Chapter 55
Enabling Democratic Local Governance through Rural E–Municipalities in Kyrgyzstan

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case study on rural e-municipalities in Kyrgyzstan as an enabling tool for facilitating and supporting democratic local governance. The authors examine the case based on their action research and discuss key findings in terms of challenges of implementing and sustaining ICT-enabled local governance observed throughout the life cycle of the real life project. The case presentation is guided by the conceptual framework built on an extensive literature review. Key findings and lessons drawn from this case study can guide policy makers and practitioners in other developing countries in designing and implementing similar initiatives with careful consideration of national development context, enabling political, administrative, and legal environment, governance structure and decentralization policies, institutional framework, and strength of rural municipalities and local communities. This chapter's possible contribution to research includes improving understanding of the implementation and sustainability issues of rural e-municipality as one of the critical e-governance initiatives at the grassroots level.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of good governance practices for achieving development goals, alleviating poverty and injustice has been recognized by academics, practitioners and development agencies. In particular political, administrative and fiscal decentralization became one of the main governance reforms in developing and transition economies. Post-communist transition countries are embracing decentralization as a natural step in the shift to market economies and democracy (UNDP, 2002). The need for decentralization and delegation of power from central to local authorities has become one of the priorities in changing the state in most of these countries to make it more democratic and efficient in delivering public services and promoting economic and social development (UNDP, 2008).

Democratic local governance enabled by the decentralization process provides new opportunities to local governance institutions for serving

their citizens and producing local economic and social development benefits (Gerster, 2004). Democratic local governance offers "a chance for achieving more efficiency, transparency and responsiveness to public needs and can contribute towards fostering democracy" (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2008). At the same time, technological changes facilitate citizens participation in public policy- and decision making and also public service delivery at the lower levels of government (Bardhan, 2002; Local Government New Zealand, 2003).

The aim of the chapter is to present a case study on rural e-municipalities in Kyrgyzstan and to discuss key findings in terms of challenges of implementing and sustaining ICT-enabled local governance and critical lessons based on the evidence and observations from real life experience. The context for the discussions is provided by the UNDP-supported rural e-municipality initiative in Kyrgyzstan called "Electronic Ayil-Okmotu" (e-Ayil). Kyrgyz Republic, one of the post-Soviet countries with the legacy of top-down, command and control system, has made a progress toward decentralization in a relatively short time (Boase, 2009). Democratic local governance and decentralization reforms are being priority concerns of the Kyrgyz Government since political, economic and governance reforms started in 1991 (Gerster, 2004) (UNDESA, 2004). In support to these reforms, government and local communities have been implementing a range of programs and initiatives with the assistance of development agencies. The e-Ayil initiative was recognized by Kyrgyz Government and international organizations as one of the successful development intervention at grassroots level. Key findings and lessons drawn from this case can be useful to policy makers and practitioners in other developing countries while implementing similar initiatives. The chapter's contribution to research includes improving understanding of the implementation and sustainability issues of rural e-municipality as one of the critical e-governance initiatives at local level.

The rest of the chapter is organized as follows. The next section reviews the literature as a background to understanding important concepts relevant to the research. The two sections that follow present a conceptual framework build on literature review and explain our research methodology. Then, we present a case on the rural e-municipality in Kyrgyzstan guided by the underlying conceptual framework. Following the key findings, we discuss lessons learned from this case study. Finally, Conclusion Section contains concluding remarks and suggestions for future work.

Literature Review

This section reviews the literature and introduces important concepts required in the rest of the chapter. It starts with a brief introduction of the development concept, followed by the critical role of good governance in pursuing development. Next, we present challenges of decentralization reforms and highlight the importance of democratic local governance enabled by such reforms in the rural context. Finally, we review opportunities provided by Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and e-governance initiatives for rural development in developing countries.

DEVELOPMENT

The concept of development has been considered by researchers, practitioners and development institutions from various perspectives. For example, modernization approach highly emphasized an economic growth perspective defining development as an evolutionary process of countries modernization (Uddin & Joya, 2007; Turner & Hulme, 1997). The liberal reformulations defined development as a "progress towards a complex of welfare goals such as the elimination of poverty, the provision of employment, the reduction of inequality and the guarantee of human rights" (Turner &

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