

Chapter 2.11

The Role of M-Government in Western China Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of m-government in Western China development. Bureaucracy has been identified as a barrier for economic development in Western China. It is discussed how applications of m-government embedded in a larger reform agenda has reduced some of the growth stifling effects of bureaucracy. This chapter describes the content of ideas, institutions, and technologies of m-government to understand how fitting these levels has led to such an improvement in governance. Recommendations are made concerning continued emphasis on simple applications, rethinking government organisation, and increased discussion of the role of private service providers.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the role of mobile government in Western China development. Mobile government, or m-government, is understood broadly as the use of mobile information and communication technologies (ICT) in the public administration to change government working procedures. The scarce research available on m-government in China emphasises the opportunities in service provision and organisational innovation created by mobile ICT (Li, 2005; Fan & Li, 2006;

Song & Cornford, 2006), and political practice is reflecting this enthusiasm.

China is a one-party authoritarian state keeping control with development of critical infrastructure such as ICT. Government use of ICT is thus important, as government has historically been the first, and necessary, mover in the spread of new technologies. And the government has moved. Use of ICT as communication platform in governance, informatisation, has become a corner stone of economic and administrative reforms clearly reflected in central policy documents (Central Government, 2006). Informatisation is perceived as intrinsic to modernisation and development

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processes, and large investments have been made to build ICT infrastructure with the long term objective of maintaining momentum in China's unprecedented economic growth.

M-government applications entered the Chinese scene around 2003, when the government used SMS (Short Message Service) to communicate with people during the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak. The short time-span considered, m-government has already seen some important applications, primarily in the more developed coastal provinces. Large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou have implemented urban management networks that imply fundamental changes in both ways of thinking and doing government (Song & Cornford, 2006). In rural areas things have also changed, even if on a more modest scale. SMS services such as weather forecasts and news about agricultural technology have helped farmers optimise their production and reduce waste of crops resulting from unforeseen weather changes. These m-government applications do not stand alone, but come in a multi channel package with other ICT mediated government services such as radio and TV broadcasts and telephone hotlines.

The economic growth in China has been unevenly distributed. Coastal China has seen impressive growth rates, while Western China has been left behind. Policies have been implemented to enhance development of Western China, and new ICT adds important dynamics to these policies. Researchers have been discussing the "e-transformation" of Western China referring to the use of new ICT to promote more flexible markets and enhance economic development potential of the region (Davison, et al., 2005). One of the barriers to development they found was that "bureaucracy can be stifling" (Davison, et al., 2005: 65). This chapter takes up the discussion of how bureaucracy has been made more service oriented and less stifling through the application of m-government solutions, thereby diminishing a barrier for development in Western China.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: First, a digital governance analytical framework is presented. Then, the analytical background of Western China is described. Following, the technologies, ideas, and institutions shaping the context for m-government are analysed. In each part it is discussed how fit between these levels can be attained. On this basis questions for further research are raised. Finally, conclusions on the role of m-government in Western China development are made.

DIGITAL GOVERNANCE MODEL

In this section, we discuss how to understand the role of mobile ICT in processes of institutional change. The theoretical challenge is to capture the importance of ICT without claiming that application of a particular technology will lead to a particular outcome. This can be achieved by constructing a theory that focuses on how the interplay between ideas, institutions, and technologies shapes the opportunity structures for powerful actors. Below, such a theoretical model will be proposed. We take the point of departure in technologies.

An apparent feature of m-government is the use of a particular set of technologies namely mobile ICT. Technology is "the use of scientific knowledge to specify ways of doing things in a reproducible manner" and the artefacts used in the process (Castells, 2000: 28). In this definition technology encompasses technical infrastructure such as e.g. mobile handsets, and transmitting devices, as well as the specialised knowledge about how mobile communication is achieved exemplified by technical knowledge held by engineers and technical personnel of government and in particular in telecommunication companies.

A theory of m-government should lead to an understanding of the mobile technologies. On the other hand, focusing solely on the technological component would likely lead to the technological

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