THE ROLE OF ICT IN FACILITATING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE LEGISLATIVE AND OVERSIGHT FUNCTIONS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN PARLIAMENT

Gonnie Naidoo
Manager: Inormation & Communication Technology
Parliament of South Africa

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Gnaidoo@parliament.gov.za

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Background

- In an address to senior management of the South African Parliament the Speaker of the National Assembly, The Honourable Ms Mbete, identified the need for greater public participation in the work of Parliament. Ms Mbete indicated that technology should play a more significant role in facilitating such participation.

- These thoughts gave rise to a greater emphasis being placed on the use of technology to assist the Parliament in executing its constitutional mandate.

- The SA Parliament has since developed an IT strategy and has launched a number of ICT initiatives to realise this vision.

- This presentation provides a practical understanding on how ICT will be utilised to facilitate public participation in the work of the SA Parliament and in the process enhance our values of democracy.

The SA Constitution..section 59..Public access to and involvement in the National Assembly

(1) The National Assembly must -

a) Facilitate public involvement in the legislative and other processes of the Assembly and its committees; and

b) Conduct its business in an open manner, and hold its sittings, and those of its committees, in public, but reasonable measures may be taken –

I. To regulate public access, including access to the media to the Assembly and its committees; and

II. To provide for the searching of any person and, where appropriate, the refusal of entry to, or the removal of, any person.

(2) **The National Assembly may not exclude the public, including the media, from a sitting of a committee unless it is reasonable and justifiable to do so in an open and democratic society.**

The SA Constitution..section 72..Public involvement in the National Council of Provinces

72. (1) The National Council of Provinces must -

a) facilitate public involvement in the legislative and other processes of the Council and its committees; and

b) conduct its business in an open manner, and hold its sittings, and those of its committees, in public, but reasonable measures may be taken -

I. to regulate public access, including access of the media, to the Council and its committees; and

II. to provide for the searching of any person and, where appropriate, the refusal of entry to, or the removal of, any person.

(2) The National Council of Provinces may not exclude the public, including the media, from a sitting of a committee unless it is reasonable and justifiable to do so in an open and democratic society

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Challenges in public participation

- **Limited facilities are provided to involve Public in Legislative processes.**
  - Physical location of Parliament – inaccessible to make submissions and presentations.
  - Committee rooms not physically structured to accommodate the public and press…apartheid Govt. did not permit such transparency of its activities.
  - Parliament website is not interactive..does not accept public comment on Bills, etc.
  - Full sittings of Houses are not broadcast on e-TV and SABC…only highlights are carried in news clips.
  - Few meetings of Committees are broadcast on National television (SABC).
  - DSTV (pay TV) has a dedicated channel on Parliament but does not broadcast full sittings and meetings.
  - Organised groups (lobbyists) appear to have more of a voice in Parliament than the general public. Reliance on participation is largely placed on elected MP's.
- **Many of the public do not know: -**
  - how Parliament serves them,
  - what legislation is being tabled, what the status of legislation is, what their rights are (with respect to legislation) and how they can participate.
  - what issues of public and political concern are being debated,
  - what checks are being done on the work of the Executive,
  - what checks are being done on the budget and government spending,
- **New legislation is not proactively marketed: -**
  - Misunderstanding on content and intent – insufficient information communicated to Public before a bill is passed.

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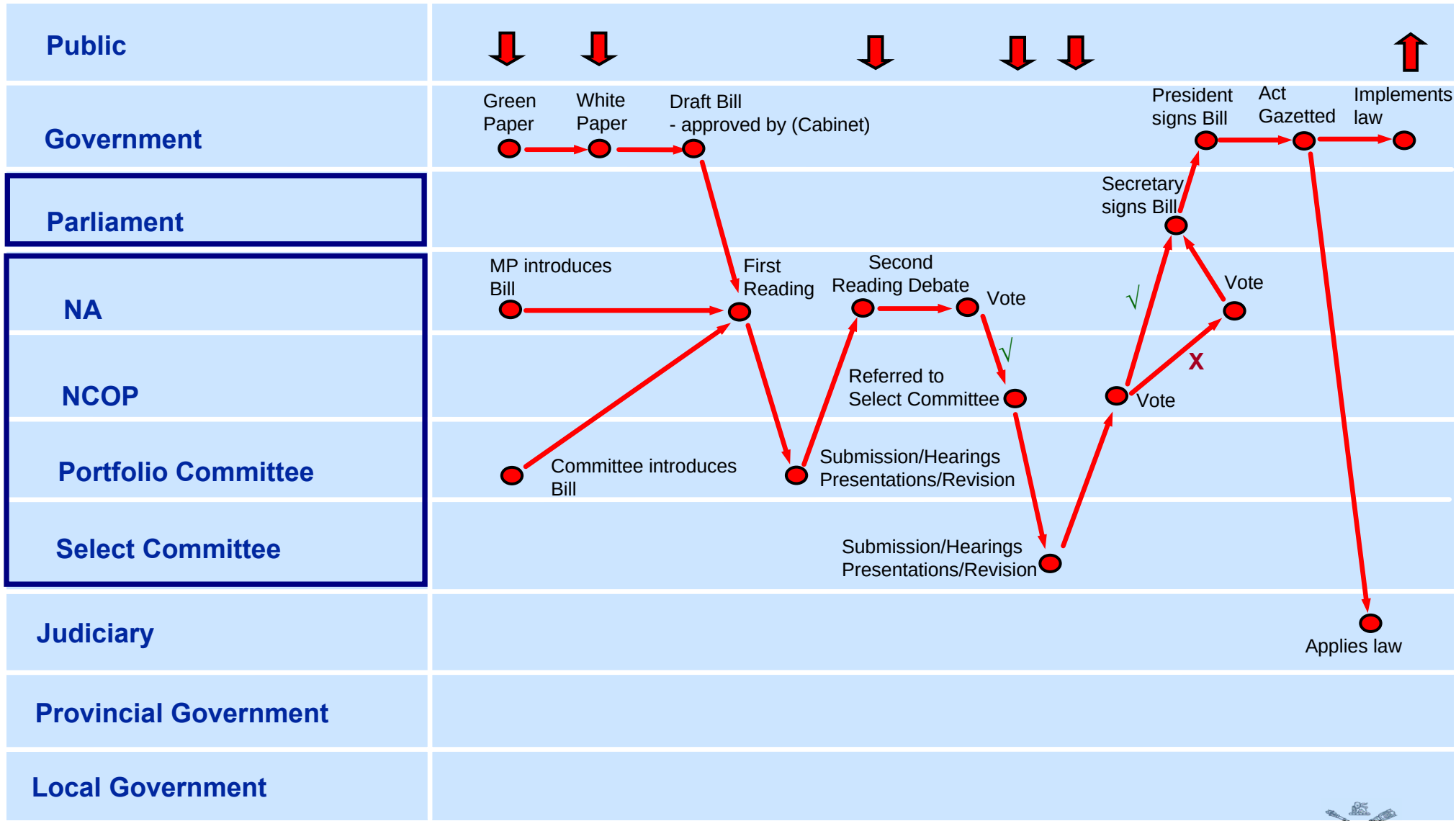
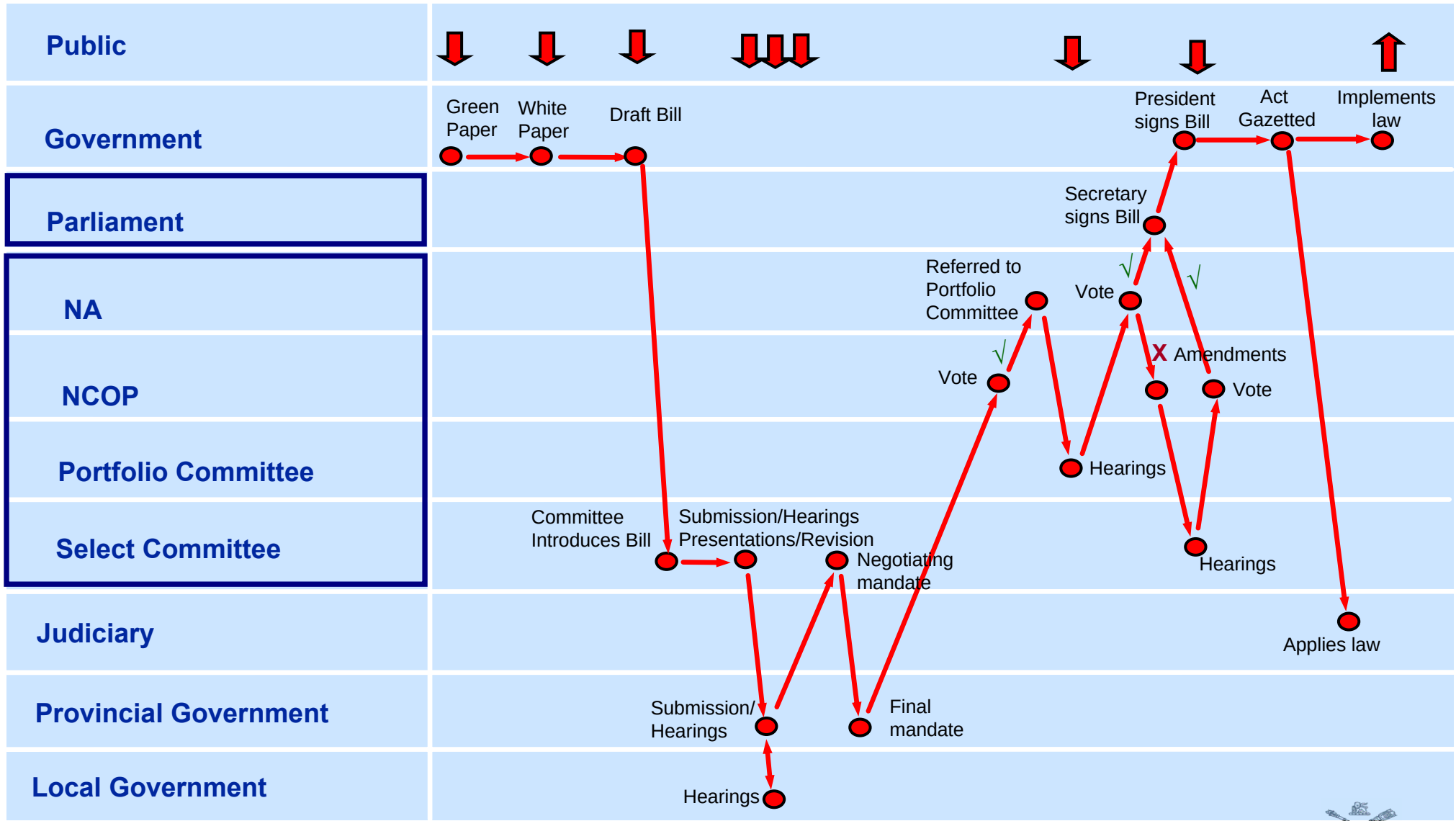
Processes that Public can participate in..Section 75 Bills



Processes that Public can participate in..Section 76 Bills



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National ICT Roleplayers.. strategic alliances and partnerships with Parliament of SA

- Government Communication Information System (GCIS) – Office of the Presidency
- Government Core Communication Network (GCCN) - SITA
- Local Government Network (LGNet) – DBSA & Government
- Batho Pele Gateway

LGNet

- **LGNet is a local government private network using the internet and satellite linkages when digital exchanges are unavailable.**
- **The objective of LGNet is to provide a one stop support service to municipalities (284) to enable them to become better functioning entities.**
- **The LGNet will:**
  - Provide ICT infrastructure to local governments
  - Provide a framework for functional monitoring of municipalities
  - Provide a centralised source of data and information
  - Allow for a focused approach to capacity building and the measuring of the impact of interventions
  - Provide for improved communication and sharing of information
  - Create a channel for training and development
  - Allow for rational planning and policy formulation
  - Improve coordination at all spheres of government

Batho Pele Gateway

- **The Batho Pele Gateway is an initiative to improve public access to government services.**
- **President Mbeki made the following announcement during the opening of Parliament in May 2004.**

  "*Within two months, we will launch the Batho Pele Gateway Portal, which will provide streamlined government services online'.*

- **Services are provided through Public Information Terminals (PIT's) at post offices and Multi-Purpose Community Centres (MPCCs), which are government one-stop service centres offering basic services and government information to residents.**
- **64 MPCCs were built by the end of 2004 realising President Mbeki's vision.**
- **The intention is to have one in each of the 284 municipal areas.**

GCCN

- **The GCCN is a wide area network infrastructure to service the whole of government consisting of routers, switches, firewalls and data lines and is provided by SITA.**

- **SITA's strategic directive regarding networks and future e-government strategies outlines and maps the integration of services on a single and manageable network infrastructure.**

- **The VPN-enabled GCCN provides:**
  - A platform for e-government
  - Exploitation of economies of scale
  - Full multimedia functionality - support for voice and video.
  - High inter-connective and secure solutions - the department can share information securely.

GCIS

- **GCIS was established in terms of Section 7 (Subsection 2 and 3) of the Public Services Act, 1994 and is located in the Office of the Presidency.**

- **GCIS's vision is to help meet the communication and information needs of government and the people, to ensure a better life for all.**

- **GCIS's mission is to provide leadership in government communication and to ensure that the public is informed of government's implementation of its mandate.**

- **GCIS' strategic objectives are to:**
  - ensure that the voice of government is heard
  - foster a more positive communication environment
  - have a clear understanding of the public information needs and government's communication needs
  - promote interactive communications between government and the public
  - set high standards for government communication

- **GCIS aims to:**
  - provide excellent media and communication services to government departments
  - make Government Information Centres (GICs) and Multi-purpose Community Centres (MPCCs) critical elements of government communication
  - assist in developing government media, communication and information policy
  - ensure efficient services to the media
  - produce information products for dissemination to citizens
  - integrate the international marketing of South Africa

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Technology

- **What can technology do?**
  - Facilitator of service delivery.
  - Bridge divide between Public and MP
  - Bridge divide between Public and Parliament
  - Bridge divide between Public and Government
  - Create a logical extension of Parliament – take Parliament to the People.
- **What can technology not do?**
  - Cannot replace the human factor (feelings, emotions, conscience)

Enabling technologies

- Virtual Parliament
- E-Knowledge Base
- Parliamentary website (NA and NCOP)
- Video conferencing
- Audio conferencing
- Call center
- Radio
- Television
- Geographic Information System (GIS)

Virtual Parliament (e-Parliament)

- **A virtual parliament would in essence be a logical extension of Parliament and effectively serve to take Parliament to the people.**

- **The wide area network (WAN) infrastructure of the following is to be utilised:**
  - Government Core Communication Network (GCCN - SITA),
  - Government Communication Information Systems (GCIS) and;
  - Local Government Network (LGNET) – spans across and connects 284 municipalities

- **A touch screen activated application (with the following functionality) is to be developed: -**
  - Member lists and contact detail
  - List of green and white papers – consolidated by subject across government departments
  - List of Bills - consolidated by subject across government departments
  - Status of Bills
  - Bills requiring Public input, (date, where, etc.)
  - Discussion threads on Bills
  - Issues of Public importance
  - Webcasts of NA and NCOP sittings and Committee meetings – view sittings and meetings live
  - Audio casts of NA and NCOP sittings and Committee meetings – hear audio of sittings and meetings in language of choice
  - Ask your MP!
  - Accept video letters – to cater for illiteracy
  - Acts (Plain language version in official languages)

- **The application will be deployed on PIT's, MPCC's, Provincial legislative offices, Government offices and local municipalities.**

e-Knowledge Base

- **An e-Knowledge Base is to provide a singular web-enabled repository of Parliament, Provincial and Local Government legislation.**

- **The following information will be represented in the form of a cascading tree structure (ie. drop down lists) : -**
  - Legislator (Parliament, Provincial Govt., District Municipality, Local Municipality)
  - Bills
  - Acts
  - By-laws

- **The e-KB will be deployed on PITS and MPCC's across the country using SITA's GCCN, GCIS and LGNET.**

- **The Public would be able to view, track and participate in the process of legislation within any of the legislative offices across the country.**

Parliamentary websites (NA and NCOP)

- **The Parliamentary website is to be re-developed to incorporate the NCOP website into a singular website for the Parliament.**
- **The website will include the following functionality: -**
  - Audio casts (for sittings in both Houses and committees)
  - Web casts (for sittings in both Houses and committees)
  - Discussion threads on issues of public interest, bills, etc.
- **Audio casts would enable the public to hear the proceedings of Houses and Committees in their language of choice.**
- **Web casts would enable the public to see the proceedings of Houses and Committees**
- **Discussion threads would be based on specific topics of interest and enable the public to state their viewpoint on various legislation and matters affecting oversight.**

Video and audio conferencing

- It is necessary for the Parliament to refurbish committee rooms to include facilities for video and audio conferencing.
- A central location in Parliament will be reserved where the press can view, and public can view and participate in committee meetings.
- Municipalities could be provided with video and audio conferencing capabilities. The Public would be able to make remote presentations and interact live during committee meetings. The rollout of this technology could start with the Provincial Offices first, followed by the A, C and B municipalities respectively.
- SITA's GCCN network would be used to link the conferencing units.

Radio

- Parliament will obtain a license through ICASA or obtain special privilege to broadcast sittings in the Houses and meetings of committees (in official languages): -
- Digital recording facilities would be catered for in every Committee room. This has already been catered for in the two Houses.
- A centralised broadcasting facility would be set up through the GCIS project.
- The public would be able to hear the proceedings of Houses and Committees.

Television

- A decoder could be customised to accept Parliamentary channels of NA and NCOP sittings and committee meetings.
- It is necessary to build camera facilities into every committee room and to refurbish the camera control room to accept digital signals.
- The custom decoders could be deployed across municipalities, government departments and even rural areas.
- The Public would be able to view the full sittings of Houses and Committees.

Call center

- **A Call center would serve to provide the public with a centralised point to obtain legislative information and to register enquiries, etc.**
- **The intention is to make use of SITA's call centre to facilitate this service.**

Geographic Information System (e-GIS)

- An e-GIS would serve to provide a consolidated database of information that is represented graphically and geographically.
- The database would contain relevant and factual information that would serve each of the portfolio and select committees eg, education and health.
- The database would enhance and facilitate the oversight process. Both Members and the Public would be able to view the information through the usage of web browsers.

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Recommendations

1. **Identify medium to long term goals for using ICT. (Develop an IT strategy)**
2. **Analyse internal ICT competencies and future goals for ICT.**
3. **Identify key projects within at least a 3 year expenditure framework. Make sure that strategy is aligned to the vision of Parliament.**
4. **Establish business collaboration and alliances with national ICT role players (where possible).**
5. **Capacitate your ICT organization (ICT structure, ICT management, policies, etc.)**
6. **Capacitate your ICT infrastructure (servers, pc's, network, etc)**
7. **Ensure that projects are managed according to scope, budget and time.**

SCIENCE WITHOUT HUMANITY

“ If science becomes all technique and technology, it quickly degenerates into man against humanity. Technologies comes from the paradigms of science. And if there’s very little understanding of the higher human purposes that the technology is striving to serve, we become victims of our own technocracy”

Mahatma Ghandi, (7 deadly sins of mankind)

"The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."

Dr Nelson R. Mandela