Chapter 7

E–Governance and Development: Service Delivery to Empower the Poor

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a quick assessment of current e-governance policies and programmes to then suggest an alternative approach to the issue of the use information and communications technology in governance process. By focusing on citizens and stakeholders needs and fostering their participation in decision-making processes, governments can be best prepared to provide them with basic services and information, especially to poor and marginalized areas excluded from the potential benefits of e-governance. Pro-poor basic delivery in turn has the potential of fostering stakeholder engagement in public policy discussions at the local level.

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s, information and communications technology (ICT) have raised to the forefront of discussions related to globalization and development (economic, sustainable, or human). Supported by the relatively fast expansion of both the Internet and (the even faster) mobile phone use (ITU, 2006), many developing countries now see the strategic use of ICTs as a new productive area to engage with the global economy while addressing, at the same time, some of their critical development challenges (RITA, 2000). The potential of ICTs as an enabler for development, and not as a goal in themselves (Accenture, Markle, & UNDP, 2001), is fostering the latter processes.

ICTS AND GOVERNANCE

The use of ICT in governance processes and by governments has been mostly centered in the
deployment of ICT applications and solutions to streamline government’s operations, reduce transactional costs, and (hopefully) increase transparency and accountability of public institutions. E-government (or online government) has indeed taken off since the end of the millennium. “Modernization” of public state institutions complemented by the delivery of specific government services has thus been the cornerstone of this approach. As a matter of fact, many developing countries have complemented existing national ICT strategies with e-government policies and/ or ad hoc deployment of solutions for specific national sectors (Heeks, 2003).

The latest trend on e-government, in response in part to the many failures of many of related initiatives (Heeks, 2003), suggests a more citizen-centric approach in which e-government priorities are much more responsive to citizens’ needs and development agendas (UNDESA, 2005). This has been complemented by a new and independent body on work that focuses on e-democracy or e-participation (Coleman, 2005) via access to information via ICT, content production, and dissemination across networks of state and non-state stakeholders, and interactive communications with government institutions and across other organizations.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A citizen centric approach has fundamental consequences of the use of ICT in governance processes. As shown in Figure 1, citizens are both “clients” and “stakeholders” in the overall process.

As “clients,” citizens are the users and consumers of government services, including broadcasting (one-way delivery) of information and knowledge resources. This is the basic role that mainstream e-government programmes assign to citizens. It is essentially a transactional role where the final aim is to deliver a service, basic or not. Key indicators here are related to the transaction process itself (cost, time, quality, easy of use, etc.). Thus, ICTs can have a direct impact in the process in terms of production, distribution, and consumption of the services and information provided.

As stakeholders, citizens play a substantially different role. The essential aspect here is the role they can play in the design and implementation of public policies and development agendas if effective participation in these processes is feasible within a given political context. The focus here is on empowering citizens. The aim is to provide stakeholders with the capacity and tools to engage with local and national governments and other players in policy or development discussions.

Figure 1. E-governance framework (Source: UNDP)
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