

An Assessment of the Open Government Web Site in Mongolia

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INTRODUCTION

The open government Web site was initiated and developed under the direct guidance and support of the prime minister of Mongolia in 2002. The project was initially supported by USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and The Asia Foundation from 2004. The main purpose of the Web site is to strengthen the linkage between the private sector and government and to facilitate public contribution of opinions to state policies and laws. The Web site has four major sections namely: legislation (draft laws, Parliament agenda, and links to laws); discussion (forum, online conference, questions, and answers); links; and search engine. Moreover, there is an opportunity to subscribe to the Open Government newsletter.

This article describes the current status of the open-government Web site in Mongolia, its strengths and weaknesses and provides a framework for future action in order to improve service delivery

BACKGROUND

The concept of e-government was introduced to Mongolia in 2001 (Enkhargal & Ariunaa, 2001) when government organizations were furnished with computers, networks and necessary equipment and some locally and internationally developed software. At the workshop on public administration reform, one of the sessions was dedicated to the use of technology for delivering government services. The concepts of what is e-government and e-governance were introduced, the former described as the opportunity for government to provide government information to citizens and the latter described as providing government services online to the public. (Heeks, 2001). Although there are different definitions of e-government and e-governance, there were no major debates or discussions held on their definite distinctions.

Information and communications technology (ICT) in the government of Mongolia refers mainly to the use of hardware, the internal organizational network setting, use of different software and applications, and access to the Internet. Apart from the physical hardware, the important issue is how to utilize investments in ICT to better serve citizens of the country. There are a number of ways to do that: (1) by developing an office management system; (2) by setting up Web sites and providing information; (3) by providing opportunities for strengthening linkages between the private sector and government; and (4) by facilitating communication with the public on matters of policies and laws.

The open-government Web site of Mongolia was referred to by the *World public sector report 2003* of the United Nations as one of the examples of “listening to citizens.” (UNDP, 2003, p. 174). Since its launch in 2003, the open-government Web site has been highly promoted and publicized. It is seen as the best means to bring the voices and concerns of the public and the private sector to the government. The front page of the Web site has welcoming remarks by the prime minister of Mongolia, who says that “24/7 (meaning the Web site is accessible 24 hours a day and 7 days a week) running Web site will enable YOU to express your opinions to the government with transparency and to co-rule the country with us.” The prime minister also assures citizens that the government will take into consideration their “valuable, comments, initiatives, and support.” (Open Government, 2005.)

Currently, there have been over 124,270 visitors to the open government Web site which translates to over 100 visitors per day (Open Government, 2005). The forum discussions are highly popular and account for most of the visitors to the Web site. The rules of discussions require that users should “express their opinions freely, without using insulting or offensive language and must respect others’ opinions” (Open Government, 2005). The Web site administrator has the right to delete comments when rules are violated and he or she is “not responsible

for the content of people's comments" (Open Government, 2005).

The open government Web site has links to Web sites of 17 governmental organizations, 10 media, eight international organizations, seven NGOs, 11 IT companies, and four others, including reference to CNN and BBC. In addition, there is a "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ) section, which provides preset answers to questions commonly asked by visitors. The prime minister visits the Web site regularly; and also gets comments in abbreviated format every two weeks. Visitors to the Web site are not expected to write directly to the prime minister, but the Web site performs the function of the messenger.

STRENGTHS OF OPEN GOVERNMENT WEB SITE

The open government Web site of Mongolia has a number of strengths namely that:

1. The prime minister has been personally involved in supporting and promoting the Web site. Without his leadership role in developing the Web site content and without his encouragement to government officials to regularly visit the Web site and provide their input, the open government Web site would have remained static.
2. It publishes draft laws for public discussion on the Web site, which provides citizens with the opportunity to make their input to the draft laws.
3. The regular visitations of government officials at the open-government Web site provide opportunities for them to give quick feedback on issues and concerns raised by the public.
4. Every two weeks, the prime minister and ministers are informed of the progress made at the open-government Web site. Issues raised on the government Web site are discussed at the meeting and given recommendations for follow-up by line ministries, agencies and other governmental organizations.

WEAKNESSES OF OPEN GOVERNMENT WEB SITE

The Mongolia open government Web site also has a number of weaknesses, such as:

1. The local area networks at the ministries and agencies are not operational in the true sense of LANs. This in effect hampers individual government officials in providing information and services from their desks.
2. The process of getting input on laws and regulations from the public is complex. Such inputs are received by the ministry/agency representative on duty, passed on to his or her boss, then further to the prime minister before it is affected into the draft law or regulation after it has been discussed.
3. Apart from the discussion forum, which is the most visited part of the Web site, the other parts are not regularly maintained.
4. There is little information or feedback to the public about which of the suggestions were considered for integration into draft laws and regulations.

Despite its strengths and weaknesses, the open-government Web site has had an impact on citizens and businesses. They are realizing that there is a new way of reaching the government, using computers and networks; that the government is willing to open up to public through this Web site and that the citizens and businesses could contribute to draft laws—a new tendency in the relationship between citizen and government. Although, it is difficult to say how much businesses use this Web site, the information available on the site seems important to them, such as the linkages to the Web sites of government organizations and the opportunity to contribute to the draft laws. Still, many challenges lay ahead. This includes the opportunity for accessing this Web site not only from the capital city, but also from different parts of Mongolia as well as by representatives of different groups of society, especially those who do not have computers at home or have no access to Internet (or cannot afford to pay for this kind of services). Mongolia is a largely dispersed country with few citizens (1.5 million square kilometres and 2.6 million population) (Statistics for Mongolia, 2001). Around 1 million people live in Ulaanbaatar and the remaining 1.5 million are widespread throughout the huge territory of Mongolia with limited access to information and technology. How to reach these one and half million people outside the capital is one of the great challenges for open government in Mongolia. Although Mongolia is considered a highly educated country with a high rate of literacy (97% by 2001 figures) (Human Development report of Mongolia, 2001), the infrastructure still is an issue for people from the rural part of Mongolia preventing them from having

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