

Chapter XXVI

E-Governance and the Information Society in Periphery

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ABSTRACT

Finland is among the leading information societies. The national information society strategy aims to make the information society accessible by every person in the country from anywhere, regardless of gender, age, or social status. The aim of this welfare-based task is to provide a good life for everyone facilitated by e-governance. At the same time, the strategy aims to enhance the innovativeness and economic competitiveness of the country. The cases of the Oulu urban area and the Kainuu region indicate that despite national strategies, in practice the information society is built locally. Its organization seems not to wither the development differences. The implementation of welfare centered e-governance has challenges. Providing a good life in the information society in Finland by combining social welfare and economic competitiveness is mainly found in the rhetoric of national strategies and not in local practice.

INTRODUCTION

“A good life in an information society” is the key vision of the National Knowledge Society Strategy in Finland for 2007–2015. The goal is to support the transformation of Finland into an internationally attractive, human-centric and competitive knowledge and service society (Government of

Finland, 2006, p. 4). Finland is an interesting case in regard to the development of the information society (IS). The penetration of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as mobile phones, broadband and the Internet, has been fast and comprehensive compared to most countries. In addition, the relative investment into research and development (R&D) and the

general level of education are among the highest in the world.

According to the Finnish IS strategy both social welfare and global competitiveness can be reached simultaneously. The strategy stresses well structured organization of e-governance in the pursuit of a welfare based IS. The national goal relies on the broader European Union i2010 strategy, which promotes inclusion as well as growth and employment in accordance with sustainable development. Public service development and the resulting improvements in the quality of life are of primary importance (Government of Finland, 2006, p. 14). From the viewpoint of the administration, and supported by a number of Finnish and international scholars, there is something unique in the Finnish IS approach. This approach has been labeled the Finnish model (Castells & Himanen, 2002), model 2.0 (Himanen, 2004) or the Finland phenomenon (Government of Finland, 2006). This approach focuses on “understanding that developing knowledge, structures and business environments will make a good life possible for individuals and enterprises, even under conditions of increasing competition. The competitive factors of a transformed Finland are an open society, a good and safe living environment, the opportunity to flexibly combine work, family and leisure time, as well as the continuous development of knowledge” (Government of Finland, 2006, p. 4; also SITRA 1998).

The message highlighted in the Finnish IS strategy is confidence in technology and administrative processes. The existing digital divides are being narrowed by active policies. As a result, any remaining outsider in the Finnish welfare IS should be included. Comprehensive digital infrastructure and networks, computer and Internet literacy and interactive e-governance are among the tools needed to reach this goal. E-governance in the Finnish context means a comprehensive technical IS infrastructure, the ability to be an active member in the IS regardless of place of residence or of gender, social status or age, and

openness, transparency and accessibility of the public sector through the IS infrastructure. The transformation from face-to-face situations into digitally mediated encountering under governance takes place. The Finnish IS should be territorially even, socially just and globally economically competitive.

National governments in the western world are designing and implementing various e-policies. E-government is viewed as enhancing trust in governments through government accountability and by empowering citizens (Demchak et al., 2000). This is not only a national project but also a regional and local one. All European Union regional and local governments are involved in e-government initiatives, although in many cases with a low level of interactivity (Pina et al., 2007, p. 464). The introduction of information and communication technologies and digital networks offers the possibility of reaching an interactive e-governance between different interest groups in society, including those of the public sector, business and citizens (Fountain, 2001; Levine, 2002; Pina et al., 2007). However, some scholars have been skeptical of these possibilities. They see the current e-government development only as a change in the format of top-down oriented information flows. The seeming simplicity and determinism of the technological variable actually becomes a trap for true e-governance (Chadwick, 2003; Heeks, 2003; Bolgherini, 2007).

In this chapter we analyze how the IS is constructed in Finland in regard to IS policies, economic competitiveness and social welfare. Particular attention is given to e-governance, i.e. how the IS is organized in practice according to technical development actions and socio-political dimensions. Public-private and university collaborations are the platform in these processes, which include the development of services, their distribution according to end-user needs and market demand (social needs vs. market potential), and the evaluation of their impact on local areas.

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