Aligning Records Management with ICT/ e-Government and Freedom of Information in East Africa

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of a research project on *Aligning Records Management with ICT/ e-Government and Freedom of Information in East Africa*, conducted by the International Records Management Trust in 2010/2011 with funding from the International Development Research Centre. It describes the methodology for the research, which included case studies in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi; summarises the findings; and describes the deliverables, which are available at: http://irmt.org/development-research/research-reports.

Introduction

Between February 2010 and September 2011, the International Records Management Trust conducted a study on *Aligning Records Management with ICT/ e-Government and Freedom of Information in East Africa*, which was funded by the Canadian International Development Research Centre. National research teams from the five East African Community countries (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi) carried out the in-country research. The overall finding was that records management issues are not being addressed in relation to the ICT/ e-government and Freedom of Information initiatives that are being planned and implemented within the region.

Methodology

An *International Situation Analysis* was conducted to provide an overview of key issues in relation each of the priority areas for study, evaluate how some of these issues can present barriers to the development of effective record-keeping programmes and describe possible strategies for overcoming the barriers.

This served as a point of comparison for national case studies that were conducted in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi. The country research teams interviewed government stakeholders about their role in ICT/ e-government and FOI, their understanding about the role and importance of records, and the record-keeping issues they were facing. This helped to establish an overview of the relationship between records management, ICT/ e-government and FOI at the national level.

The country research teams also analysed court case management systems to identify the practical implications of the issues identified at the national level. This three-tiered approach enabled the researchers to draw regional comparisons, with specific technical examples.

Findings

ICT/ e-Government and Records

Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda have made substantial investments in ICT procurement and deployment. ICT plans are supported at the highest level of government, and while the agencies involved varied from country, there was significant senior level support. All of the EAC countries are moving forward aggressively to implement ICT plans, with e-government initiatives designed to harness the power of the Internet to deliver information and services more effectively to citizens. Some of the governments are moving more rapidly than others. Rwanda, for instance, has relatively extensive e-government systems operating across government departments. Others have chosen to emphasise particular areas of ICT development, for instance the roll out of fibre optic cabling to the districts in Uganda.

These initiatives are not without challenges. Personnel with the required expertise are in short supply, as are financial resources, and projects have been affected by changing priorities and high staff turnover. In some cases, electricity shortages have been a factor. Despite the profile of ICT/ e-government plans and the high level of

importance being accorded their implementation, there was little evidence that any of the countries were addressing records management concerns as part of the planning process.

Only in Tanzania has the National Archives been consulted in planning and developing ICT and e-government policies, strategies and projects. Generally, the archives and records authorities were not involved in government information management initiatives. The Kenya Government was implementing a digital document and records management system that was to be rolled out across the public service, but this was being spearheaded outside the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service. Rwanda had adopted a document workflow management system, but it did not incorporate the full records management functionality. Records specialists from the archives and records authority had not been involved. Generally, the ICT systems being implemented had not been developed to take account of records management requirements. As a result, there was a high risk that digital records would not being captured and protected systematically.

Freedom of Information and Records

The Government of Uganda had enacted FOI legislation but at the time of the study, five years after the enactment of the law, it had no implementation strategy. The other countries were preparing the way for FOI legislation, and in two cases – Kenya and Tanzania – bills were pending that could lead to FOI laws. Several of the countries had directives or policies that promoted openness and encouraged government agencies to provide citizens with access to information. Plans for existing or pending FOI laws typically took account of the need to ensure that records are managed properly. The pending FOI law in Kenya, for instance, would require government agencies to create and preserve records necessary to document their policies, decisions, procedures, transactions and other activities and to ensure that records, including those in digital form, are safeguarded from damage or destruction. However, the National Archives was not consulted on the law.

Even with implementation periods of three years or five years, concerns have been raised that bringing records management to the level required to establish a sustainable FOI regime would take a considerable length of time. Moreover, there was little evidence that provisions for implementing the laws would take account of the regulatory framework necessary to achieve completeness, accuracy and accessibility of government records in all formats.

Records Management

Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi have legislation that establishes a single authority on the management of government records. However, only in Tanzania, among the five countries, is the National Archives well positioned to carry out its legislated role. Its position in the Office of the President gives it the profile and visibility required to enable it to have influence over the management of records across the government.

Other archives are less well positioned, or lack an explicit mandate for records management or records disposition. In Kenya, the National Archives has been given the authority, but its lack of experience in managing digital records has meant that other ministries have been assigned responsibility for managing current records, leaving the archives with responsibility principally for archival records. This split in the records and archives function can lead to a lack of clarity about policy and procedures.

Some governments had policies in place for managing current records, but these typically addressed paper records only. None addressed the management of digital records, and there was no evidence that records management provisions had been applied to digital records. It was also significant that policies addressing the management of ICT or e-government initiatives had yet to incorporate provisions reflecting the importance of records management.

With the exception of Kenya, the countries in the region had yet to formally adopt the ISO standard on records management, and none have adopted standard functional requirements for managing records in ICT systems. One of the reasons for this was

in the lack of expertise in records and archives authorities to review existing functional requirements for their possible adaptation. For instance, specifications and functional requirements for trusted digital repositories had yet to be considered for testing and adaptation in any of the East African countries. Although all the governments in the region were involved, to a greater or lesser extent in digitisation projects, and although digitisation had taken on a high profile in most of the governments, none had adopted international standards for producing and managing digitised records. Moreover, the integrity of the digitisation projects was undermined where the original paper records were poorly organised.

Procedures for the continuous management of records had been developed in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, but they were directed to the management of paper records. Some of the governments used classification schemes and file control systems, including file titling rules, location indexes, file censuses, file movement procedures and access controls. In some cases, notably in Tanzania, procedures for transferring semi-active records to records centres and archival records to the national archives were in place, but only for paper records. The absence of procedures for managing digital records was becoming a serious issue across the region; if not resolved, it will undermine ICT/ e-government and FOI initiatives.

Although the Governments of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania had cadres for records management staff, these were mostly in relation to records and archives authorities rather than government-wide. The Government of Tanzania had a network of Departmental Records Officers working within a defined scheme of service. In the Kenya and Tanzania National Archives, staff had strong professional qualifications, with many having graduate and post-graduate degrees or certificates. However, few had professional education and experience in managing digital records. In Rwanda and Burundi, very few staff had professional records qualifications, and in the Burundi Archives there were only two staff with professional education to rebuild an entire records and archives programme for the government. University programmes existed for records and archives management in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, but few of the programmes addressed the management of digital records. Where they did, it was not from a practical perspective. The result was a lack of expertise across

government to address digital records management in ICT/ e-government and FOI initiatives.

In Tanzania, steps had been taken to establish a digital records management programme but, as in other countries, the facilities for storing digital records, including trusted digital repositories, had yet to be built. Within government agencies, facilities for managing records according to international standards were often lacking and were almost non-existent for digital records. Digital records were stored on various recording media in computer rooms or, as reported in many cases, particularly in Burundi, in rooms with poor environmental controls. There was little documentation and little attention to their continued accessibility in relation to changing technology.

Records centres for semi-active records had been established in some governments, but for paper records only. Most of the national archives did not have purpose-built facilities for managing paper records, and the lack of space was becoming a major problem. Although the issue of storage facilities for digital records was beginning to be recognised, the focus in most countries was on establishing basic facilities for storing paper records. No country in the region had established a secure, trusted digital repository.

Taken as a whole, the findings suggest that ICT/ e-government and FOI initiatives are at considerable risk.

Court Case Management Systems

Within the national contexts, the researchers examined court case management systems for records management functionality. They found that the process mapping and risk assessment exercises that preceded case management system design had generally not addressed records issues. International standards for records management had not been consulted, so that the systems often had limited records management functionality. The systems generally could not capture records in all formats, could not assign unique identifiers to documents, and did not have pre-defined metadata for records, nor rules for controlling metadata. This meant that the

search capacity was limited, which could have serious consequences for cases before the court and for the rights and entitlements of citizens. The systems were not yet capable of assigning retention and disposal actions during records creation. This will mean that when administrators wish to move records to a digital repository for safe-keeping over time or to delete out-dated records from the system, individual records will need to be opened and assessed against a retention and disposal schedule, which is an expensive and time-consuming process.

The systems often had only limited audit trail functionality, and audit trails were rarely monitored. This meant that the records were open to tampering, and it called into question their reliability. The systems did not link digital records to paper records, so that digital and hard copy records for the same case would have to be searched and tracked separately. Back-up practices were *ad hoc*, putting records at serious risk of corruption and loss.

The disconnects between law, strategy and policy that were identified in the broader country studies were already having repercussions at the level of practical and technical design and implementation of digital systems. The lack of attention to records management functionality in court case management systems was directly affecting the performance of the courts and the in turn the rights and entitlements of the citizens. In this environment, the courts would find it difficult to comply with Freedom of Information legislation if it were introduced.

Outputs

The project produced reports and court case studies for each of the five EAC countries. These findings are compared and analysed in an *East African Situation Analysis*, which includes a *Regulatory Framework for the Management of Records*. The framework defines the basic elements that must be in place at the national level if governments are to manage records effectively in the hybrid paper/ digital environment. There is also a generic country strategy for managing records as reliable evidence for ICT/ e-Government and Freedom of Information and a *White Paper for Senior Management* that sets out key issues at a high level.

The products were presented to a meeting of senior government officials, IT specialists and records and archives managers at a stakeholders meeting in Tanzania in September 2011. The participants made a number of resolutions, including calling for the preparation of a regional strategy to guide the five EAC countries in addressing the issues collectively. The stakeholders then formed a working group to draft an *EAC Digital Records Management Strategy,* that sets out four targets:

- Building Regional Capacity through the Establishment of a Centre of Excellence for Digital Records Management
- Building and Resourcing National Capacity for Records Management
- Strengthening Legal and Policy Frameworks for Records Management
- Aligning Records Management with Regional Objectives.

To achieve these targets, the strategy proposes activities including:

- Delivering Training and Education and Raising Awareness
- Providing the Capacity for Research and Innovation
- Harmonising Legislation and Policy
- Introducing International Good Practice Through Standards
- Reforming Existing Systems and Procedures in Preparation for Modernisation
- Developing the Regional Knowledge Base by Attracting and Retaining Qualified Records Management Staff
- Expanding and Modernising Infrastructure and Facilities for Records Management.

Apart from the draft regional strategy, which is under review by the East African Community Secretariat, all of the products of the research project are available to download, free of charge, from the IRMT website, at http://irmt.org/development-research/research-reports.

Conclusion

The research project has identified the elements of the regulatory framework that

need to be in place if there is to be sound records management in the public sector in the digital/ access to information environment. National records and archives authorities have a vital role to play if government initiatives in the areas of ICT/ e-government and FOI are to succeed and to offer real value to governments and to citizens. Hopefully, the project deliverables will be a step toward laying the foundation for achieving this.

ICT/ e-government and FOI are high profile issues for many governments, but even in the short period since the research was completed, new areas of interest are emerging. The international movement towards open government is driving new initiatives in the digital environment, particularly in relation to open data. The success of these new initiatives will, once again, rest heavily on the capacity of the records and archives community to build a strong foundation for managing digital records. This will inevitably present new challenges, but the extent to which national records and archives authorities are able to engage with these new developments will also offer opportunities for an increasingly high-profile role within government.