

Putting the Internet to Work

Paul Rowan, Editor of *Public Service Review*, spoke to Mark Fleeton about the take-up of e-government in developing countries...

ICT has had a tremendous impact on the developed world, and we are now beginning to see how it can improve lives and stimulate economic growth in developing countries. Of course, the implementation of e-government necessitates strong support, through funding and guidance, something that the Development Gateway Foundation is striving to offer. To get a better understanding of the work of the Development Gateway Foundation, and the issues that face developing countries in building e-government, Paul Rowan, Editor of *Public Service Review: International Development*, interviewed Mark Fleeton, its CEO.

To begin, could you give us a brief history of the Development Gateway, its target audience and also outline its core aims?

The Development Gateway was an initiative by the World Bank in the late 1990s, and it was one of a number of initiatives aimed at making the Bank a 'knowledge bank'. In 2001, we became a not-for-profit foundation incorporated in the District of Columbia, so we're now independent, although we have significant World Bank representation on our board. The aim of the Foundation is to put the internet to work for developing countries, and we do this by providing web-based solutions to strengthen governance, improve aid effectiveness and encourage knowledge sharing amongst development practitioners, who are our main audience.

The Development Gateway is a strong advocate of developing world e-government programmes. How are you working to build e-government in traditionally poor, infrastructure deprived nations?

We're focusing on key areas where we think we can make a difference, in the area of e-procurement, for example, which is one of the core sub-sets of e-government. One of our flagship programmes is called dgMarket, which is an e-government tendering information system, and is the leading independent aggregator of tendering notices in the world. We have over US\$500bn worth of tenders a year on dgMarket, and about 60,000 procurement notices at any one time. Virtually all national tenders from 34 countries are on dgMarket, plus all contracts funded by the World Bank and other multilateral banks in an additional 120 countries. This has two benefits for developing countries: Firstly, when they implement dgMarket themselves, there can be significant savings from reduced costs in public procurement through open, competitive bidding. Various studies show that these savings can range from 5% in stronger environments, up to 20% in weaker environments. They also benefit from increased access to international business opportunities when developed countries advertise on dgMarket. About 50% of our users here are from developing countries.

So, e-procurement is one particular strategic area that we are focused on. The other area is aid effectiveness and management. As you know, the Paris Declaration last year laid out the international agenda for aid effectiveness. It is largely based around donors relying more on partner government systems, particularly procurement and financial

management systems. Our work on procurement supports this. On the financial side, we also have a tool called the Aid Management Platform, which is a software system that allows partner-governments to co-ordinate and track what all the different donors are doing in their country in terms of commitments, dispersals, actual expenditures and achievements against milestones.

That's the first part of my answer, but looking specifically at low income countries, I think it is harder to develop e-government solutions there, compared to middle income countries. This is partly because countries have to be network-ready to some extent to take on board e-government, and also because the demand from middle income countries tends to be stronger. They tend to view e-government as a badge of modernisation in some cases. So we have to try harder to find ways to help low income countries. For example, in Mozambique, we have focused on two e-government projects – one to set up a Govnet to link the various Ministries together because they really need that basic help, and a second to establish an e-land registry to document land titles in electronic form. This is an effective way to stimulate business development – it gives people access to capital, as they can use their land as collateral when they can prove that they own it. So, Mozambique is a case where we've had to work harder for a country that is on the cusp of network-readiness.

Examining the place of e-government in the broader picture of government, do you feel that e-government should be a fundamental element of government in developing countries, or do you think that it should only be promoted where the basics of sound government are already in place?

Well there's a chicken-and-egg dimension to this issue, I think. e-government is a way of achieving more efficient and accountable government, but it's dependent on the extent to which the Government is committed to reform. Our experience has been that governments are interested in e-government tools when they're interested in a wider reform programme. For example, there's no reason for joining a platform for the open, competitive advertising of tenders unless the Government is committed to transparency in competitive bidding. If they have such a tool, the very fact that they have it will pressure them to go in that direction. When commitment for change is present, small investments in IT can generate large returns in efficiency for government operations, and so we tend to focus on simpler, basic solutions. For dgMarket, the costs are around US\$50,000-100,000 per country for implementation of a locally branded site, yet it can bring around 90% of the benefits of a more sophisticated e-tendering system costing US\$20m to implement.

Do you feel that there is a risk of focusing too much on technologically advanced government, which might detract from the important basic principles of good government?

There's always a risk of e-government being seen as a technological fix, but we have to remember that it's about more than technology – it's also about processes and people. To take a look back at the e-procurement angle, for example, it's fine and good to have an electronic system that allows you to advertise your tenders, but you also need to have the reengineering of processes, the rigorous enforcement of rules, the training of people and

the capacity building that goes into making the system work, to maximise the benefits of making the procurement open and transparent. That's why we advocate 'e-government', rather than just the provision of software tools. Technology as a tool can help, through the efficiency by which it can collect, collate and disseminate information, and ICTs are seen as valuable tools in promoting transparency and fighting corruption. It boils down to the more open and free flow of information involving those tools, but unless you have the supporting systems and structures in place, the tools themselves won't get you there.

Looking at the delivery of e-government and other ICT programmes, what role does local input play in it, and how does this integrate with the Development Gateway's work?

Local input is critical to success, and strong local partnership is therefore crucial in whatever we do. In fact, that is our main threshold consideration before we'll go into a country. We are currently looking at a range of Development Gateway Foundation programmes for Gabon, Mali and Mauritania, for example, and before we were prepared to embark on that, we had to satisfy ourselves that their governments were really interested in, and committed to, those programmes. It is an ongoing assessment on our part. The Foundation is unique in that it has a network of 50 country gateways, 49 of which are in developing countries, and we also have three research and training centres in developing countries, which provide a platform for local inputs and partnership. This helps in our assessments and, where we have country gateways, we are particularly well placed to foster and promote partnerships, and to really involve communities in their ICT development. We're also very much in the camp of open source software. This allows involvement by local contractors, for example, at a much reduced cost if the software needs to be changed, rather than more expensive proprietorial software, where we have big problems of vendor lock-in and the high costs associated with service, maintenance and any changeover of system.

Our Aid Management Platform in Ethiopia is another case where we've had very strong local partnership and input. The Ethiopian Government took the initiative to pilot this Platform, and they've had the lead role in the ownership and management of the system – they've defined the software requirements and driven the agenda in terms of the implementation and customisation required. For our e-Government grants programme also, each grant is managed by the partner government, so that's also a locally-owned and driven approach, where the partner government handles the procurement, as well as the management of the activity.

How is Best Practice in information exchange and e-government implementation determined? Is it a process of evolution, gathering ideas from across the world, or is there a standard procedure that underpins every project?

Well, I suspect in relation to e-government, as a cross-cutting sector, that it's a process of evolution. I've noticed that Best Practice compendiums are starting to appear, and the United Nations recently put out a compendium of innovative e-government practices in which a range of Development Gateway Foundation programmes appear. I think that it's generally clear that Best Practice will be nested in the broad approach of open source software, with common standards and common systems. This approach makes a lot of

sense for developing countries – it offers them much more affordable solutions and gets around problems of horrendous costs associated with changing from one supplier to another.

The other comment I'd make is that, from my experience in development assistance more generally, the fundamental principles that underlie effectiveness and quality of development should apply equally to e-government. One of the major lessons learned from the development experience over the last 50 years is that there are a number of key qualities, processes and principles that, if adhered to, will make the chances of success much higher. These are principles like an activity being based in sound policy and strategy, being strongly based in partnership and local ownership, being well designed to deliver sustainable benefits and also being results-based, with a monitoring and evaluation framework against which progress can be measured. One of the main lessons is that it's not so much what you do, but how you do it. e-Government is no different.