ABSTRACT

This chapter explores preconditions for the successful development of e-government in Vietnam, particularly the readiness of the population to access and use ICTs. It reports the results of in-depth interviews in 2006 with 38 citizens in various regions of the country, which focused on patterns of non-use and use of ICTs and particularly the Internet. The chapter explores obstacles to effective use of Internet based services amongst both ICT nonusers and users, and implications are drawn for the development and uptake of e-government services. In the light of the interview data and relevant literature, suggestions are offered as to how the Government of Vietnam might better use ICTs to improve communication between citizens and government, with a view to building a more informed and empowered society.
INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

Vietnam is transforming into a networked society where more people are becoming connected, and more advanced applications, such as e-government, are becoming available. From 2000, the Government of Vietnam determined that, with Vietnam integrating more comprehensively into the global economy, the building of an effective e-government would help to facilitate its capacity to manage resources, implement sound policies and better satisfy the needs of citizens (Nguyen, 2001).

Statistical data suggested that in May 2007 there were about 16 million Internet users, and 70 million others were living and working without the use of computers in Vietnam (Vietnam Internet Center, 2007a). There was no data about who are users and nonusers of computers and the Internet, why people use the Internet, to what extent they use e-government services, or what changes, benefits and difficulties people were experiencing when using such services. Nor was there data about non-ICT users and how they interacted with government-related services, how and whether their needs could be better served through e-government services, and what barriers needed to be overcome to enable current nonusers to enjoy the benefits of e-government.

The chapter concerns preconditions for the successful development of e-government in Vietnam, and in particular the readiness of the population to access and use networked ICTs, the prime communication medium of e-government. The chapter reports the results of in-depth interviews conducted in 2006 with 38 citizens in various regions of the country. Its primary purpose is to examine the readiness of citizens, at the time of the study, to become effective users of e-government services in terms of their access to, and capacity to use, ICTs. Its subsidiary purpose, in the light of these user-centric considerations, is to offer some thoughts on how government in Vietnam might position itself better to provide effective e-government services. In essence the chapter attempts to shed light on the following questions: How ready is the population to make use of e-government services if these were provided? How ready is government to provide a full range of e-government services to this population?

The assumption was made in this study that the aim of e-government is to improve the responsiveness of government to the needs of people, or in other words (to borrow from Abraham Lincoln) to contribute to the reality of government of, by and for the Vietnamese people, and that e-government can play a role in this by improving communication between government and people (Nguyen, 2001). In 2007 only 18.8 percent of Vietnam’s more than 85 million people were Internet users (Vietnam Internet Center, 2007a). If e-government service delivery is to be effective, clearly a much greater proportion of the population needs to become Internet users. This chapter looks at case studies of users and nonusers in order to frame initial suggestions about how barriers to wider Internet use can be overcome, and how services to current and future users could be made more effective.

THE CONCEPT OF E-GOVERNMENT AND FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ITS SUCCESS

The term “electronic government” or “e-government” appeared about a decade ago and there is no commonly accepted definition (Bhatnagar, 2004). Oliver and Sanders saw e-government as “the migration of government information and services to an on-line delivery mode” (Oliver & Sanders, 2004, p. viii). As with the concept of “e-commerce”, the scope of e-government covers the interaction between government and citizens (G2C), government and business enterprises (G2B), and inter-agency dealing (G2G).

In this chapter the authors apply the broad definition of e-government provided by Marche and McNiven:
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