

Introducing Electronic Governance in the Philippines

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INTRODUCTION

The Philippines has recently identified five key reform packages where information and communications technology (ICT) will play a key role: job creation through economic growth, anti-corruption through good government, social justice and basic needs, education and youth opportunity, and energy independence and savings (Patricio, 2004). Such an important role of ICT can be seen in terms of the signing of the Electronic Commerce Act of 2000, or the E-Commerce Act in June 2000. The law mandates all government agencies to adopt electronic means in their transactions within a period of two years (2000) of its signing.

BACKGROUND

Focusing on local governments, the National Computer Center (NCC, n.d.), assisted by the Department of Science and Technology (DOST), is bringing electronic governance under the acronym, e-LGU, to the local government units (LGUs), as part of DOST's Support Program for Electronic Governance (SUPRE-GOV). The e-LGU Project runs from 16 September 2003 to 15 September 2005.

Having learned from the experience of the 1990s, when DOS-based applications were introduced to LGUs but with very limited technical and financial support, the e-LGU Project recognizes the very limited resources to modernize LGUs' operations. Thus, it advocates the use of open source technology, reducing the dependence on expensive, proprietary software and limited third-party governance solutions used by the more affluent LGUs, but increases the need for training on software.

ELECTRONIC GOVERNANCE IN THE PHILIPPINES

The e-LGU Project of bringing e-governance into the Project LGUs, has six components:

1. LGU-IT Resources and E-Governance Readiness Survey (LGU-IT Resources, 2004);
2. Electronic Governance Seminar for LGU Executives (Electronic Governance Seminar, 2004);
3. Information Systems Development Planning (Information Systems, 2004);
4. Formulation of Data Standards for Local Governance (Data Standards, 2004);
5. Establishment of LGU Web Presence (Web Presence, 2004); and
6. Application Systems Installation and Users Training (Application Systems, 2004).

E-LGU aims to enable LGUs to use ICT in their operations to provide better public service. To be able to do this, it will determine the level of local government computerization and readiness for e-governance by means of a nationwide survey conducted in August 1992 (LGU-IT Resources, 2004). A total of 15,446 computer units are reported by 640 LGUs. The number ranges from a high of 435 units to one unit per LGU.

In the Philippines, LGUs are classified into provinces, cities, municipalities, and barangays (villages). Provinces are composed of component cities and municipalities. Highly urbanized and special cities do not belong to any province. Cities and municipalities are composed of barangays. Cities have the most number of computer units, with an average of 75 units, followed by provinces with 60 units, and municipalities with 10 units. The income classification of LGUs (ranging from first to sixth class as classified by the Department of Finance every three years) was found unrelated to their number of available computer units.

Microcomputer systems accounted for almost all (97%) of the systems reported. As far as Internet and e-commerce are concerned, 30.7% of LGU respondents reported having Internet capabilities, and the majority (87.6%) of them are connected via dial-up. The Philippines is divided into 15 regions, and two administrative regions (Cordillera Administrative Region and Administrative Region For Muslim Mindanao). Region III (Central Luzon) has the most number of Internet connection, then Region I (Ilocos), and Region IV-A (CALABARZON). LGUs with no Internet connection

attributed its absence to: “No ISP” (57%), “No Budget” (40%), and “No Management Support” (9%). A minority of 22% of the LGUs surveyed reported hosting their own Web site.

The Project aims to promote awareness and better understanding and commitment of LGU officials to e-governance through seminars (Electronic Governance Seminar, 2004). It will annually provide 100 LGUs with Web-enabled information system (using open-source technology) for improved assessment and collection of taxes (property and business) (Application Systems Installation, 2004). It will also establish a Web presence for LGUs and an interactive WAP-enabled Web presence for the pilot LGUs by the third year of implementation, with a local government portal for all Web sites (Web Presence, 2004). The Project will institutionalize ICT for 100 pilot LGUs by the end of the first year and 300 LGUs by end of the Project by preparing and approving LGU Information Systems Plans (Information Systems, 2004). The Project also aims to facilitate data sharing and information exchange through data standard development (Data Standards, 2004).

FUTURE TRENDS

The Project is definitely a step ahead in putting local governments into the ICT age. The selling point of the Project for the LGUs is the low cost of software used in the e-Real Property Tax System (RPTS) and the e-Business Permits and Licensing System (BPLS) applications. The use of the Internet to connect with their respective constituents provides the LGUs with a potent tool, which may even be interactive, to deliver services or to collect taxes.

CONCLUSION

Several questions arise in relation to the e-LGU project. Given the importance of the project, some sense of the costs involved and of the benefits to be derived from embracing ICT at the local government level must be given by the government agencies involved in the project. How many years does it take to recover the costs involved in the purchase of hardware, in man-hours, in materials used in developing the software, the Web presence, the standards?

It may not be a question of cost recovery, but it may be more economical to retain the analogue technology in the long-term, due to obsolescence, that hardware become outdated or prone to breakdowns even before the cost has been recovered. Is it possible that the

analogue technology may be more cost-effective in the long-term considering the recurring power outages or instability in areas outside Metropolitan Manila?

What e-commerce uses do the LGUs have? Are the Internet connections only to provide Web presence, but no transactions for the LGUs? There is the problem of dated data observed in Web sites of local government units, as in accomplishment reports way back 2002. Is there a mechanism to address this problem?

The development perspective of maximizing the LGU presence in its area of jurisdiction must be said to be the future of all these efforts. Initially, revenue generation is the concern of the LGUs and the e-LGU proponents.

All these issues appear to be addressed by the use of the open-source technology (Open Source, 2004), giving the e-LGU Project a glimmer of hope in the world dominated by a proprietary operating system and applications.

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