Public Administration and Information and Communication Technologies: The Case of the Greater Bangalore Municipal Corporation

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in governmental reform processes in development through a case study of the Greater Bangalore Municipal Corporation. The study explores the increasing use of ICTs for property taxation and its impact on municipal government reform processes within a developing world context. Attracted by the ‘hype and hope’ of such technologies and related platforms, development actors across the world have adopted computer-based systems and related ICTs for use in government as a means reforming the inefficiencies in public service provision. Much has been written about e-governance within a growing stream of literature on ICT for development, generating countervailing perspectives where optimistic, technocratic approaches are countered by far more sceptical standpoints on technological innovation. This paper will examine not only the interplay of local contingencies and external influences acting upon the project’s implementation but also aim to offer an insight into disjunctions in these relationships which inhibit the effective exploitation of ICTs in the given context. The research on which this paper is based focus on an empirical case study surrounding the implementation and use of an electronic property tax collection system in Bangalore, India between 1998 and 2008. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of the ‘Ecology of Games’ and ‘Design-Actuality Gaps’ which recognise the importance of a multitude of diverse motives and individualistic behaviour as key factors influencing organisational reform and institutional change, the article contributes not just to an understanding of the role of ICTs in administrative reform in development, but towards that emerging body of research which is critical of managerial rationalism for an organization as a whole, and sensitive to an ecology of actors and their various motivations within the organisation.

Keywords: Ecology of Games, e-Government, Empirical Case Study, Information and Communication Technologies, Public Sector Reform

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INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the last two decades, globalisation and information technology have been rapidly dismantling traditional barriers to trade, travel and communication, fuelling great promise for progress towards greater global equity and prosperity. Attracted by the ‘hype and hope’ of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), development actors across the world have adopted computer-based systems for use in government as a means reforming the inefficiencies in public service provision. Much as been written about e-governance within a growing stream of literature on ICT for development, generating countervailing perspectives where optimistic, technocratic approaches are countered by far more sceptical standpoints on technological innovation.

However, in trying to analyse both their potential and real value, there has been a tendency for scholars to see e-governance applications as isolated technical artefacts, analysed solely as a collection of hardware and software. Far less work is based on empirical field research, and models put forward by scholars and practitioners alike often neglect the actual attitudes, choices and behaviour of the wide array of actors involved in the implementation and use of new technology in real organisations as well as the way in which the application shapes and is shaped by existing social, organisational and environmental contexts.

Introducing e-government technologies into public bodies is a tricky game to play as computerisation alters the work-load, work profile, and content of the average public sector employee; impacting accountability, reducing the opportunities for exercising discretion, making performance more visible, and flattening the hierarchy often forcing the need for retraining and retooling and sometimes creating redundancy (Bhatnagar, 2004). Many projects tend to face internal resistance from staff – particularly from the middle to lower levels of the civil service – with moves to reengineer processes and effect back-end computerisation having a profound effect on the way civil servants perform their duties and perceive their jobs. Very often, it is the fear of the unknown that drives this resistance, and in corrupt service delivery departments there may be pressure to slow down or delay the introduction of technology-led reforms due to the impending loss of additional income.

This article seeks to unravel the social dynamics shaping e-government projects used to reform public sector institutions, and the degree to which project failure (ie. the general inability of the project design to meet stated goals and resolve both predicted and emerging problems) is symptomatic of a broader, much more complex set of interrelated inequalities, unresolved problems and lopsided power-relationships both within the adopting organisation and in the surrounding environmental context. The article examines in detail the conception and design of the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) property tax system: the structure and operations of the paper-based system, attempts to change its design, its implementation through the introduction of digital technology and new policy measures, and its subsequent outcome through an examination of interview data and property tax revenue figures.

UNDERSTANDING ACTOR BEHAVIOUR

The central issue that needs to be understood whilst studying project outcome through an analysis of actor interactions is thus: Why do people do what they do? One approach to understanding behaviour is to look at the rationality of individual actors, rather than the system as a whole. This is largely because political actors are driven by a combination of organisational and institutional roles and duties and calculated self-interest, with political interaction being organised around the construction and interpretation of meaning as well as the making of choices. It thus can be extremely difficult to transplant new technologies and ways of working into organisations (March & Olsen, 1989).

Psychologists contend that human motivation must be understood as the product of the interaction between events and things in
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