Chapter 25

Municipal E-Government Services in Emerging Economies:
The Latin-American and Caribbean Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines and discusses the approach taken by local governments in developing countries to using the Web as a means of providing e-services. In particular, we focus on the capital cities of Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries to discover whether their public administrations are using the Internet to transform how they interact with citizens through the delivery of online public sector services, thus advancing a benchmarking process. An empirical study was carried out of e-government services in these cities, focusing on the content of e-services by applying the CapGemini (2009) methodology, which has been widely used in prior research. Our findings confirm the existence of a wide variety of e-services among the cities examined, with many of these local administrations remaining unaware of the possibility of using Internet to facilitate the delivery of public sector services. Therefore, there is great scope for improvement in the field of e-government. Reforms in public administration are needed in order to make government more participative and open. Likewise, setting effective policies to ensure e-inclusion is the key to the future of LAC's new empowered societies, with a more visible voice and more chances to express their concerns.

INTRODUCTION

There is increasing public awareness of the need to endow public sector bodies with effective, efficient management systems, rationalizing the use of financial resources and improving the performance of public services. Public administrations need to be made more efficient (Rocheleau & Wu, 2002) and more transparent (Piotrowski & Van Ryzin, 2007), building an operative framework which facilitates competitiveness, provides more information and enhances participation in public life (Fieldman & Khademian, 2007).

In response to increasing demands by their citizens, numerous countries have implemented changes in public administration, applying the principles of New Public Management (NPM), adopting tools providing greater transparency and increasing citizens' involvement in the decision-making process (Bonson et al., 2006).

The implementation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in public administrations (e-government) is considered to be among the most important items on current political agendas with respect to transforming and modernizing public administrations (Jaeger, 2003; Borins, 2001; Chan & Chow, 2007). E-government can often act as a conducting mechanism to accelerate the decentralization of public administration, promoting the adoption of new technologies in order to meet NPM objectives, thus meeting social demands efficiently and effectively (Welch & Hinnant, 2002) and, at the same time, improving the capacity of governments to supervise activities (Thorson et al., 2005). In addition, the implementation of ICTs in public administrations could reduce both administrative costs and the time devoted to repetitive tasks by civil servants (Yen & Evans, 2005), offering greater transparency to public administration (Wong & Welch, 2004; Ya & Tat-Kei Ho, 2005), improving the current performance of public sector services (Hartley, 2005) and expanding the access to services, thanks to the 24 hours a day, 7 days a week availability of the Internet (West, 2004; Scott, 2006).

Accordingly, in recent years, public administrations have created official websites, viewing e-government as an Internet-driven activity that improves citizens' access to government information, services and expertise, thus enhancing their participation and satisfaction with the government (United Nations and the American Society for Public Administration, 2002). The Internet is now one of the tools most widely used by the public to access government financial information (Borins, 2002), and the most common form of e-government initiatives has been to establish a government-run website or portal (Joseph & Jeffers, 2009). Thus, many public administrations use ICTs both to offer the digitalization of procedures –public services– and to introduce a website oriented towards economic transparency, allowing users free, easy and appropriate access to fiscal and economic information on the management of public finances.

Nonetheless, although e-government has been promoted over many years, by a variety of international bodies (see, for example, G-7, 1997; OCDE, 1998), developments in the implementation of ICTs in public administrations have been slower than the technical advances made. Moreover, although public administrations have developed websites and leading edge cities have invested, albeit in a fairly finite set of functions (Kaylor et al., 2001), their efforts to improve performance regarding public sector services and online government information remain irregular (Paris, 2005). In fact, e-government has been penetrating national government much more rapidly than local government (Edmiston, 2003; Streib & Willoughby, 2005). In this regard, although e-government has been adopted by many municipal governments, it is still at an early stage and has failed to obtain many of the outcomes promised in e-government rhetoric (Moon, 2002). Studies such as that of Shackleton et al. (2004) indicate that apart from Web based information provision, little progress

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