

Chapter 16

E-Government for Transparency, Anti-Corruption, and Accountability: Challenges and Opportunities for Central American Countries

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the development of e-Government in Central American countries. The study presents an analysis of the role that e-Government has played during the last decade (2000-2010) in order to promote transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption measures. It starts with a definition of the principal concepts of the study and the e-Government development in the Region. It then reviews the laws and regulations and analyzes Web technology deployment in new agencies that have been legally established by Central American governments to advance transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption initiatives. In this context, the research aims to explore the question about whether information and communication technologies (specifically e-Government) facilitate transparency and accountability, and limit corruption in developing countries. The results provide support to this general statement and also suggest that public institutions themselves, and their non-digital procedures, still play a significant role in promoting more transparent practices. Finally, the text concludes with how to reinforce the policy of employing digital technology as an instrument for promoting good government in emerging economies.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) distinguished the second half of the last Century. However, it was only at the end of the 1990's that ICTs in public administrations became known as 'e-Government,' with this change signalling the need to confront the complexity of modern political problems (Dunleavy & Margetts, 1999; Heeks, 1999) in the framework of 'public transformation.' Various research studies have highlighted the impact of ICTs in almost all areas of society, especially in the political, economic, and social arenas (Castells, 1996). Moreover, the potential of technology to improve transparency, participation, and representation has provoked the growing debate about the relationship between ICTs and political institutions (Oriol, 2005). Thus, the rationale for this study is that the relationship between transparency, accountability, corruption, and e-Government has not yet been clarified. Additionally, the study of the impact of ICTs in emerging economies still remains in its infancy; above all regarding the democratic and networking implications of these types of new political-institutional systems¹.

This chapter addresses the development of e-Government in Central American countries by analyzing three specific democratic dimensions of political systems: transparency, anti-corruption, and accountability. The core objective is to study the current usage of e-Government as a platform (for new agencies, bodies, commissions, institutional networks, etc.) that has been created to foster and promote the aforementioned democratic dimensions. The main research question can be formulated as follows:

Does e-Government reinforce the fight against corruption, encourage transparency, and promote accountability in Central American governments?

This study proposes, as a tentative hypothesis, that e-Government is a mechanism that favors the

promotion of transparency, accountability, and non-corruption in countries with emerging economies, because it promotes independent institutions that specifically seek these institutional ends. Nonetheless, due to its limitations, this chapter only provides evidences to explore this hypothesis instead of providing a conclusive answer.

This chapter analyzes the case of a group of six, infrequently studied, emerging Central American economies that employ e-Government. Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama have very similar histories, geographical positions, and political, institutional, and socio-cultural features (García, 2005; Martí, 2004; Seligson & Booth, 1995). The size and proximity of these six countries has meant that they have often been treated collectively in spite of the fact that Costa Rica is atypical (above all, from the point of view of political and economic performance, according to various international indexes) (Alcántara, 2008). Thus, this geographical area deserves attention in its own right and offers the opportunity for comparative analysis.

The methodological approach of this chapter is twofold: Firstly, this work assesses secondary documents and undertakes a literature review of previous research on developing countries and e-Government. Secondly, it focuses on the *legal/institutional dimension* regarding transparency, combating corruption and enforcing accountability in Central American countries during the last decade. Additionally, it addresses a *procedural/technological dimension* focusing on Web technology deployment across a range of new agencies legally established by the Central American governments for the advancement of the aforementioned democratic dimensions. These methods facilitate triangulation of the analysis and conclusions about the significance of e-Government in order to promote good governance in Central America.

The remainder of this chapter is organised as follows: The second section describes the significance of e-Government and focuses on its

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