

Digital Divides and Grassroots–Based E–Government in Developing Countries

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INTRODUCTION

Once properly managed, e-governance can add tremendous dynamism in reforming public administration and can change the mode of interaction between the state and its citizens. However, concerns regarding digital divides and the challenges of e-governance in the developing states of Africa, Asia, and Latin America are growing. If the factors contributing to digital divides are not carefully identified and properly solved, there is a growing risk that in the coming years digital resources might become the preserve of the “haves,” while ignoring the plight of the “have-nots” as they seek access to resources in developing countries. The current Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan (2000) provided the insight that new information and communications technologies are bringing people together, and bringing decision-makers unprecedented new tools for development. At the same time, however, Mr. Annan added, the gap between information “haves” and “have-nots” is widening, and there is a real danger that the world’s poor will be excluded from the emerging knowledge-based global economy.

E-governance in this article could be referred to as the use of digital devices, usually by public authorities, when dealing with their public, private and non-profit stakeholders. E-governance comprises a practice, process, or activities through digital means and could equally be practiced by different stakeholders in managing public affairs. While in contrast “e-government” is defined by Shafritz and Russel (2003) as conducting any aspect of government business operations over the Internet—from providing information by government to paying bills to the government. This article examines and analyzes the current status of emerging electronic and Web-based governance (e-governance) in developing countries. In doing so, the article outlines the market model, participatory state model, flexible government model, and the deregulated government model presented by Professor Guy Peters for reforming governance. In light of the above, the article brings forward the emerging issues of governance, e-governance, and the possibility of shared governance. Emerging e-governance is reshaping the

process of administrative reforms in developing countries—which requires fresh academic research and a scholarly contribution.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PRACTICAL CONCERNS

Theoretical Background

In terms of technological efficiency and effectiveness, it seems that e-governance can be applied in developing countries. However, in practice, models of e-governance remain a paradox between myth and reality in most countries struggling to overcome their present-day developmental challenges. The emerging trend of e-governance in global development and the dynamic interplay of power and practices between the local, national, and transnational governmental agencies are real concerns in development management led by information and communication technology (ICT).

Professor Guy Peters (2001) brought valuable theoretical insights in the areas of changing states, governance, and the public sector. His work brings new perspectives into administrative reforms in developing and transitional countries where he presents the contesting scenarios of the following four models of governance. His scholarly work provides an important insight and the scope with which to understand the growing concerns of governance and to analyze e-governance in developing countries. His theoretical arguments are summarized below:

1. **Market Models:** Claim that private-sector methods are almost inherently superior for managing activities, when compared to those of the traditional public sector.
2. **Participatory State Model:** Is completely the ideological antithesis of the market approach and emphasizes the promotion of political, democratic, and collective mechanisms by laying emphasis on public participation.

3. **Flexible Government Model:** Emphasizes the capability of the government to respond effectively to new challenges and survive in the face of change.
4. **Deregulated Government Model:** Is built on the assumption that if some constraints on bureaucratic action were to be eliminated, government could perform its functions more effectively. The work provides directions for future reforms and changes in governance.

Probably the context of e-governance in developing countries is more suitable to the above private-sector led market models for reforming the government. The participatory state model is completely the ideological antithesis of the market approach and emphasizes the promotion of political, democratic, and collective mechanisms by promoting public participation. Due to various concerns with resource scarcity, low rates of literacy, and other disadvantaged human development indicators, e-governance cannot be easily promoted in developing countries. However, e-governance may result in increased attention being paid to the third alternative, the flexible government model—which emphasizes the capability of the government in responding effectively to new challenges and in surviving in the face of change. As a matter of fact, this is what most developing countries are doing with emerging Internet-based operations. And finally, Peters' deregulated government model also suits well the basic principles of e-governance in assuming that if some constraints on bureaucratic action are eliminated, government could perform its functions more effectively. Probably the context of e-governance is opening up a new theoretical horizon for shared governance, which Professor Peters (2001) did not address. However, the practical challenges of establishing e-governance in developing countries are many. The following section may help understanding of the context.

The Practical Concerns

Initiating grassroots-based e-governance is not easy. Comparable indicators of the “networked world” are even more skewed than those in the “economic world.” One may ask the question: how? Singh (2000) presents the scenario: at the turn of the millennium the richest 20% of the world's people accounted for 93.3% of Internet users, while the poorest 20% accounted for 0.2% of Internet users. While the Internet is, in theory, the great leveler, in practice, various divides are becoming accentuated. For example, South Asia, with 23% of the world's people, has less than 1% of Internet users. Though growing, however, on average African countries will not account for more than this percentage—if not less. While only 10% of the

people worldwide speak English, almost 80% of all the Web sites are in English. There is a strong correlation between the spread of telephone lines, televisions, fax machines, personal computers, and Internet usage. More importantly, buying capacity has always remained the central question: what percentage of the people living in the developing world can afford new technologies? The fact of the matter is that by the end of the twentieth century more than 80% of the people in the world had never heard a dial tone.

Traditionally, a major obstacle for the effective performance of public bureaucracies in most developing countries is the excessive concentration of decision-making and authority within the central government. Decentralization within the state involves a transfer of authority to perform some service to the public from an individual or an agency in central government to some other individual or agency closer to the public to be served. However, in practice, the challenges to good governance through decentralization are numerous. In most developing countries, there has been a tendency of independent governments to prefer delegating power within the public services rather than through locally elected authorities. Also the capacity of local and regional authorities has remained generally weak. There has been much rhetoric about participation and local autonomy, but central governments have jealously guarded their power (see, e.g., Turner & Hulme, 1997). Similar findings have also been experienced by other researchers (e.g., Khan & Zafarullah, 1991; Seppälä, 2000) in their work on central and local governance. In general, governance has thus remained far from being referred to as “good.” Therefore, one could easily judge how enthusiastic the central governments in developing countries would be to initiate effective e-governance, which might start to open up doors to real administrative decentralization.

Naturally, having considered the above scenarios, the establishment of e-governance in the developing world will sound “ambitious”—and a major, daunting task. However, in the era of electronic activities, e-governance is being initiated and certainly will move forward—even in the developing countries. In the meantime, if ICT possibilities are not given to the world's poor, the technological divides will grow even further and provoke legitimate concerns about “inclusiveness” and “exclusiveness” in systems of governance. In addition, the emerging e-governance will create opportunities for the “few” and ignore the plight of the “many.” But will it lead scholars to re-think alternative definitions of good governance? It will, especially if the grassroots-based challenges of electronic governance are not taken care of in advance.

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