

Chapter 4

Socio–Cultural Context of E–Government Readiness

Selected Problems

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ABSTRACT

E-government is not only an innovative idea but, more and more in a growing number of countries, a practical activity of high priority. It reflects the emergence and development of information societies (IS). Socio-cultural context is a framework of e-government strategies and practices. The context will determine the effects of such efforts. It is important to consider and understand the socio-cultural characteristics and functioning of society while its e-government undertakings are planned and introduced. From this point of view, the presently emerging worldwide information societies can be grouped in classes. It may help to analyze the classes' needs and possibilities and to formulate proper e-government agenda to be implemented. The real specificities and diversities among classes make the IS development multi-trajectory. In this diversified world, the effects will vary greatly. This chapter has tried to identify and briefly analyze the challenges for e-government strategies and practices from the point of view of socio-cultural context. It is argued that this context should be treated dynamically – as changing and as creating potential for change leading to further advancement of IS. Thus the discourse on the socio-cultural context of e-readiness is summarized. Some conclusions and recommendations are formulated, especially with reference to diversities and specificities of IS classes.

INTRODUCTION

E-government readiness has several dimensions. Readiness on the side of government depends on government's *propensity* to use information-

communication technologies (ICTs) to exchange information and provide services to citizens and business. Such propensity, which is psychological, political, social and cultural in character, varies from society to society. Psychological, political, social and cultural factors and conditions can act in positive or negative directions with regard to e-readiness.

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Either way, it can be assumed that governments play the role of enlightened leaders and are under the influence of the external world (that is, the networked world). However, governments may strive for democratic governance or prefer tough rules based on control of people, surveillance, and manipulation. Moreover, they can be effective in both cases. ICTs can be used in both ways.

So the historical heritage, norms and values, social and religious customs and attitudes, orientations (e.g., proactive, future-oriented, openness), social aspirations and national ambitions, social structure, level and span of education, competences in administration and business, technological culture, political and legal systems, media status, advancement of civil society, relations with other countries etc. are *non-technological determinants* of e-government readiness of all its stakeholders – public administration, business and civil society. These factors constitute the **socio-cultural context** of e-readiness of both government and society. It is worth noting that business has an economic motivation and arguably a more “natural” technology-driven propensity to use ICTs.

To make government and social e-readiness work properly and effectively, all factors and their feedbacks should be considered by *all stakeholders*, including central and local public authorities, business, and NGOs, while the stakeholders develop strategies, plans, and policies and while they react to various pressures and challenges imposed by ICTs and globalization. Socio-cultural context ought to be treated dynamically—as changing and as creating potential for change. Unfortunately, quite often this context is overlooked or underestimated what diminishes possible advantages and positive effects for all sides involved in ICTs applications and diffusion in all spheres of social activities and life.

The fundamental component of e-readiness is *technology*—computers, telecommunications infrastructure, and ICT organization and management. Tools and techniques of e-government are connected with the use of some hardware, software

and orgware. The latter has evident political and cultural dimensions. Security and privacy standards also have legal dimensions.

E-government is nowadays necessary in order to take advantage of ICTs for better public administration, for more effective business performance, and for citizen activism. However, it is costly. After the initial period, e-government functioning should be measured and evaluated from the point of view of all stakeholders. Moreover, failures, incompatibilities, negative side effects, and exclusions should be also identified and recognized, and strategies and policies toward diminishing or liquidating the unintended effects elaborated and implemented.

Media and educational institutions (being in fact the components of socio-cultural context) can play an important role in ICTs assimilation and use in the public and private sectors.

BACKGROUND

Selected Approaches and Cultural Challenges

The discourse on the socio-cultural context of e-readiness is a rather new area of research. From the point of view of the history of science, it can be located close to such themes as technology and culture, technology and society, STS studies, or social assessment of technology. Without the technological component e-government would not exist. However, more types of innovation are necessary to make it work. It is worthwhile to note that technology also emerges in certain cultural, social, economic, and international settings. This is the first socio-cultural condition of technology. The second lies in technology’s social use (i.e., for education, training, strategies, policies, building infrastructure, legal framework). The third condition is connected with the social response (will, propensity, attitudes, expectations, competencies).

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