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E-GOVERNMENT: PROVIDING VALUE TO CITIZENS

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations or its Member States.

Introduction

The challenges in an information age society are more daunting than anything governments had to face in the past. Governments in their typical bureaucratic mode and political nature adapt very slowly to changes, thus meeting the needs of an Internet savvy society can become problematic.

E-government, democracy, and e-participation are the foundation of e-democracy. Today, we see citizen discussions and activism affecting the politics and governance of most developed countries. With the easy access of information and knowledge in the information age, the notion of e-citizen is taking root. The question therefore that most governments will have to answer is with this potential new savvy e-citizen coming of age is what will be value added of e-government to the daily lives of the people.

Governments will play a critical role in the development of the online world. They need to incorporate and adapt strategies and technologies that will expand participatory democracy. Enhancing the participation of citizens is vital to ensuring the views and inputs of the people are taken into account and have an effect on the policies of governments.

The challenge for governments is how to move on from focusing on service delivery to providing a people-centre tools and applications. This means placing a priority not just on how the delivery services to citizens, but using e-government to enrich the lives of its citizens. E-Government should also be employed to improve the way public servants use public resources to support the society.

With the advent of the role of the e-citizen, governments will have to change their current ways of doing business in order to meet the needs of this new empowered constituent.

United Nations' Proposed Guidelines for E-Government

As noted in the United Nations "World Public Sector Report 2003: E-Government at the Crossroads, "public value refers to the value created by government through provision of services, the passing of laws and regulations and other actions". "Only the public can determine what is truly of value to society. In a representative democracy, value is determined by people's preferences, expressed through a variety of means and refracted through the decisions of elected politician. People's preferences are formed socially; in the family, among friend and in public debate. Citizen's engagement in public affairs is desirable precisely because it challenges and changes underlying preferences".

The World Public Sector Report has outlined 15 guiding principles for successful e-government:

1. Priority development needs that require government involvement. E-government applications are best embedded in areas that are perceived as closely related to the priority development needs of the society. This brings broad support and makes it easier to overcome inherent difficulties and sustain attention, commitment and funding.
2. Efficiency and effectiveness as key success criteria of government involvement. It is best if the role that the government plays in such areas is judged partly or predominantly by factors that ICT can bring. The link between ICT applications, optimization of government operations and achievement of important social development goals is a very convincing argument for continued development of e-government.
3. Availability of funding. Even initial pilot e-government operations should start with a good understanding of costs involved and assured funding that follows careful analysis of opportunity cost. Whenever advisable and feasible, funding should be treated as a business investment and carry expectation of reforms.
4. Skills and culture of the civil service. Civil servants must be able (though ICT, change and project management and partnership building skills) and willing to support e-government or at a minimum, must be eager to learn and change. The culture prevailing in the civil service determines the assessment of expected loss that e-government applications can bring to individual civil servants and, eo ipso, the eventual strength and effectiveness of the anti-change lobby.
5. Coordination. Needed “backroom” coordination and effort – within and between government agencies – must be ironed out before any e-government application goes on line to avoid duplication, assure inter-operability and meet the expectations of users.
6. Legal framework. E-government introduces unique legal requirements and these should be realized and faced early on.
7. ICT infrastructure. Infrastructure needs should be assessed against the background of requirements and desired results of planned e-government development. Anything short of this limits both. Anything that goes beyond this carries the danger that ICT infrastructure will be converted into expensive and idle office equipment.
8. Political leadership and long-term political commitment. The Chief Executive Office of the public sector must be committed to e-government development, lead and build broad support for it, and be eager to learn. This generates the

all-important signals that the civil service needs to receive from its top leadership.

9. Public engagement. The public should have a personal stake in e-government development. This should be reinforced by actively, genuinely and continuously soliciting people to participate in the development of e-government application so that these are custom-crafted to the way people live and work.
10. Plans for development of human capital and technical infrastructure. There should be a vision and plans for closing existing divides in skill and access. Otherwise, neither the public administration nor the society can hope to become ICT literate and capable – an important ingredient for e-government success.
11. Partnerships. Early on, the government should see business firms and civil society organizations (CSOs) as its partners in securing financial resources, skills improvement, better access and adequate capacity to service the ICT network. Partnerships should never be forged at the cost of transparency, accountability or economic soundness of investment.
12. Monitoring and evaluation. Setting clear responsibilities and realistic benchmarks for e-government development, as well as for their transparent monitoring, is an important ingredient for eventual success and builds up the overall transparency and accountability framework in the public sector.
13. Perception of added value. Any design of e-government development must incorporate a calculation of the added value that the application intends to bring to individual users. It is best if this calculation proves to be congruent with that of the users.
14. Access and skills. It should be made easy in terms of time, cost and effort for the potential users of e-government to actually employ it. Imaginative solutions for increasing the level of this “ease of use” must be part of any e-government development plan. They should include, but also transcend, individual access and skills.
15. Privacy and security. Security and privacy concerns – culturally defined as they are – must be addressed early on, openly and with demonstrated professional aptitude. The public is bound to expect a breakdown in this area and any news (even informal) of one is bound to become a huge setback with long-lasting consequences.

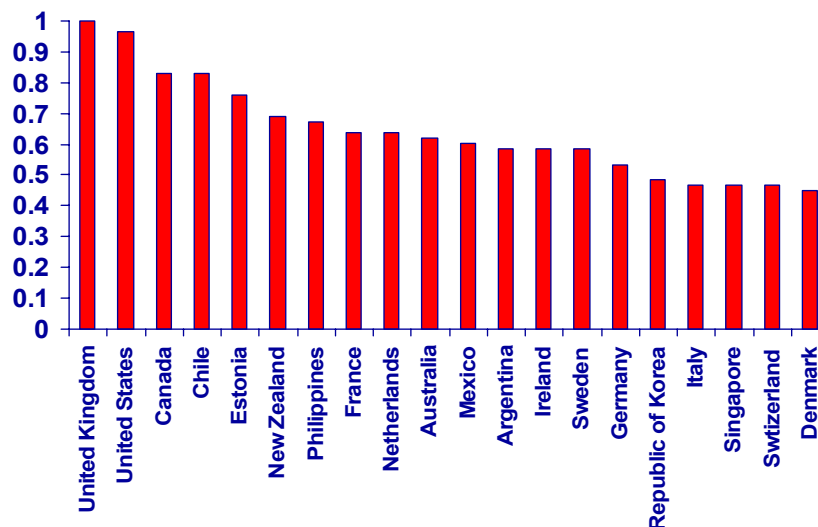
Against this background, for a State to effectively serve its citizens, it must seek out the participation of its citizens in making new laws, policies and in the allocation of financial resources. States must provide the means for its citizens to provide some feedback on all issues that concerned them and more importantly, should listen and incorporate their views.

In the United Nations Millennium Declaration, the Member States have pledged:

- To work “for more inclusive political process, allowing genuine participation by all citizens”;
- To ensure the right of the public to have access to information;
- They expressed their conviction that “democratic and participatory governance based on the will of the people best assures these rights”;
- In eliminating poverty and securing the right of development, the said “success in meeting these objectives depends, inter alia, on good governance within each country;

Below is the list of the top twenty countries that have provided their citizens with quality e-government solutions:

E-PARTICIPATION INDEX WILLINGNESS OF GOVERNMENTS TO ENGAGE CITIZENS IN DIALOGUE



Putting the Citizen First

E-government can transform governments by making them more accessible to its citizens. In addition, through e-government, governments can become more accountable, effective and transparent. A properly implemented e-government strategy will enhance and cement the bond between government and citizens. The bond will enable government to have confidence that their policies have the best interest of its citizens and furthermore these policies had been influenced by their inputs.

Government should encourage its citizen to increase their use of online services to do their business, including interactions with the public service, online (through the Internet, through PCs, phone, etc). The net result should be better value for money is delivered to the citizen through the increased efficiencies enabled through e-Government.

Building from consultation with its e-citizens, governments should support means that increase the participation among citizens on issues concerning them. The participation of the e-citizens will have real value only if all sections of civil society are able to participate equally.

There are a number of issues that determine the bond between government and its citizens:

- Simplifying delivery of services to the people
- Provide greater access to information online
- Increasing the accountability of government to its citizens by making it more transparent
- Eliminating layers of government management
- Providing resources where society can benefit to a greater extent
- Simplifying government's business processes and reducing bureaucracy
- Reducing corruption that exist in many governments
- Promoting people-centre dialogue that allows the public to interact with policy and decision makers.
- The extend that decision makers listen to its e-citizens

The bond between government and its citizens is greater at the local level than at the national one. The use of e-government at the local level will enable a broad cross-section of e-citizens to see the results of their participation. As a result, people will continue to enhance their participation once they see that views have an impact on government.

As noted, the UN World Public Sector Report of 2003, "participation must be well informed and skilled. Education, including literacy, general knowledge and civic knowledge must be present in this process. If education and those skills are not present, they must be supplied in an easy-to-use, affordable way. Literacy today also means ICT literacy and skills. Participation means networking skills; skills to organize and sustain domains of shared interest and action; debating and negotiating skills, etc."

If the governments cannot provide the necessary skills and knowledge to the vast majority of its citizens then there is a very real possibility that cross-section of society will be disenfranchised and thus will not be able to voice their views and inputs. This could create an elitist class that has its views incorporate into government policies, while others are left behind.

Case Study of Tampere, Finland

As noted in the UN World Public Sector Report 2003, the objective of the eTampere programme is to develop a sustainable knowledge society that supports active citizenship and innovative business. Its three mutually supportive dimensions are: strengthening the expertise base of research and education, generating new business connected to the information society; and developing the digital services of the local government and making them accessible to the entire population

Programmes developed by the City of Tampere (Finland) to support e-government:

- On-line discussion platforms for topical issues
- System for on-line consultation about citizens' development priorities
- On-line facility for commenting on administration plans and their funding
- Q&A e-booths that assure administration's response in matter of days
- On-line open to all facilities for content provision by citizens and group communication
- Intensive ICT skills training program for all

There are other public sector institutions that have embraced e-government and have increased efficiency, transparency and accountability. The Republic of Korea's Open System is one example, where the system allows the postings of all the procedures of cases undergoing administrative processing.

In Singapore's eCitizen portal provides the public with accessible and integrated customer-centric e-services, which enables the public to carry out complete transactions with the government without dealing with several agencies separately.

The portal Canada Site is the primary Internet access point to comprehensive and up-to-date online information about the Government of Canada's programmes and services.

Barriers to E-Government

The barriers to e-government continue to be the perception that it is difficult for users to find the information that they require in a timely and efficient manner. In countries with low Internet connectivity prefer a human contact when they deal with the government.

There are a number of potential barriers that can reduce the effectiveness of e-government to civil society such as:

- Leadership and political commitment
- Infrastructure
- Access to the Internet
- Trust
- Financial Resources

Leadership and political commitment

Commitment from top is critical to any implementation of e-government strategies and application. That commitment must also involve the genuine outreach to the citizens. Most e-government applications fail when decision makers do not fully understand the importance of the project and thus do not place the full weight and power behind it. Most civil servants will not buy-in to any project unless there is full commitment from the senior management.

Infrastructure

In the developed world, when we talk about infrastructure, we are speaking about the quality of the e-government portal, its ease of use and the ability to navigate through it. One school of thought is that all government portals should have the same feel, no matter what agency you are accessing; the portal looks and feels the same. This clearly is more effective in smaller countries and the larger ones.

In the developing world, the infrastructure that we are speaking about is the actual infrastructure, such as connectivity, bandwidth, networks, portals, data bases, etc. The limitation of the above reduces the potential benefits of e-government in most developing countries. If one cannot access the information online, then even if a country has the best of all possible system, it is of little use to its citizens.

Access to the Internet

We are not talking infrastructure in this section, but rather the skills and time variables. This is where the “five-minute activist” comes into play. Citizens do not have enough time to make meaningful contributions and thus quickly provide some feedback. The “elitist” citizen is also a potential barrier. This is a person who has a great deal of time on his/her hands and spends an inordinate of time on the Internet answering surveys, and providing feedback. Therefore, the blue-collar worker, who doesn’t have the luxury of time, is unable to benefit from the e-government applications, especially in terms of affecting policies.

Trust

This is probably the most important aspect of e-government. Without trust, citizens will not go into portals, will not answer questionnaires, and thus not participate in e-government. If one doesn’t believe that his/her view points are being seriously considered or that the government is just pay lip service to them, then their future participation will be lost for a very long time. As a result, government will have to make tremendous investment to regain that trust.

Financial Resources

Any project that is not fully funded is doomed to fail and e-government projects are no different. In fact, it is even more important to have the funding secured prior to beginning the work, because the failure will be felt by a large cross-section of society.

The adage of “think big, start small and scale fast” is applicable in the case of most e-government applications. Small e-government applications have a greater chance of succeeding and thus should be encouraged.

Conclusion

Participation, equal access, and transparency are the foundation of an effective e-government programme. Although ICT will be the driving engine of e-government, the e-citizen will be conductor. In the near future, they will determine how resources are spent and allocated within most governments.

ICT will provide governments with the possibility of becoming more responsible to the citizens, thus making e-democracy and e-participation a reality. As technology becomes more efficient and feasible, governments will have no choice but to enact laws and policies that enable the e-citizen to fully participate in the democratic process. We have already seen how the Internet has affected a number of political situations.

There is still however, a digital divide that must be addressed. The gap between the haves and have-nots is unfortunately increasing. Developing countries are still very far away from reaping the benefits of e-government. But as the cost of ICTs decreases and the political will of decision makers increases, there is an opportunity for the digital divide to be reduced.

As the e-citizen becomes more empowered, politicians will be more responsive and accountable to the needs and thus a fundamental change will take place. Politicians will be able to have greater knowledge of their constituents and will be able to enact laws that are influenced by citizens. The political aspect of e-government will replace the art of backroom lobbying and will take the power away from well endowed lobbyist to the hands of the ordinary citizens.