



Establishing the nexus between information availability and good governance: Authors' perspective



Review Article



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global in the, **Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**

Volume 5, Issue 2, 2021

© 2021 The Author(s). This article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY-NC-SA) license.

Article Information

Submitted: 11th August 2021

Accepted: 30th November 2021

Published: 10th December 2021

Additional information is available at the end of the article



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

ISSN: e-2523-0948; p-2520-4009

To read the paper online, please scan this QR code



Samuel Muthami Wanjiru¹ and Daniel Muthee Wambiri²

Department of Library and Information Science, Kenyatta University, Kenya

Correspondence: muthami70@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7715-409X>

Abstract

This paper discusses the role that information and knowledge in the contemporary world play in enhancing good governance with reference to Kenya. Information and knowledge are the raw materials that drive decision-making in both small and big organizations. This also applies to day-to-day personal undertakings. It is the lifeblood that runs in all enterprises both as input and output. If for example a political party or a country is considered as a company, information is one of the single most vital ingredients that hold all the other sectors together. The paper delves into the features of good governance, the role of information, challenges in availing information as well as measures to plug gaps in support of good governance in Kenya.

Keywords: access, decision making, good governance, information, knowledge



How to Cite:

Wanjiru, S. M. ., & Wambiri, . D. M. . (2021). Establishing the nexus between information availability and good governance: Authors' perspective. *Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(2). Retrieved from <https://royalliteglobal.com/njhs/article/view/697>



Introduction

Information unlike the raw statistical facts called data is the processed data that is useful to support decision-making. It is technically defined as data that have been given meaning by way of context (Groff & Jones, 2003). Information is the food that nourishes all types of decision-making processes with a view to arriving at the best of available alternatives. Knowledge on the other hand is even more refined than information. Groff & Jones, (2003), define it as information combined with understanding and capability to guide action. This is even more critical than information since it provides more experiential and empirical support to decision support. Another term that is critical to democratic ideals and rule of law is good governance. Whether in corporate or state management, it refers to the process of proper decision making and its implementation in the management of public or institutional affairs. (Cambridge University, 2018) defines good governance as the “effective and responsible management of an organization, a country considering society’s needs in its decisions it makes”.

Evolution and attributes

The concept of governance has acquired increased importance since the 1990s largely because international aid agencies began to recognize its absence as a serious barrier to the economic development of the developing countries, which has been their avowed objective. It is the failure in developmental efforts that brought forth into prominence the need for as well as identification of the principal elements or constituents of good governance. But the pursuit of it is as old as our civilization. The term "good governance" however, comprehends the processes and procedures as well as substantial concerns. It is only then that sustainable development is really possible.

Salient features of Good Governance

The concept of good governance feeds on information as a service product to survive. It is characterized by such elements as rule of law which ensures that members of an organization or country are equal above the law and are informed of their legal obligations and safeguards. Secondly, transparency and accountability are two other hallmarks of appropriate governance. This denotes openness and free flow of information which breeds trust (ICJ, 2007). Thirdly, democratic participation by all the stakeholders for example in elections so that there is ownership of entities is also a trait of good governance. Related to the above are other elements like responsiveness to stakeholders' needs; consensus building like in referenda; equity and inclusivity as well as effectiveness and efficiency in the management of public and institutional affairs. All these elements get suffocated if the flow of information is curtailed through legal, economic, or political interferences by any of the key stakeholders like the state.

Participation

Participation by both men and women is a key cornerstone of good governance. Participation could be either direct or through legitimate intermediate institutions or representatives. It is important to point out that representative democracy does not necessarily mean that the concerns of the most vulnerable in society would be taken into consideration in decision-making. Participation needs to be informed and organized. This means freedom of association and expression on the one hand and an organized civil society on the other hand.

Rule of law

Good governance requires fair legal frameworks that are enforced impartially. It also requires full protection of human rights, particularly those of minorities. Impartial enforcement of laws requires an independent judiciary and an impartial and incorruptible police force.

Transparency

Transparency means that decisions taken and their enforcement are done in a manner that follows rules and regulations. It also means that information is freely available and directly accessible to those who will be affected by such decisions and their enforcement. It also means that enough information is provided and that it is provided in easily understandable forms and media.

Transparency refers to the availability of information to the general public and clarity about government rules, regulations, and decisions. Thus, it both complements and reinforces predictability. The difficulty with ensuring transparency is that only the generator of information may know about it, and may limit access to it. Hence, it may be useful to strengthen the citizens' right to information with a degree of legal enforceability. For similar reasons, broadly restrictive laws that permit public officials to deny information to citizens need to provide for an independent review of claims that such denial is justified in the greater public interest. Access to accurate and timely information about the economy and government policies can be vital for economic decision-making by the private sector. On grounds of efficiency alone, such data should be freely and readily available to economic agents. While this is true across all areas of the economy, it is especially relevant in the case of those sectors that are intrinsically information-intensive, such as the financial sector in general and capital markets in particular.

Transparency in government decision-making and public policy implementation reduces uncertainty and can help inhibit corruption among public officials. To this end, rules and procedures that are simple, straightforward, and easy to apply are preferable to those that provide discretionary powers to government officials or that are susceptible to different interpretations. However well-intentioned the latter type of rule might be in theory, its purpose can be vitiated in practice through error or otherwise. In practice, though, it may sometimes be necessary to place limits on the principle of transparency. In doing so, it may be helpful to distinguish information as a commodity from information as a process.

Responsiveness

Good governance requires that institutions and processes try to serve all stakeholders within a reasonable timeframe.

Consensus oriented

There are several actors and as many viewpoints in a given society. Good governance requires mediation of the different interests in society to reach a broad consensus in society on what is in the best interest of the whole community and how this can be achieved. It also requires a broad and long-term perspective on what is needed for sustainable human development and how to achieve the goals

of such development. This can only result from an understanding of the historical, cultural, and social contexts of a given society or community.

Equity and inclusiveness

A society's well-being depends on ensuring that all its members feel that they have a stake in it and do not feel excluded from the mainstream of society. This requires all groups, but particularly the most vulnerable, to have opportunities to improve or maintain their well being

Effectiveness and efficiency

Good governance means that processes and institutions produce results that meet the needs of society while making the best use of resources at their disposal. The concept of efficiency in the context of good governance also covers the sustainable use of natural resources and the protection of the environment.

Role of information and knowledge in governance issues

Helps in decision making since facts about alternatives are available

From the foregoing definitions and background, it is clear that transparency and accountability in the management of the various sectors of the economy are critical. The governees and the governors require information to make decisions. By conducting the factual census, demographic survey, health survey, and so on, the government is able to plan and share resources from an informed point of view. Citizens to make informed decisions if they access all the information about various consumer goods, political candidates in an election, or choices in a plebiscite. Today some citizens can decide to stop consuming sugar if the correct information confirms that the product circulating is lathed with harmful chemicals.

Enlightens public on social, political, economic, and cultural issues

It is the availability of information that enlightens the citizenry on social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental happenings in their country. The role played by the government and statehouse and other company's spokespersons is to pass information to the public. This expands citizens' knowledge base about their surroundings.

Promotes openness by reducing the nuances of sirikali

The availability of information proactively by the government vide such platforms as e-citizen, e-government, huduma centres, Open data, and the whole idea of digitizing government services breaks barriers hitherto witnessed in public administration. This provision of information proactively demystifies the extreme secretive nature of government operations. Who would have thought a few years back that getting passports, IDs, birth certificates and land documents could be as easy as they have become now. Indeed, this availability of information has also enabled the government to conduct its operations since more data gets captured of citizens initially not captured.

Removes suspicion and conspiracy theories fueled by inadequate or lack of information

In public administration as well as even in private enterprises, proactive availability of information militates against rumours, conspiracy theories, and even suspicions since the populace are kept up to

date. With a free flow of reliable information and not emanating from rumour mills, citizens and stakeholders are able to make informed decisions.

Informed citizenry who can make democratic choices

Citizens who have access to information can make critical and informed choices. If they are denied or deprived of information, they end up making poor decisions with detrimental ramifications on the political, economic, social, and cultural fronts.

Promotes business and trade since market information is freely available

The availability of information is a critical catalyst for trade. Market intelligence or information is what helps farmers, traders, organizations, and countries on what and where to sell or buy goods and services for the sake of their people.

Availability of information enhances information literacy and expand knowledge

It is the availability or lack of information that either facilitates or impedes knowledge acquisition as well as information literacy. Both formal and informal learning is enhanced by freely available information supported by all stakeholders. The media and the government particularly play a central role in facilitating access to information for development. The education sector is primarily thriving on the availability of cutting-edge information that supports research, learning, teaching, and community engagement to solve societal challenges.

Information and NGO support

The NGO sector is either empowered or stifled by the amount of information circulating in the governance world. Many NGOs have made a life out of availability or lack of it. Some of the earlier NGOs in Kenya for example were anchored on increasing the democratic space by fighting for various freedoms. These have through the years been achieved vide the statutes as well as the passing of the new constitution with strong governance safeguards provisions (Republic of Kenya, 2010).

The Internet and governance.

The Internet has had a remarkable influence on society and politics. It has transformed how individuals, groups, and institutions organize, as well as how they relate to each other. Many people now rely on the Internet to connect with family and friends, keep informed, and conduct daily activities. More importantly, the medium represents new avenues for socio-political outreach and activism. Social networking media and other communicative technologies have shaped the new way in which information is communicated and processed by masses of people (Clarke, 2010). Facebook and Twitter, for example, represent two of the most popular social media, with an Alexa Rank of 2 and 10 globally, respectively. In the fall of 2011, Facebook approached the 800 million users mark, while Twitter reported 200 million users. Given their enormous potential for communication, it is hardly a surprise that governments, institutions, and businesses employ social media. For instance, public officials use the technology to learn the views of key demographics, especially the traditionally apathetic youth, and to communicate policy platforms to audiences that might not otherwise tune in (Howard, 2011).

The Internet has also become integral to politics, particularly in democracies, where it promotes free dialogue between the government and the governed. Political candidates and public officials employ the Internet to reach prospective voters or communicate to citizens. By maintaining an online presence, leaders appeal to large demographics, cultivate a public image, and build a rapport with “followers,” who might leave them comments. Citizens depend on the Internet to acquire political information, monitor election campaigns and hold politicians to account for their pledges (Selnow, 2019). Similarly, transnational actors, private citizens, and informal organizations have come to enjoy modern communicative technologies in advancing their goals.

Challenges in the availability of appropriate information

It is worth noting that though this information or knowledge in our time is a critical cog in governance as already stated, it is not always readily available. A number of factors militate against an environment where information diffuses freely to hasten growth in all sectors. Some of these impediments include:

- a) Restrictive Policies – regimes in some countries impede media work
- b) State of press freedom which is stifled – like media laws to slow information diffusion
- c) Prohibitive regulations and legislation like the exceptions in the Kenyan Access to Information Act 2016
- d) Literacy levels which imply only the literate can access information for the development
- e) Unequal distribution of technology since uptake is limited to some areas like the case of fiber optics cable, ICTs, and telecommunications
- f) Economic power, competitiveness, and poverty since information as a tradable commodity can only be accessed by the affluent
- g) Corporate culture and the leadership styles whether they promote sharing of experiential tacit wealth
- h) Corruption and other unethical behavior divert the natural course through which information effectively and efficiently meanders to its ultimate end users
- i) Governmental control of the regulating bodies like the Communications Authority of Kenya almost unilaterally suffocated the industry
- j) Entrenched leaders, impunity, and abuse of power by people who cannot stand any expose about scandals they are associated with
- k) Weak human rights bodies who cannot effectively put a government on its toes lest they risk deregistration
- l) Cybercrime and counterfeiting which destroy livelihoods, creativity and instill fear like the one engulfing Kenya due to the suspected adulterated sugar and other consumer goods
- m) Infrastructure – power, technology, people – all that may be having some inadequacies
- n) Plagiarism and censorship as two integrity and ethical issues in the sector

- o) Digital divide with an imbalance in terms of information flow which is made dire by the economic conditions prevailing
- p) Neo-colonialism where the neocolonialists dictate what the neo-colonies consume in terms of information for instance the skewed production and usage of electronic resources.
- q) Globalization is a positive and a negative because of the influence it delivers in the so-called global village.

All these conspire to deny people in organizations and nations a chance to enjoy the fruits of a free society anchored on respect for human rights. Mechanisms must therefore be instituted to plug the said challenges and ensure free flow of information that supports decision making at all levels and in all organizations.

Mitigating the information access gaps that impede or stifle good governance

As alluded to above, several efforts can be instituted to address the foregoing issues. Among the key approaches and which have succeeded in many jurisdictions include:

- a) Formulation of appropriate policies is critical to fast-track the free flow of information and hasten the growth of all sectors.
- b) Allowing stakeholder participation in a participatory democratic process in all decision-making is required. This ensures citizens own any government processes and projects.
- c) Laying down necessary infrastructure both legal, policy, and financial to proactively support good governance. These are essential to provide an appropriate ecosystem to spur development.
- d) Liberalizing the flow of information and reduction of tendencies that interrupt the free flow of information as a key ingredient of governance. The Kenyan Constitution 2010 and subsequent legislations are availing this vital landscape.
- e) Promoting local content that gives contextual content that is easier to understand by the locals to innovate solutions to problems.
- f) Embracing technology in a smart way only to support the areas that need technology and not just for the sake of it. The e-government concept must be viewed in this context.

Exceptions and balancing the imbalance

Though it is known that transparency and accountability enhance good governance, democracy, and globalization, the challenges and solutions must be forthcoming from governments that unfortunately are the single most notorious agents in impeding the same in the pretext of security or other excuses. Such governments tend to stifle the free flow of critical information for people and society. On the other hand, the other stakeholders must also exploit the free environment responsibly. Otherwise, in absence of this symbiotic collaboration, endless belligerence will be the order of the day. This ultimately stalls development in all its many facets. Irrespective of any excuses the state may harbor to curtail the free flow of information, this must not be done at the expense of the public right to know.

For instance, the Freedom of Information in Kenya (Republic of Kenya, 2016) has noble provisions in this regard but the inherent exceptions on security and ethical grounds among others dilute these benefits (ICJ, 2006).

Conclusion and Way Forward

From the foregoing, it is important to note a number of issues. Information plays a key role in enhancing good governance. Any impediment to its flow stifles democracy, globalization, and critical decision-making. Governments, organizations, and even family units must devise strategies that support the free flow of information and dismantle any barriers to this. These may present themselves in form of legal frameworks like the Freedom Of Information law; flexible media laws, a liberal constitution that engenders democracy and the rule of law; enabling information and ICT policies as well as policies impacting on trade, education, security, counter-feighting, and intellectual property rights. Governments must proactively institute not just information repositories but must smartly invest in knowledge-based infrastructure to exploit appropriately their social capital and create the necessary awareness to all stakeholders so that no one feigns ignorance.

References

- Cambridge University. (2018). Cambridge English Dictionary. Cambridge: CUP.
- Clarke, A. (2010). *Social media: 4. Political uses and implications for representative democracy*. Parliamentary Information and Research Service.
- Groff, T. R., & Jones, T. P. (2003). *Introduction to Knowledge Management: KM in Business*. Amsterdam: Butterworth Heinmann.
- Howard, P. N., Agarwal, S. D., & Hussain, M. M. (2011). When do states disconnect their digital networks? Regime responses to the political uses of social media. *The Communication Review*, 14(3), 216-232.
- ICJ. (2006). *Freedom of Information Handbook: Transforming the culture of government from one of secrecy to one of openness*. Nairobi: ICJ.
- Selnow, G. W. (2019). *Electronic whistle-stops: The impact of the Internet on American politics* (Vol. 10). Greenwood Publishing Group.
- ICJ. (2007). *A citizen's guidebook: applying freedom of information law*. Nairobi: ICJ.
- Republic of Kenya. (2010). *The Constitution of Kenya*. Government Press.
- Republic of Kenya. *Access to Information Act* (2016).
- Cambridge University. (2018). *Cambridge advanced learner's dictionary*. Cambridge: CUP.