1 The "Batho Pele" Principles

In 1997 the DPSA released a White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service. In this paper, the concept of Batho Pele was introduced:

"*Batho Pele* is Sesotho for 'People First'. The name was chosen to express the key message [...] that the purpose of the Public Service is to serve **all** the people of South Africa." [3]

Batho Pele can be seen as South Africa's (rather poetic) way of moving towards a "citizens as consumers" approach.

### 2.2 Ten Year Implementation Horizon

The political party landscape of South Africa is very stable compared to most other countries. The *African National Congress* (ANC) is the ruling party and is likely to stay in power for the foreseeable future due its strong support in the country. Thus, a ten year implementation horizon for e-government is entirely feasible.

The plan follows six stages in chronological order: information provision; two-way transactions; multi-purpose portals; personalized portals; clustering of services; and comprehensive corporate transformation. (see [2] for definitions and timing of implementations)

Currently the government is seeking to achieve three main objectives through its e-government initiatives: increased productivity; lowered costs; and increased citizen convenience. This indicates a strong focus on service delivery improvement. Very little mention is made however, of any fundamental transformation objectives except for a vague but inevitable restructuring that begins in stage 5 of the implementation plan above. An implied overall aim of the e-government implementation is to undergo a "comprehensive corporate transformation" (the final stage of the plan).

## 3 Current Practices of Government in South Africa

There is little consolidated information available with regards to the progress and current practices of e-government in South Africa. However, a brief scan of the

“South Africa Online” website (www.gov.za) shows that some progress is being made. Almost all individual government departments have their own websites. A comprehensive resource of government documents including White Papers, Green Papers, speeches, annual reports, legislation, policies and other information is available for download.

This is consistent with the first phase of the implementation plan namely, “information provision”. However, this should not be seen as an automatic improvement in service delivery.

“Setting up a Web site often leads to complacency about e-government. Creating a Web site may be a benchmark, but it does not guarantee performance or customer usage.” [5]

According to the targets set out by the plan, initiatives in “two-way transactions” (at least in the G2G arena but also starting in the G2C and G2B arenas) as well as in “multi-purpose portals” (mainly G2G at this stage) should be taking place.

However, there is little evidence that initiatives in either of these stages are currently being entered into by any government websites. There are several promising initiatives underway such as the *Gateway Project* [2], aimed at providing a central portal to government services, but none are as yet operational. Thus, it seems that the ten year plan is already experiencing some significant setbacks. A gap is developing as a result of practices failing to meet the targets set out by policy.

Furthermore, there seems to be a major lack of coordination between government departments with regards to the overall e-government policy. A key feature of the policy is that it relies heavily on the individual departments to come up with their own strategies and projects. At best the departments do not seem to be initiating e-government projects at the rate that is expected; at worst they are not initiating e-government projects at all.

#### **4 What is Causing the Gap?**

It is difficult to pin-point why the ten year plan is not going according to schedule. It is still in its infancy but things are definitely not going well as evidenced by the already large gap between where policy and practices. The lack of adequate progress is probably due largely to the obstacles outlined in the first section of this paper. There is an apparent willingness to pursue e-government but a lack of capacity to follow this through. Evidence from other studies such as Wastell [4], indicate that public sector organisations are often characterized by the profoundly defensive “discourse of dependency”. This subtle, but powerful resistance to change by public officials could be a further reason for the existence of the gap.

#### **5 A Proposed Framework for E-Government Implementation**

As a result of the problems being experienced in the implementation of e-government in South Africa and in other countries, the author proposes a new framework to guide the implementation processes. The framework is based on

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concepts from the ANT and follows a due process model. The author intends to study the framework's ability to successfully guide an e-government implementation process.

In particular, the framework will provide a way to overcome the resistance to change of public officials through its fundamentally inclusive approach to implementation that goes beyond mere consultation. It will also improve alignment between policy and practices by applying a more integrated approach to these two processes.

The proposed framework will be discussed in more detail at the conference presentation and can be obtained by emailing the author.

## 6 Conclusion

The Batho Pele principles provide an excellent foundation for successful e-government in South Africa. Unfortunately, it appears that capacity is a major limitation to implementing e-government initiatives in South Africa. Therefore, a gap is developing between the espoused e-government policy and actual practices. It is envisioned that the proposed framework will provide a way of managing the implementation of e-government in South Africa so that true progress in this arena can become a reality.

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