E-Government in the Information Society

Lech W. Zacher
Leon Kozminski Academy of Entrepreneurship and Management, Poland

INTRODUCTION

The information society (IS), which nowadays is the emerging form of the organization of advanced societies (see e.g., Castells, 1996; May, 2002; Zacher, 2000a, 2000b), is governed more and more by the use of electronic devices and systems. That is why the concept of *e-government* was introduced and practically implemented. (For a historical perspective, see the article on Historical Perspective of E-Government).

BACKGROUND: BASIC FUNCTIONS AND VARIOUS MEANINGS OF E-GOVERNMENT

Apart from the technical side (e.g., infrastructure, equipment, programs) *e-government* can be defined as a *set of practices or activities* of various kinds—ranging from political decisions, national legislation, international actions, and so forth, to public services for citizens on a local level—which use ICTs. Such practices can be not only high-level decisions and general regulations, but also information and services available for individuals, groups, communities connected with possible public support, job opportunities, on line payments, various advice and so on.

Thus, e-government can be defined as the production and delivery of services (including information) within government and between government and the public—using ICTs (see e.g., Fountain, 2004). In the broader definition, not only practices enhancing access to and delivery of services are mentioned but also more general aim—to improve relations between government institutions and citizens (Heichlinger 2004).

Electronic or in other words info-communication technology (nowadays mostly digital) is just a powerful new instrument of politics, decision making, public administration, and governance. So it can be evaluated from the point of view of its applicability, appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency—all not only in a technical but also a political sense. On the other side citizens and facilitations of their life and activities (e.g., in business) can be the reference point. Under democratic political regimes, the latter is underlined.

Ideally, e-government should mean less management and more stewardship of government (all levels and agencies) and more citizens' participation. Therefore, e-government can be not only more efficient public services but also a *part of democratic process*. Alternatively e- government can be substantially commercialized (citizens become then customers or clients solely) and can be treated as a "technical tool." Of course, in practice some mixed solutions are possible and possibly most realistic (in any market economy).

E-government as it is now in the advanced countries (e.g., in the EU—see e.g., e-Forum and e-Europe Web sites) appears to be a fundamental issue especially on a local level. On this level, authorities and administrations have frequent and mostly direct contact with citizens and other stakeholders (e.g., companies, NGOs, foreign firms).

Applications of electronic instruments (or in other words ICTs) in politics, administration and management proved to be extremely useful and efficient at least in certain fields like

- Identification, recognition, and documentation of needs of various social groups which are consumers of public services
- Improvement of efficiency and also transparency and trust (making public all procedures and other information)
- Information policy (i.e., publications of various reports, official documents, projects and plans to be debated) and citizens' participation (by use of interactive media)

E-government as a result of the application of ICTs in public administration activities and having multifaceted impacts will enhance *e-governance* and *e-democracy*. Moreover, its transforming role makes it an important characteristic and a part of IS.

From the beginning e-government oriented predominantly to the needs of bureaucracy, and the information of its work, procedures, and so forth had to be more effective, relevant, and easier. Then the massive access to the Internet, online information, and better communication between public administration and citizens made a difference. The participation of citizens, clients, and various stakeholders in shaping and providing public ser-

vices became politically possible and technically feasible. Moreover, participation was often declared as an important social value under democracy. Therefore, the management of public matters was somewhat transformed—*via* e-government into e-governance.

Moreover, due to the integration of bureaucratic work and its networking, the public administration institutions served their clients much better (i.e., faster) without multiplied visits in these institutions, without multiple data presentations, without corruptive situations.

There were some necessary stages of e-government evolution (or rather its building). The initial step was always a simple *Web site*, which served as the first contact and source of information about the institution, its services, procedures, and so forth. The next step was to make the relation between the institution and its clients interactive. The interactive Web site is possible only if some technological, organizational, and legal conditions are fulfilled (e.g., some necessary connections between Intranet system of an institution with Internet as an external system, validity of electronic signature). Further stages of the evolution are the following:

- Multifunctional fully interactive portals
- Personalized portals providing integrated services
- One official portal for all public services providing an integrated packages of services

The sequence of evolutionary stages of e-government has not only a technological dimension. The consecutive changes shift the communication between citizens and public administration to *virtual space* (time and physical space are not important any more). Further change makes inner structures and competence pattern of public institutions meaningless as well. Moreover, these processes are accompanied by steadily growing depersonification.

MAIN ISSUES OF E-GOVERNMENT

E-government is still *in statu nascendi,* in its developing stage, accumulating experience, improving functioning. Moreover, in some countries it is already well grounded in the mentality, organization of the public sphere, in politics. However, in some it is still a new concept not practically explored yet. This is the problem of the transition economies especially those joining EU. Of course, there are many challenges faced by public administration and public organizations in all countries trying to use ICTs to serve societies better.

There are at least four groups of challenges:

- Legal issues
- Accessibility issues
- Economic issues
- Social issues

The *legal issues* in e-government concern such questions like privacy, authentication, taxation, various e-submissions, also e-voting and e-government presence in the courts, and so forth. It is evident that the adoption of e-government (or in other words—e-government techniques) has to affect legal systems and legal practices.

The *accessibility problem* of e-government applications in countries advanced and rich, with good technical infrastructure, a high level of computer literacy is limited mostly to groups of citizens with some disabilities (physical, cognitive, hearing, and vision impairments). Therefore, these applications ought to be user-friendly and inclusive. A more difficult issue to solve is—in the context of e-government (or e-governance in broader sense)—what to do with an often quite large social margin or socially excluded people (e.g., former prisoners) permanently unemployed, homeless, very poor, illegal migrants, and so on. Of course, the solution cannot be in this case only techno-organizational.

Growing e-government throughout Europe and the world is costly, which makes it an *economic issue*. Until recently, the fascination of ICTs use in public administration overweighed the question of return on investment. E-government as a certain benefit for citizens' use of resources (always limited) should prove its economic validity and effectiveness.

Social issues were already previously discussed. What can be added here is that the accessibility issue also has financial and social dimensions. Needless to add that social adoption and use of e-government applications require learning, computer literacy, and so forth. Moreover, it is expected that broadly understood e-government (or rather e-governance) facilitates inclusion, participation, democracy. This also has an important political meaning.

E-government is not only about faster and better provision of public service. It can give groups of citizens and of individuals not only some satisfaction but also citizen or community identity, some possibilities to act and to interact with others, to enable sharing of experience. Groups and individuals are not separated and closed any more since the Internet gives them an opportunity to function in the "connected intelligence" system (to use the de Kerckhove term—Kerckhove, 1997). This somewhat external input will certainly contribute to local, regional, and national e-government and could be seeds for world e-governance.