

Chapter 9

E–Governance at the Grass Roots: Observations at the SAARC Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Ever growing and evolutionary technologies of the Internet have lured nations in utilizing information and communication technologies to upgrade the livelihood of their citizens. Governments of most countries have initiated multi-faceted programs and initiatives to provide enhanced services through means and methods that are being facilitated by the Internet. However, forms and norms of services have taken shapes and domains depending on the ground context, expansion and maturity of ICTs in their countries and communities. This chapter will explore situations of electronic forms of the government, which it argues is a pre-requisite for good governance and thus enable governments to reach the people at large. Particularly, the chapter will review the emancipation of ICTs in eight countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It investigates some basic parameters of ICTs retrieving archived data from various institutions and organizations. Later on, the chapter tries to generalize the situation in terms of recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the potentiality of the electronic form of the government services (popularly known as e-government), it is somehow uncharted in many countries in terms of implementing the governance system at the local level. In theory it is the local government, in practice it is the lowest tier of the governance system, and for this study it is termed as the grass roots governance. The reality is that the implementation of grass roots governance lack proper incentives, adequate resources, satisfactory management including appropriate leadership, long term management plan and foremost any standardized framework (Zwahr, Rossel & Finger, 2005; Das & Chandrashekhar, 2006; Malhotra, Chariar, Das & Ilavarasan, 2007; Gessi, Ramnarine & Wilkins, 2007).

In recent years, governments throughout the world are in quest of finding novel ways to deliver public services more efficiently and effectively. Incorporation of e-governance in the local governments tier is an option widely discussed, although the expectations often vary. They vary in nature, culture, practice, habits and habitations among communities, states, nations and regions. Various socio-economical motivations, including political commitments may also be reasons for the change as well (Pattakos, 2004; Commonwealth, 2004; Fox & Gurley, 2006; Rahman, 2010).

Moreover, due to non availability of any long term strategy, action plan or vision, and or any accepted or standardized e-governance framework defined to be satisfactory accepted for the grass roots e-governance, some countries and agencies of implementation are still at the stage of simulation or initiation or experimentation or at the state of confusion, even after years of successful operation of e-government system. Countries in the developing and transitional economies are major sufferers of this situation, as most of the time they just try to replicate an established system or try to simply manipulate on their own without

enough researches or try to popularize a political agenda without looking into the innate intricacies surrounding the system.

The consequences are that, not only governments, but also, development actors are revisiting the concept of e-government as many projects on e-governance have failed throughout the globe. Notwithstanding the reasons being indistinct in a short term research finding, some of the international agencies have even shifted their focus area of funding. Perhaps, these could be due to factors related to design, perception, culture, economy, transparency or simple failure due to lack of proper attention (Rahman, 2007). As mentioned, elaborated research work is necessary to make any conclusive recommendation or set a guideline. However, for the sake of this research, the study is following the growth of the very basic parameters of ICTs, which are being accepted by national and international institutions while talking about implementation of electronic form of government around the globe. This chapter likes to see the pattern of progress for some parameters of e-government, such as the governance structure, the ICT policy and strategy, and the e-government ranking; and ICT for development, such the growth of GDP, the number of fixed and mobile telephone, and the number of Internet users (which are very much inter-related for the emancipation of grass roots e-governance) in the SAARC region. From the various patterns of ICT growth as mentioned above, the chapter makes a synthesis and recommendation for future research.

BACKGROUND

Local government can be defined as a city, county, parish, township, municipality, borough, ward, board, district, sub-district, or other general purpose political subdivision of a state or a country¹. Local governments in different countries are primarily composed of provinces, districts, sub-

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