

# THE ROLE OF NATIONAL LIBRARY SERVICE IN PROMOTING THE E-GOVERNANCE IN MALAWI

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## Abstract

*The Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are being increasingly used by the governments to deliver its services at the locations convenient to the citizens. These applications utilize the ICT in offering improved and affordable connectivity and processing solutions. E-Government is being used to make it easier for people to lead healthy lives, experience life-long learning, and access resources to sustain a reasonable standard of living. E-Government also facilitates the ability for individuals to participate in the life of their society, government and community. The National Library Service (NLS) in partnership with the Department of E-Government is providing free ICT lessons to the general public under the Mass ICT Literacy Program. The program aims at giving the populace confidence in using ICT services without fear. This current study aims to investigate the role of the National Library Service (NLS) in promoting e-governance in Malawi. The specific objectives of the study was to find out the role of NLS in promoting e-government through training the general public, to determine the challenges encountered and a way forward to overcome these challenges. The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The study population comprised of NLS staff. Sampling was purposive. Based on these findings, the study recommends that NLS authorities improve ICT use among the general public through training; it has also further recommended that the Malawi government improve the electricity infrastructure and lower the tariffs on imported ICT technologies with a view of improving better exploitation of e-governance in Malawi.*

**Keywords:** e-governance, e-government, ICT, National Library Service, National Library Service staff.

## 1. Conceptual settings

Scholars have defined e-government in different ways: Electronic government has been defined by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as ‘the use of information and communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, as a tool to achieve better government’ (OECD, 2003). Silcock, (2003) stated that e-government is the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees. In its simplest form, it is the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to deliver public services (Holmes, 2001). The terms “e-government” and “e-governance” are sometimes used interchangeably.

E-government refers to any government functions or processes that are carried out in digital form over the Internet. E-governance is the public sector's use of information and communication technologies with the aim of improving service delivery, encouraging citizens in the decision making process and making government accountable, transparent and effective (UNESCO, 2010).

Throughout the whole world, there has been a paradigm shift where governments and other independent policy/law makers have realised the importance of e-government as a strong tool for responsive governance. Traditionally, many governments have been using paper-and-file approaches in managing their businesses and this has proved disadvantageous in as far as accountability is concerned (Mehrtens et al., 2001). E-Government has the potential to enhance the decentralization reforms by bringing decision making closer to the doorsteps of ordinary citizens by collaborative reasoning made possible with the use of ICT (Tassabehji and Elliman, 2006). ICT in the context of e-government is looked at as a portal for information exchange or a platform through which decisions can be made.

## **2. Contextual Settings**

The National Library Service of Malawi (NLS) is the legal deposit and copyright library for Malawi. The National Library Service of Malawi is run by the Malawi National Library Service Board. The Malawi National Library Service Board is a Statutory Corporation established under the Act of Parliament, No. 31 of 1967. The main task of the Service is to operate nationally distributed public library and information services in Malawi. Their declared mission is to ensure that Malawians have access to educational training, access to materials for leisure and access to materials that can provide information for national development. Specifically they promote, establish, equip, manage, maintain and develop the fifteen libraries in Malawi. The National Library Service (NLS) in partnership with the Department of E-Government is providing free ICT lessons to the general public under the Mass ICT Literacy Program. The program aims at giving the populace confidence in using ICT services without fear. Over 30,000 members of the community have been trained 57 % were male and 43% were female. This shows that at least a large group of women are also interested in the training. The lessons were open to everyone and were mostly done in vernacular and no education levels were considered as a condition for selection of participants. Duration for each session was 3 days per group. Training took place in the following districts: Zomba, Blantyre, Mangochi, Monkeybay, Balaka, Phalombe, Chiladzulu, Mulanje, Thyolo, Dedza, Lilongwe, Mchinji, Kasungu, Ntchisi, and Salima. The programme is expected to be rolled out to other districts in 2016 especially in the North with funding from US Embassy.

## **3. Statement of the Problem**

Despite the fact that the e-government was implemented in Malawi, it has been observed that citizenry are still not fully using ICT to interact with the government. The study conducted by Makoza (2013) to assess the level of e-government, the results showed that Malawi is in the early stages of e-government (presence and interaction phases). Majority of the government ministries and departments have not yet implemented e-government websites. It is for this background that the researchers would like to investigate the role of NLS in promoting the e-governance in Malawi.

#### **4. Research Questions**

- RQ1 Are NLS staff aware of e-governance concepts?
- RQ2 Which ICT programmes were delivered during the NLS Mass ICT training?
- RQ3 What were the challenges faced during the e-governance programme and way forward?

#### **5. Literature Review**

Exploitation of e-government is going to conduit the interaction gap between ordinary citizens and the government. This demands that citizens should collaboratively participate in decision making. This is the case because governments have been viewed as complex, mammoth bureaucratic establishments with a set of information silos that erect barriers to access of information and make the provision of services cumbersome and frustrating (Coleman, 2006). E-Government can also result in huge cost savings to governments and citizens alike, increase transparency and reduce corrupt activities in public service delivery. Previous studies have categorized public service delivery in three groups: publishing, interacting, and transacting (Kumar et al. 2007). Having realized the benefits that e-government brings forth, many governments the world over have adopted e-government as an effective tool for reaching to its citizens and other different stakeholders. However, nowadays there has been a paradigm shift because even governments are equally interested in using the internet in carrying out its day-to-day activities (Zhu and He, 2002).

e-Government helps in achieving greater efficiency in government performance by raising service performance, and service delivery, by eliminating inefficient processes and reducing bottlenecks and red tape in the service delivery process as much as possible (Mutula, 2008). Furthermore, it is important to note that e-government initiatives are also aimed at improving government service delivery and citizen participation. However, despite the above mentioned benefits of e-government, the implementation of e-government initiatives in Sub-Saharan African countries have in most cases been failures. As reported by Heeks (2003), 35% of e-government projects in developing countries are total failures, 50% are partial failures, while the remaining 15% are successes. Furthermore, according to Almarabeh and AbuAli (2010), huge failures have been recorded for a large proportion of e-government initiatives as they have failed to achieve promised goals. The challenges that hinder the successful implementation of e-government initiatives in the Sub-Saharan African countries lead to diversified implementation strategies at the various levels (Middleton, 2007). According to Mutula (2008), e-government initiatives in Sub-Saharan African countries seem to be far from reaching realization and attaining the purpose for which they are undertaken due to several challenges and stumbling blocks.

#### **6. Methodology**

Descriptive survey research method was adopted for this study. The application of descriptive social survey design in this study enabled the researchers to obtain opinions and data from the population sample of the Library Assistants, Senior Library Assistant, Assistant Librarians, Librarians and ICT staff at the National Library Service in respect of the role of National Library Service in promoting the e-governance in Malawi. One (1) Library Assistants, four (4) Senior Library Assistant, four (4) Assistant Librarians, two (2) Librarians and two (2) ICT staff, making a total of thirteen (13) formed the population of the study. Purposive sampling technique was adopted to arrive at the needed sample for this study.

The choice of purposive sampling was informed by the fact that the method is characterized by the use of judgment and a deliberate effort to obtain representative sample. The rationale for purposively selecting library staff was because the staff were trained to provide training to the community. The instrument used for data collection includes questionnaire and interviews. Questionnaire was used as the major instrument to elicit data from respondents. Oral and formal interview was used as complementary instrument to obtain information from the respondents. The data collected from the respondents were analyzed using simple frequency distribution tables.

## 7. Findings and Discussion

### 7.1 Respondents by Ranks

The respondents were asked to identify themselves according to their ranks 2 (15%) Librarians, 4 (31%) Assistant Librarians, 4 (31%) Senior Library Assistant, 1 (8%) Library Assistant and 2 (15%) ICT staff. Overall, 13 (100%) responded to the questionnaire.

### 7.2 Awareness of E-governance in Malawi

The respondents were asked to give their opinion on what they know about e-governance. The question was asked to establish whether library and ICT staff understood the concepts of e-governance. Majority of the respondents viewed e-governance as citizens' ability to interact with technology for transacting business and finding prices of agricultural produces. This concurs with Wyld (2004: 20) who conceptualised e-government as "the use of electronic processes by citizens, businesses, and the government to communicate, to disseminate and gather information, to facilitate payments, and to carry out permitting in an online environment". From this definition, the role of e-government is to enhance access to information and delivery of services using ICT. The aims of e-government are to improve administrative efficiency in delivery of services, promoting public participation in decisions and actions for government, encourage political accountability and policy effectiveness (Parajuli, 2007; Schuppan, 2009). Provision of services to the citizens using ICT may also support attainment of socio-economic development (Ngulube, 2007).

#### 7.2.1 ICT programmes offered

ICT Programmes	TICK
Types of computers	13
Hardware, and software Input and output devises and the CPU	13
Windows Explorer (organising folders and files)	13
Working with applications software (Microsoft Office Suite e.g Word, Excel, Power point, Access, Publisher)	13
Internet basics (online search using search engines, emails, using social media tools like Facebook, SMS, Twitter)	13
Other utility programs including installing hardware drivers.	2
Network configuration and troubleshooting	2

Table 1: CT Programmes offered

The respondents were requested to identify which ICT programmes were they trained in, as presented in the Table 1 above, majority of the respondents were trained in types of computers, hardware and software, input and output devices and the CPU, windows explorer (organising folders and files), working with applications (creating and editing text files in notepad, WordPad and Microsoft Word), Internet basic (Online search using search engines, emails, using social media tools like Facebook,) ,Microsoft Office Suite and other utility programs including installing hardware drivers and two (2) ICT staff were trained in other utility programs including installing hardware drivers and two (2) were trained in Network configuration and troubleshooting. The course content was based on the EU Computer Driving License (Grade 3). Most of the selected staff either underwent or facilitated Web 2.0 and Social Media training workshop (#WebsforDev) developed and sponsored by CTA.

### **7.3 Programme offered to community members**

The NLS staff were also asked which programme were being offered to the community members. Majority of the respondents indicated that they trained the community members on teaching them different types of computers, hardware and software, input and output devices and the CPU, windows explorer (organising folders and files), working with applications (creating and editing text files in notepad, WordPad and Microsoft Word), Internet basic (Online search using search engines, emails, using social media tools like Facebook,) , and Microsoft Word and none was trained in utility programs including installing hardware drivers and Network configuration and troubleshooting. Follow up interviews conducted on 13 respondents indicated that community members were interested in the Social Media than other programmes which were offered. This finding is almost in consonance with that of Khasawneh, Abu-Shanab (2013), who found that social media (such as blogs, websites and other social networking tools like Facebook, Twitter and Google+) has become a platform that is easily accessible to anyone with Internet access which makes governments that utilise these web tools have the capacity to rebuild the relationship with their citizens and increase the level of citizens' engagement and participation.

### **7.4 Challenges faced during e-governance programme.**

The respondents were asked an open ended question on what were the challenges they faced during e-governance programmes. The following were the challenges:

- Time was limited and this hindered participants from having adequate hands on training
- Lack of wide coverage because some participants walked long distances
- Computers were not enough especially when we were doing practical due to large group of people that were present
- Participants wanted to receive certificates for the training so that they can benefits in case of job hunting
- People wanted allowances so that they can use for buying food and travelling because they were coming from very far.
- People of different education levels were put in one class
- People of different levels of education were being taught using the same training materials

There are a lot of challenges faced by e-government as researchers such as Monga, A. (2008), Dada (2006), Bwalya(2009), Mutula and Mostert(2008) and others have outlined: low level of the Internet penetration; telecommunications infrastructure constraints; lack of institutional framework supporting e-government; lack of allocated budget for e-government deployment; digital divide; privacy and security concerns; limited IT skills and training; culture and lack of citizen awareness and participation.

## **8. Way forward for e-governance programme**

When the respondents were asked to provide suggestions on the way forward regarding e-governance programmes, the suggestions include:

- Classes should be given three or more days
- NLS authorities improve ICT use among the general public through training;
- Malawi government improve the electricity infrastructure and lower the tariffs on imported ICT technologies with a view of improving better exploitation of e-governance in Malawi.
- The programme should target villagers that is each village has to have their session
- Need for adequate publicity.
- There is need to have a good number of computers to match with the number of the participants
- There is need to issue participants with certificates
- Money should be available to give the participants so that they can use to buy food and for transport
- There should be more resources e.g. computers so that two or three people should share one computer
- The training should also be done in other languages other than Chichewa only
- Resource centres should be opened by the government where participants to the programme could be practicing and learn more about ICT
- The programme of e-government should also be introduced in all primary schools
- Involve other stakeholders for support of the programme
- Strategies to target the youth
- More trainings should be conducted to reach out to more Malawians
- More funds should be invested in the programme to improve its impact
- Need to find ways of sustaining the programme

## **9. Conclusion and Recommendation**

The growing use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has a significant impact on how people live, interact and communicate with each other. Such significant impact changes not only the way people perform their work and activities but also the way governments work

and perform their functions. An important issue to consider is that social media tools are new social type of vehicles that aid decision makers in their understanding of how citizens interact with issues posted on the page and how to react to such measures. As a way forward the study recommends that NLS authorities improve ICT use among the general public through training, involve other stakeholders for support of the programme, Malawi government improve the electricity infrastructure and lower the tariffs on imported ICT technologies with a view of improving better exploitation of e-governance in Malawi.

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