

»» E-governance: eliminating barriers between authorities and citizens

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E-governance gaining momentum

Digital applications are becoming increasingly relevant for government institutions – also in developing countries. All 193 UN member states have at least one publicly accessible website. The generic term e-governance refers to online presences and related digital applications that serve as interfaces between government administration and the general public.

Proximity to government and administration through digitalisation

E-governance aims to eliminate barriers between authorities and citizens. Information about government organisation, but also about official services (e.g. birth certificates, tax payments or business registrations) can be provided more easily. People living in rural areas in particular can benefit from digital applications, which are easier to access than a distant administration office. This especially applies to developing countries where transport infrastructure is often inadequate.

E-governance, by integrating citizens digitally, strengthens democratic principles such as transparency as well as participation and can encourage trust in government. The “two-way-sharing principle” enables users to address suggestions and criticism directly to the authorities. Institutions can thus not only provide information, but also interact directly with the public.

E-governance is becoming more important – Africa has the potential to close the gap

The United Nations E-Government Survey, which gives an overview of global developments in e-governance, is published every two years. It examines both the current state of access and the im-

plementation of e-governance around the world. The resulting E-Government Development Index (EGDI) enables a comprehensive comparison. The index uses a four-tier scale to evaluate the areas of telecommunications infrastructure, human capital and online services.

In fact, well over half of all UN member states were deemed successful by the index in 2018. Only 16 out of 193 countries were placed in the lowest category (2016: 32 out of 193 countries). This resulted in significant improvements. It is worth noting that 14 of the 16 countries are located in Africa. Hence, African countries tend to lag behind in the development of e-governance.

Overall, the EGDI found that the scope and quality of official online services have developed very positively, as they were rated 40% better than in 2014 on a global average. Although predominantly African countries lag behind here as well, 57% of the countries were able to improve their position.

The future of e-governance: leaving no one behind

To harness the potential of digital participation for people in developing countries as well, carefully planned implementation of digital systems is required. This is because there is sometimes a risk of intensifying existing inequalities and effectively excluding individual sections of the population from the opportunities offered by e-governance.

One of the biggest hurdles to digitalisation – especially in developing countries – is the still widespread “e-illiteracy”, i.e. lack of sufficient skills to deal with digital devices and applications. In addition, only just over half of the world's population has access to the Internet. Expand-

ing networks and improving user skills – especially to already disadvantaged population groups such as poorer people or people living in rural regions – are therefore a basic prerequisite for ensuring that the advantages of e-governance benefit broad sections of the population.

However, e-governance not only has great potential, it also creates new opportunities to data misuse. Repressive political regimes in particular may use digital technology to monitor their citizens more closely or to manipulate them, instead of giving them more opportunities. In projects that promote e-governance, it is therefore essential to ensure compliance with international data protection and cybersecurity standards.

Conclusion

The EGD Index shows that countries around the world are striving to expand their online presence. There is a particular need for action in this area to support African states. This requires first and foremost expanding digital infrastructure, improving user skills and complying with international data protection and cybersecurity standards. Finally, e-governance may not under any circumstances intensify disparities within societies. ■