Chapter 15
Explaining the Underdevelopment of Rural E–Government: The Case of Romania

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ABSTRACT
The advent of information and communications technology led the public administration of many countries to step into a new era. During the last decade, an increasing number of researchers analysed the e-government performance of national governments, regions, and large cities. However, far less attention has been paid to villages and rural areas, probably because their e-government was not a prioritised target for national policies and, consequently, was not developing at the same pace. In fact, rural e-government is nothing but a part of e-government and should be included in e-government policies. However, from a practical point of view, rural e-government raises specific issues, especially in those society where the divide between cities and villages still clearly exists. E-government could significantly improve rural services, support economic development, and encourage citizen engagement. The goal of this research is to assess the rural e-government level in Romania by evaluating five core components: 1) security and personal data protection; 2) usability; 3) content; 4) type of services; and 5) digital democracy. The low scores obtained by the only two measurable components—usability and content—allow one to conclude that Romanian rural e-government is in its early stages. Based on some unexpected collateral conclusions, the authors offer suggestions for future researches and policy makers.

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INTRODUCTION

The advent of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) invited the public administration of many countries to step into a new era. A significant number of authors thought, in the 90s, that when these technologies developed further, governments and individuals will greatly benefit. Obviously, the ICTs were the way towards governmental services that are less costly, faster, personalized and accessible at any time from any location. The transformations that later took place confirmed this expectations, but only in some aspects. In fact, the classic tension between innovation and conservation intervened and slowed down the adoption of the new technologies (Lanzara, 2009).

It is worth remembering that ICTs emerged into a favourable environment. In the 90s there was a growing discontent with the New Public Management (NPM)—the administrative theory that was supposed to make governments “work better and cost less” (Denhardt, 2008). Many scholars have been attracted by the many ICTs advantages and especially because of its initial ideological neutrality. On their part, the political actors have been also quick to recognise the technology itself as a political object (Barr, 2001). In this context, a new administrative paradigm has been slowly crafted around ICTs and, a few years ago, lead authors in the e-governance field felt entitled to proclaim the death of NPM (Dunleay et al, 2006). The next step in this evolution seems to be the transition from e-government to digital governance - a higher level of e-administration designed to “provide multi-channel two-way service delivery to all citizens” (Milakovich, 2012).

While the change of administrative paradigm is remarkable, it is also important to note that large parts of global population have a rather limited access to e-technologies. This new phenomenon, coined as “digital divide”, has been observed through comparisons between countries, but also within countries (ITU, 2011).

During the last decade, an impressive number of researches documented and analysed the e-government performance of national governments, regions and large cities. The researches indicated that a number of factors are influencing the use of ICTs. For instance, the presence of Internet connections at home is influenced by income, education, age, race and ethnicity (Mossberger, 2003). It appears that men tend to use the Internet much more than women, albeit the gender is not reflected into an Internet access divide (Fallows, 2005). However, when comparing with the literature dedicated to cities, especially the large ones, the researches on rural e-government are only at the beginning.

OVERVIEW OF RURAL E-GOVERNMENT

The rural e-government can be defined as the digital interaction between government and the citizens living in rural areas, the businesses, and other governmental agencies operating in the same area. In fact, rural e-government is nothing but a part of e-government and should be always considered as included in any definition of e-government. However, from a practical point of view, rural e-government raises specific issues, especially in those society where the divide between cities and villages is still in place.

The literature is rather scarce when it comes to rural e-government. Several reasons may be behind this situation. Firstly, the rural e-government could look as a less appealing research theme when compared to national, urban or large cities e-government. Secondly, a large majority of the global rural population lives in poor countries where even basic Internet access is problematic. Thirdly, the population of well-developed countries living in rural areas declined other the years, with the differences between rural and urban being less noticeable. And finally, there is a surprising lack of e-government official data on rural areas.