Chapter 1
E-Government and Social Inclusion: Concepts

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ABSTRACT

E-Government is a relatively new phenomenon in much of the world, having been put in place in the 2000s. Thus, it is not a settled concept but an evolving one. Social Inclusion, although still a very contested concept, has been around for considerable time, but even that needs to be updated to suit the digital world in which it is being applied in this book. The authors in the first section of this book deal with these and associated concepts, and this chapter provides an overview of selected ideas as a primer for the chapters that follow.

INTRODUCTION

E-Government is a relatively new phenomenon in much of the world, having been put in place only as late as the 2000s. Thus it is not a settled concept but an evolving one. Social Inclusion, although still a very much contested concept, has been around for considerable time but even that needs to be updated to suit the digital world in which it is being applied in this book. Throughout this section, various authors have attempted to interrogate the many propositions made on these concepts and offer their own formulations or endorse some old ones.

Likewise, many authors have provided extensive coverage and useful critiques of actual E-Government practices in several parts of the world with regard to e-government and social inclusion.

This chapter summarises some of the key concepts found throughout this book. It is not an exhaustive list but a selective one. Each chapter has a valuable contribution to the understanding of the theme of this book and the reader is encouraged to go through them all.

CONCEPTS

E-Government, the short form of Electronic Government, has been defined in various ways but as Warf points out they “all essentially point to the
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use of information technologies (typically the internet) to facilitate the delivery of government information and services, restructure administrative procedures, and enhance citizen participation.”

Archmann and Guifart in their chapter refer to the broader concept of e-governance and invoke a definition in a UNESCO Working Paper on eGovernance as “the public sector’s use of the most innovative information and communication technologies, like the Internet, to deliver to all citizens improved services, reliable information and greater knowledge in order to facilitate access to the governing process and encourage deeper citizen participation (Castro Sardi, Mlikota, 2002, p.4).

In virtually all iterations of the e-government concept, the use of technology to provide government services and the engagement of citizens figure prominently. However, many authors express concerns and even skepticism that the stated objectives of e-government are often unmet because of the way the concept is operationalized and because of inadequacies in execution.

Instead of providing a uniformly beneficial outcome to all citizens as declared or implied, the e-government system has in reality created, in many cases, social exclusions and digital-divides.

Social Inclusion and Exclusion

In their chapter on “Toward digital inclusion: Digital divides and new media literacies” Anzera and Comunello discuss extensively the concepts of social inclusion and social exclusion and address digital divides created by such inclusions and exclusions. Since the time of Myrdal (1963), social inclusion and exclusion have become part of the sociological narratives around the world. As the authors point out these concepts “have remarkably evolved over time and refer now to the most important spheres of social life, from the macro-economic to the micro-relation levels.” They highlight the differences between the individual level social exclusion or inclusion which is perceived as failure of the subject and the social system level exclusion or inclusion perceived as a problem faced by state institutions.

Today, they stress, social inclusion presents itself as a multidimensional concept that affects different spheres of individual sociality. They refer to research studies that divide social inclusion into five categories -- personal, social, cultural, political and economic inclusion -- that can provide emotional and material resources. They argue that “ICT constitutes an essential inclusion tool, for at least three reasons: it provides the above mentioned resources; it allows people, who are potentially at risk of exclusion, to make up for the shortage in the categories above; it affects both the macro-social and the individual sphere.”

Some of the leading commentators on the networked society have long been warning of the potential for social exclusion even as governments roll out new technologies. Anzera and Comunello refer to Castells (2001) who posited that the inability to exploit these technologies condemns the individual to a process of progressive social exclusion. Likewise, Van Dijk (2005) warned that those excluded from the digital world, and thus excluded from the participatory perspective, are destined to become second- or third-class workers, students, or consumers.

Digital Divide

Anzera and Comunello in their essay discuss digital divide extensively. [Their chapter] Acknowledging it is not easy to define digital divide as the idea has gone through various iterations over the years, they suggest that “digital divide today is a multifaceted concept, embracing a number of dimensions: not only technology access, but also literacy, contents and services are other important elements to be considered.” They further argue that for a better understanding of this topic, “we need to abandon any techno-centric approach and any dichotomous vision that can be found in traditional digital divide literature. We would therefore need a more analytical definition.” They add that