Chapter 11
A Road Far Too Long?
E-Government and the State of Service Delivery in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the state of e-government development and associated changes to service delivery in Bangladesh. Using the "stage model" as a frame of reference, the authors show the progresses Bangladesh has made in terms of informational, interactive, transactional, and integrated services. They argue that although Bangladesh's overall progress is still modest for it allows only limited advanced levels of services, there are encouraging trends underway. In its conclusion, the chapter highlights some of the impediments and challenges that hamper e-government initiatives undermining their potentials and benefits in the country.

INTRODUCTION

While public sector reform is nothing new, the advent of information and communication technology (ICT) has marked the beginning of a new phase of reform which promises to bring about radical improvements in governmental operations and services. Widely known as e-government, the new reform has acquired a global character with both developed and developing countries embracing it. At its simplest, it entails the application of ICT in the public sector. While there are various interpretations of e-government in this chapter we use the term to mean the governmental system that delivers public services by using ITC as a tool. It is more than mere presence of governmental websites on the Internet; it involves the transaction and information exchange between government, citizens and businesses with the help of ICT. Though it seeks to enhance the efficiency of government, at the heart of e-government is the desire to increase the availability of governmental information and services by making them accessible to citizens and other users at all

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times. Bekkers captures it all when he says that e-government is the 'use of ICT to design new or redesign existing information, communication and transaction relationships between governments and citizens, companies and non-governmental organisations as well as between different government organisations and layers in order to achieve specific goals" (Bekkers, 2013: 253). Relevant goals, according to him, include the improvement of the access to government, the enhancement of the quality and efficiency of public service delivery processes, the improvement of internal and external efficiency, the support of public and political accountability, the support of the political participation of citizens and the strengthening of inter-organisational cooperation. Indeed, these are some of the areas where e-government can deliver significant benefits.

Not surprisingly, e-government has enjoyed massive popularity fuelled by the belief that it can enhance service delivery and produce significant improvements in various domains. A UN report asserts that e-government can result in better delivery of services to citizens, improved interactions with businesses and industry, citizen's empowerment through greater access to information and/or efficient governmental management (UN, 2003). It is also believed to be associated with a range of other values. Foremost among them are savings in time and efforts, operational efficiency, convenience and user-friendliness. It is seen as a mechanism that can transform the outmoded bureaucracy, give citizens and businesses greater access to governmental services at the same time help reduce paperwork, and eventually save governmental resources (Backus, 2001, Lam, 2005). Online availability of services also means that the users will benefit from 24x7x365 access to government information and services. Apart from economic and administrative benefits as above, e-government is desirable for it fosters good governance in the society: it does so by promoting transparency in governmental operations, helping combat corruption, improving governmental accountability and responsiveness (West, 2004).

However, the benefits of e-government can hardly be taken for granted: the extent to which such merits translate into reality depends largely on the state of e-government development – a phenomenon explained by a number of theories and models. One of the most popular among them is the maturity/stage model which postulates that countries go through a number of stages in their e-journey before they are able to transform service delivery systems and deliver the benefits, as noted. The United Nations model (UN, 2008) suggests that as countries move towards maturity they pass through several thresholds in terms of information development, content delivery, business re-engineering and so on. This model involves five stages: *emerging presence* (development of websites with some basic information), *enhanced presence* (websites with greater information and download option), *interactive stage* (further development with interactive features), *transactional stage* (provision of complete and two-way transactions) and finally the *connected stage* (complete integration of service delivery and the institutions offering them). These stages are used to benchmark the UN member states based on their ability to deliver online services to citizens and other stakeholders[1]. Likewise, Moon's model suggests that e-government development entails five basic stages: information, communication, transaction, integration and participation. Each of these stages is characterized by a different level of sophistication and interface with citizens and others. Stage 1 is the most basic - featuring one-way information dissemination and stage 5 is the most sophisticated level which allows variety of political participation including online voting, opinion polls and consultation (see Moon, 2002). However, it must be noted that while each stage is distinct, different stages can occur simultaneously (Herman & Cullen, 2006). Also, it is relevant to note that along the way there are formidable barriers and