Chapter 3

E-Government for Transparency in Mexico: Advances and Limits in Promoting Open Government and Citizen Engagement

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, Mexico’s developments regarding the recognition and protection of the right to access the government’s information has been considerable. The use of internet has been a key factor to make information available and to make citizen-government interactions easier. However, institutional, structural and behavioral factors continue to be obstacles to the effective realization of the right to information. The chapter provides a brief background to the development of e-government at the federal level and of the transparency legislation. The use of IT in the implementation of the LFTAIPG is explained and main strengths and weaknesses are identified. The main structural, institutional, and cultural limits to the use of ICTs for making the right to information effective are presented. Finally, some concluding remarks are offered in relation to the interaction between internet technologies and institutional behaviors that can thwart the efficacy of e-government as means to foster citizen engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government; that whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights.

Thomas Jefferson

Information is a critical element to be able to get involved in the political debate and have an impact on the decision-making process and their implementation (Aguilar, 2001). A representative democracy requires information so that institutional checks and balances can operate properly and voters can impose a sanction on those public servants who do not perform adequately; accountability requires that public officials explain and justify their actions, and that citizens enjoy the right to debate and make judgments on the information and arguments presented to them (Stewart, 1984). While this is not enough to ensure effective accountability, the right to information is an essential ingredient of a well functioning democracy.

In this respect, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been seen not only as tools to improve the efficiency and quality of public services, but also as way to increase the confidence of the people in public institutions (West, 2009). Technological tools such as the Internet have great potential as a means for extending the public sphere and, therefore, generating greater citizen involvement in public affairs. Such potential can be appreciated in the form of easier access to public information. However, such positive effects are not achieved without problems: while it is true that ambitious projects to make government more transparent are now possible, there are circumstances or factors that technology cannot by itself surmount. This is particularly the case when we consider the problems of democratic governance and the deep social gaps that poor and developing nations are facing. Paradoxically, in such countries, the use of e-government is at the same time a pressing matter but also a strategy with limited impacts within the wider context in which it is applied.

This chapter presents the Mexican experience of access to public information, identifying the progress made and the most important challenges that have been detected in the use of ICT. The aim is to show the potential of e-government as a tool to increase government transparency and access of the public to information, but also the lessons learned regarding the social, institutional and cultural factors that limit or constrain the effectiveness of ICTs in increasing citizen engagement. In this sense, e-government represents an opportunity to foster a more informed and active citizenry but cannot be seen as a “silver-bullet”. The multiple factors affecting the exercise of the people’s rights beyond the use of technologies must be considered and addressed if the right of access to public information is to be strengthened.

The rise of Vicente Fox to the presidency of Mexico in the year 2000 marked the culmination of a gradual democratization process of the political regime, dominated by a single party for 70 years. At that point, Mexico experienced an unprecedented climate of political openness in which the new administration promoted major reforms inspired by the idea of good governance. In 2001, the government published a presidential agenda with six main lines of action, including promoting honest and transparent government, and digital government. As regards honest and transparent government, the most important gain was unanimous congressional passage of the Federal Law on Transparency and Access to Public Governmental Information (LFTAIPG) in April 2002. The Law guarantees the right every person to access to public information in position or produced by the federal government aiming to strengthen democratic culture and practices in Mexico. The right of access to