Institutions (Also) Matter in E-Government: The Case of Bolivia

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INTRODUCTION

For the past five years, several e-government global, regional, and local benchmarks have been carried out. Although not all of them have included Bolivia in their analysis, the ones that have coincide in their perceptions about the implementation of e-government in this country. Generally speaking, Bolivia usually ranks below both the Latin America and the world average. In *Benchmarking e-government*, Ronaghan (2002) classified the country as one with e-government medium capacity and interactive presence. Despite the fact that Bolivia performed better than most countries in Central America, East Asia, and Africa, it was still far from the most developed nations such as the United Nations, New Zealand or the United Kingdom as well as from some Latin American countries being the most remarkable the cases of Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay.

The *United Nations World Public Sector Report 2003*, on the other hand, also placed Bolivia in a worse position than other South and Central American countries. Its e-government readiness index score of 0.411 was lower than the regional average (0.442) and, in fact, it was closer to the South and Eastern Asia average (0.410).

Finally, in the *United Nations E-Government Readiness Report 2004*, of the twenty Latin American countries surveyed, only eight countries ranked below not only the regional average but also the world average. Again, that was the case of Bolivia whose score also dropped from 0.411 (position 78th) to 0.3863 (position 88th). Although this loss was not as dramatic as that of Paraguay, comparatively speaking, Bolivia's e-government performance was one of the worst in relation to the set of countries considered. This fact has to be seriously considered particularly because the region as a whole improved, as did the world globally speaking.

Although, as previously showed, Bolivia has tended to lose out in the set of world comparative rankings, during the last years, the country has designed and implemented several projects aimed at introducing the new information and communication technologies in the public sector. Therefore, it can be stated that the poor results displayed are not due to government inactivity. Instead, there are other variables that play an essential role in Bolivian e-government success or failure.

Several authors have already reported that a limited human and technological infrastructure has a decisive impact on how a country performs in terms of e-government. Bolivia is not an exception. But this cause-effect view can turn out to be too narrow. This unfinished research is aimed at making evident the existence of other more structural factors that also influence e-government accomplishment. So far, the literature review and the interviews conducted have focused on some of the more outstanding e-government projects that have been carried out in Bolivia. This has proved that, despite the results shown in the reports previously cited, Bolivia is striving to move towards the inclusion of ICTs in the public sphere. In the current stage, and a as a consequence of the perceived poor performance already stated, other (institutional) factors are being explored, besides ICTs penetration level and illiteracy, that are believed to have to be considered to understand why the country is not being successful in its efforts.

THE STATE OF E-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES IN BOLIVIA

Bolivia has since 2005 a national strategy for the development of the information society (http://www.etic.bo/Default/default.htm) although the country has not developed an e-government strategic plan yet. Nevertheless, since 2002, when the supreme decree number 26.553 established ADSIB, the Agencia para el Desarrollo de la Sociedad de la Información en Bolivia (the Agency for the Development of the Information Society in Bolivia), the country has implemented several projects in order to make digital government a reality.

To start with, back in 2002, the government presented a document called *Lineamientos para la Estrategia de Bolivia en la Era Digital* ("Ideas for a Bolivian Strategy in the Digital Era") that gave the Vice-presidency of the Republic the responsibility to launch the program Bolivia en Línea (Bolivia Online) aimed at integrating all the public sector portals, at helping public agencies to design new web pages, at standardizing Bolivian web pages, and at strengthening local government computing systems (Ministry of Sustainable Development and Planning, 2002). Despite this effort, the document was too broad and the initiatives depicted were not concise. As a result, several e-government projects, related to both back office and front office adjustments, started to take place on a heterogeneous basis and without the required coordination.

Most of those projects pursued the integration and improvement of internal information systems. That was the case of the automation of the management and register system developed to enhance the implementation of the financial decentralization program ILACO II, or of SIGMA, the Sistema Integrado de Gestión y Modernización Administrativa (Integrated System of Management and Administrative Modernization), a project implemented by the Ministry of Finance aimed at automating the public budget management, the public provision of goods, and the human resources management.

Several front office initiatives have also been carried out in Bolivia. In this sense, it is important to note that there are more than 70 governmental web pages. Despite the growing number of web pages related to the Bolivian government, most of them (the Ministry of Sustainable Development and Planning, back in 2002, referred to the 85%) are merely informative pages that have been designed as simply broadcasting vehicles. Even the Guía Nacional de Trámites (National Requirements Guide), available at http://www.tramites.gov.bo/, is only a tool that provides information about how to proceed with certain formalities, which steps to take every second, and which institutions to consult if problems arise. In a country like Bolivia, geographically handicapped, where its citizens are still forced to travel for hours to access the governmental information, the possibility of retrieving it by the means of the Internet or other electronic devices is an important step forward.

Finally, despite the fact that many websites are open to the citizens' opinions and views, the e-democracy field is probably the less developed. This might be due to the socio-economic situation of the country, which leads to low levels of connectivity and, therefore, hinders the promotion of the democratic process by the means of online tools. Also, the current consolidation process of the Bolivian institutions shows that the priority is to achieve more social participation using those mechanisms that are closer and more familiar to the population.

THE E-GOVERNMENT DIVIDE IN BOLIVIA

Despite the described efforts, the yearly rankings on e-government do not show any important progress for Bolivia (see Table 1).

As a result, the existence of a so-called electronic government divide can be confirmed. In this sense, it can be stated that the country experiences both a regional e-government divide (or the digital gap that refers to e-government actions among countries that belong to Latin America) and a domestic e-government divide (which explains the difference between the advanced online public administrations and the more backward ones in the framework of Bolivia) regardless of the digital government initiatives that have been implemented throughout the years (Gascó, 2005).

Table 1. E-government readiness index

Year	Position in ranking	Index
2003	78	0.411
2004	88	0.3863
2005	85	0.4017

WHAT EXPLAINS THE POOR RESULTS?

Two variables are usually considered when studying what gives rise to differences in public sector technological projects. In the first place, e-government actions are useless if connectivity remains an unresolved issue because, when that is the case, only a very small percentage of people can have real access to the initiatives. Also, as Gascó (2005) explains, if the adoption of technology is slow and poor, governments experience their own technical and managerial difficulties. The availability of resources (that can be measured by the means of the human development index since it is strongly influenced by a country's economic and social composition) is the second factor that influences how decision makers, policy planners and public sector managers elect to approach, develop, and implement e-government programs (Ronaghan, 2002).

Bolivia's ICT diffusion rankings are shown below (to be able to make comparisons, it is important to note that the USA ranked second in 2004):

Also, the human development index in 2005 was of 0.687, which is lower than that of the USA (0.944), Italy (0.934), Chile (0.854), Costa Rica (0.838) or even China (0.755).

In spite of what has already been said, the researcher of this project believes that there is a third factor that explains the poor e-government results of Bolivia. According to this, the evolution of the use of ICTs by the public sector is parallel to the transformations that have taken place in the public administration as a result of the state reform processes. As a consequence, the role (and therefore the importance) of technology is different in each stage of the public sector modern-ization process. Also, it is the result of how that reform process is conceived and is taking place (see Table 3).

According to the preliminary findings of this research, Bolivia's public administrations are in the initial stage. These bureaucratic organizations are very resilient to change. What's more, in the case of Bolivia, one can state that the reform has hardly taken place due to the existence of odd, pre bureaucratic structures that has given rise to patronage practices patterns that are extremely difficult to eradicate. As the World Bank noticed back in 2000, "a weak private sector practically incapable of generating employment for the middle class, politicians' interest in obtaining electoral support from and control of the government bureaucracy, and a fragmented party system which forces political organizations to negotiate coalition agreements, are cited as sources of patronage and clientelism".

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Table 2. ICT diffusion rankings 1997-2004

1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
123	123	124	125	120	120	119	122

Table 3. The evolutionary element

Type of organization	Modernization stage	ICTs role
Bureaucratic	Initial. The goal is to improve efficacy and efficiency	In the automation of work flows and internal processes reorganization
Professional	Advanced. The public management model has already been adopted (emphasis on efficiency but, also, on meeting the citizens' demands and expectations)	Without forgetting the previous achievements, ICTs make the interaction between the public administration and the citizens easier by the means of portals and web pages
Relational	Consolidating and institutionalizing the process. The governance paradigm has been adopted (the citizen is not only a customer but an important participant of the governability processes)	Key regarding transparency and accountability

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