

Electronic Government in Small Island States

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INTRODUCTION

The capabilities provided through electronic government (e-government) opens up the potential for government's worldwide to improve the services they offer to their citizens. However, a move towards e-government offers particular advantages to developing countries, especially to small island states. Small island states are typically scattered over a wide geographic area, posing unique problems for their governments in coordinating and delivering services to their citizens. Information and communication technologies (ICT) now make it possible to connect a citizen of the remotest island directly to central government services. This article investigates the role of e-government in small countries. The island states of the South Pacific¹ have been selected as a case study. Though every small island state has its own particular characteristics, the island nations of the South Pacific exhibit such diversity in terms of culture, language, economic activity and ethnicity as to make this region an ideal laboratory in which to observe developments in e-government. The island states of the South Pacific generally exhibit a low population density, which can be an advantage, as ICT-based strategies can be implemented more quickly than in a larger country. However, a small population often means a lack of appropriate skills to implement such policies (Comnet-IT, 2002).

Before the status of e-government can be assessed it is necessary to gauge how ready a society is to benefit from recent developments in ICT. This is generally done by carrying out an e-readiness assessment, which measures a country's ability to take advantage of the Internet and other information and communication technologies as an engine of economic growth (GIPI, 2001). An e-readiness assessment looks at infrastructure, the accessibility of ICT to the population at large, and the effect of the legal and regulatory framework on ICT use. An e-

readiness assessment can be useful in the development of e-government by providing benchmarks for comparison and gauging progress.

A survey of the e-readiness of five South Pacific countries (Purcell & Toland, 2004) shows that, with the exception of New Caledonia, these countries are a long way from being e-ready, with little use of IT in businesses, schools or homes; teledensities of 10% or less; Internet penetration of less than 5%; relatively expensive dial-up connection charges (e.g., U.S. \$31.00 for 10 hours in Fiji as of 2002); and with a single monopolistic telecommunications provider. Another recent survey carried out for UNESCO (Zwimpfer, 2002) confirms this, reporting that less than 25% of the South Pacific population use a computer for any purpose.

Despite the bleak picture painted by these statistics, there are some positive aspects: AUSAid statistics indicate that the population is well educated, with a high level of literacy; that English is the main business language in most countries; that all countries are included in the global telecommunications network, and many countries have recently upgraded their telecommunications infrastructure. This means that if the technology became more affordable and suitable training was introduced, the development of e-government could accelerate quickly.

E-government should not be viewed as an uncomplicated transfer of IT tools and concepts developed in the private sector into the public sector. The public sector is a law-based system, and government covers many processes that are different from processes encountered in private sector settings such as retail or banking, for example: complex decision making; negotiations between stakeholders; policy formulation; and democratic participation (Lenk, 2002). An example: the issue of land ownership is contentious in the South Pacific, and the use of e-government could help land boards to demonstrate a fair and transparent approach to this issue.

BACKGROUND

E-government is more than just technology. It provides a new kind of service delivery function for government organisations. Several traditional government functions, such as publishing, information gathering, business transactions, and data search and retrieval, are combined into a single form of presentation. In the past the use of ICT in the public sector generally consisted of batch processing of mass transactions using a mainframe computer. Recent developments, particularly applications of the Internet including e-mail and the world-wide Web, have now eliminated the constraints of geography, and time, with far reaching consequences.

A distinction should be made between public sector usage of ICT generally, and specific e-government initiatives. E-government is the subset of public information technology, which involves the delivery of government services and information to citizens (Howle Schelin, 2003). E-government includes two separate areas. First, it is concerned with changing internal government operations, inasmuch as information technology is used to support cooperation among government agencies. Second, it is used to support external government operations, in particular the interactions between citizens and companies, and the public sector, on a self-service basis. E-government is not only concerned with using more IT in the public sector; it is also key to supporting governments which want to become more strategic in their use of IT (Gronlund, 2002). Gronlund suggests E-government involves using IT to:

1. Provide easy access to government information and services to citizens and business;

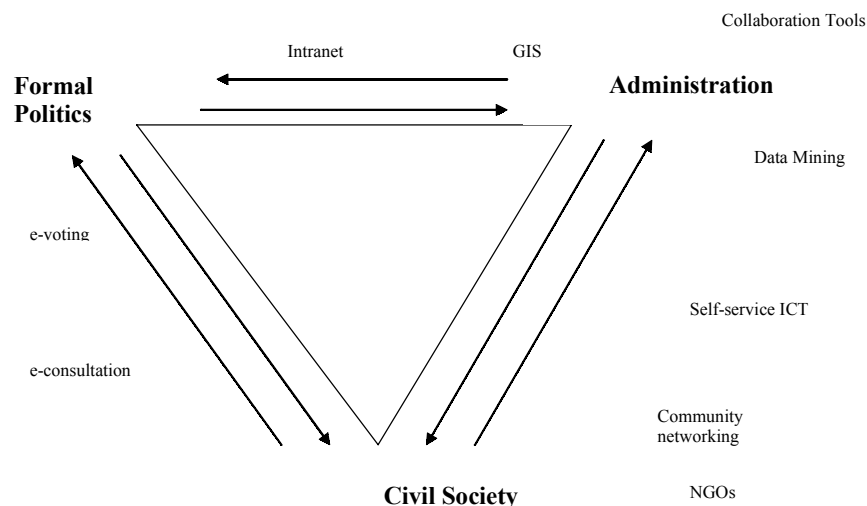
2. Increase the quality of services, by increased speed, and process efficiency;
3. Give citizens opportunities to participate in democratic processes.

Though the focus of e-government is often on external services, it is also important to use these technologies to make the internal services more efficient (Gronlund, 2002). The traditional bureaucratic model of public service delivery has highlighted specialisation, departmentalisation, and standardisation resulting in individual departments adopting a “silo” mentality and resisting cooperation across agency boundaries. Recent developments have seen governments adopting a more citizen-centred approach, which emphasises both internal and external collaboration (Ho, 2002).

Figure 1 shows the basic elements and relations in a democratic government system. The arrows indicate influence. Each node in the system influences both of the others through a number of relationships. The potential ICT systems that can be used to facilitate coordination between formal politics, administration, and civil society are shown. These systems aim to improve the internal workings of administration by cutting process costs, and managing process performance. They address the problems of government being too costly, too inefficient, too inconvenient, and too self-serving (Heeks, 1999).

E-government applies to both national and local government. The adoption of ICT is often driven by national governments, which have access to more resources and are more aware of international trends. In contrast, local governments are closer to their communities, and as such may be more aware of the practicalities involved in facilitating a citizen's access to e-government.

Figure 1. Examples of ICT uses in e-government (Source: Gronlund, 2002)



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