Chapter 14
Public E-Procurement Implementation:
Insights from the Structuration Theory

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ABSTRACT

Today most e-government and e-procurement research and discussion are done in a quite utilitarian and technical way. This follows the worldwide positivist and utilitarian approach to research that neglects the social, organizational, cultural, and political aspects of social life. Therefore, most research initiatives are based on a market-driven and utilitarian approach in which technology is treated as a mere tool. So, under the use of a traditional top-down model or the "tool-approach," information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been implemented in developing countries detached from their social and political context, as an instrumental, static, elitist, and uncritical utilitarian approach, neglecting a deep investigation of how social, economic, and political factors are embedded in technology. In addition, most of the literature on e-procurement has been studied primarily from a business-to-business (B2B) perspective, and the field of public sector procurement has been neglected. Although public e-procurement has similarities with the private sector, it also has some special characteristics that make it different. Therefore, it is not clear to what extent recent decisions on public e-procurement have been optimal. In the broad competing views of information technology (IT), interpretative or constructivist approaches see the use of IT as the result of conflicts, negotiations, and interpretations of various interests that make it socially constructed. These competing views of technology help the formulation of an appropriate debate on e-procurement that holds enormous potential for cost savings, efficiency and

benefit gains, and transparency. In this work, an attempt was made to show how qualitative research traditions like structuration theory (specifically the perspective of "dialectic of control") and qualitative research analysis can be used in the analysis of e-procurement in Brazil, leading to results that differ substantially from the mainstream positivist research that does not always touch the barriers and challenges that can constrain the adoption and implementation of public e-procurement projects.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, developing countries have increasingly adopted ICT to enhance government services and business transactions. In Brazil, for instance, e-procurement is a very basic e-government tool that is said to have the potential to improve efficiency in government administration and achieve better governance.

However, despite the enthusiastic discourse of public administration modernization through the adoption and development of ICT, literature has shown that successful implementation of e-procurement technology remains a challenge in both developed and developing countries. It is stated that e-procurement requires a fundamental transformation of traditional government organization and development infrastructure, in addition to financial and human resources. In that case, a "successful transparent e-procurement system requires policies, legislation, and a legal framework conducive to reorganizing the Government and its services to the citizens, businesses and institutions" (United Nations, 2006, p. iii).

It is stated that the benefits of e-procurement are numerous in terms of enhancing transparency of transactions, saving time and lowering costs, increasing productivity, and standardizing and integrating processes. However, there are a multitude of barriers and challenges, especially in developing countries, where infrastructures are underdeveloped and human resources in both private and public sector are not trained. It is mentioned that before "an e-procurement system can achieve

maximum potential, a strong infrastructure must be developed, ICT services expanded, innovative policies administered to establish a secure online environment, standard developed" (United Nations, 2006, p.3), and leadership and government reorganization are required.

Today most e-government and e-procurement research and discussion are done in a quite utilitarian and technical way. This follows the worldwide positivist and utilitarian approach to research that neglects the social, organizational, cultural and political aspects of social life. Therefore, most research initiatives are based on a market-driven and utilitarian approach in which technology is treated as a mere tool. So, under the use of a traditional top-down model or the "tool-approach", ICTs have been implemented in developing countries detached from their social and political context, as an instrumental, static, elitist, and uncritical utilitarian approach, neglecting a deep investigation of how social, economic, and political factors are embedded in technology.

Although public e-procurement has similarities with the private sector, it also has some special characteristics that make it different. Therefore, it is not clear to which extent recent decisions on public e-procurement have been optimal. Further to this, IT is not value neutral, because it is developed and designed by hegemonic interests to manipulate, control, and dominate public consciousness (Feenberg, 1996).

As the implementation of e-procurement is extremely challenging and its impacts are unclear, a number of e-procurement initiatives have been

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