

Electronic Service Delivery in the Local Indian Community of Visakhapatnam

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INTRODUCTION

New public management (NPM) conceptualised public administration as a business, to be managed with business-like techniques. Since services had to be assessed by the criteria of quality, efficiency, and satisfaction of citizens, the public sector had to reorganize its processes. As strong emphasis was on the services, improving their delivery was expected to facilitate achieving the above criteria. The terms of the NPM approach such as “customer focus, managing for results, and performance management” have become part of the standard language of public administration (Ali, 2001; Bekkers & Zouridis, 1999; Crossing Boundaries, 2005; Spicer, 2004).

BACKGROUND: ICTS IN IMPROVING PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are considered to raise the speed and quality of the public service delivery. Expected increase in public access to government services and information leading to more openness, facility for remote communication and transactions, scope for citizens’ virtual participation in democratic processes, reduced costs of public services, rebuilding relationships between governments and citizens, and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of delivery so that services can be accessed by citizens at any place/time were the reasons to embrace the ICTs (Ali, 2001; Bekkers & Zouridis, 1999; Phythian & Taylor, 2001). Many developed countries have decided to utilize ICTs for delivery of public services. The Canadian government wanted to achieve the status of the government most connected to its citizens, enabling them access to all government information and services online at the time and place of their choosing by 2004 (Government of Canada, 1999). The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom set a target of making all central government public services available over the Internet and the Web by 2005 (National Audit Office, 2002). Australia had set a more ambitious target for electronic service delivery (ESD) of 100% of all appropriate services electronically on the

Internet by 2001. The United States and Germany were rated highly for interactivity and transparency of government Web sites. Similar to the above, various governments have set targets of interest in improving public service delivery through electronic channels has been rising.

ESD—AN OVERVIEW

With regard to transactions over the Internet, viz. the ESD, there are different definitions. The e-Europe 4-stage framework defines the transactions as follows (Scottish Executive, 2004).

- Online information about public services
- One-way interaction, for example, downloading of forms, discussion forum, e-mail
- Two-way interaction, for example, forms returned electronically, e-mail response
- Full online transaction, for example, full electronic interaction including order, delivery, payment, and posting of transactions

West (2004) states that features are defined as services only if the entire transaction can occur online ... if a citizen has to print out a form and then mail it back to the agency to obtain the service, we do not count that as a service that can be fully executed online. Searchable databases count as services only if they involved accessing information that results in a specific government service response” (p. 5). He assessed that North America (including the United States, Canada, and Mexico) offered the highest percentage of online services with 53% of sites having fully executable online services. The Pacific Ocean islands (43%), Asia (30%), Western Europe (29%), and the Middle East (19%) were the other regions, in that order. Of the 198 nations analyzed by his study, Singapore had the largest number of services, with an average of 9.5 services across its various government agencies. Bahrain (5.0 services), China (3.2), the Bahamas (3.0), the United States (2.9), Hong Kong (2.5), Australia (2.3), and New Zealand (2.1) were notable countries.

Ronaghan (2002) feels that “all government services can be classified under one of three fundamental categories: informational, interactive, and transactional” (p. 8). As services are the public face of governments, providing the citizens an efficient and alternative medium to interact with the service providers became the primary objective of e-government initiatives. For this article, Ronaghan’s classification is used.

CRITIQUE OF ESD

It has been cautioned that the Internet is just another medium for service delivery. Lack of connectivity to the Web, inferior technology, limited e-mail capacity, and absence of intranets have to be addressed before realistically expecting online service delivery to be effective. Ronaghan (2004) considers that, “online service delivery should be thought of as complementary rather than accepting the more popular view that it will ultimately replace many traditional channels for public service delivery” (p. 4). Bekkers and Zouridis (1999) have reservations on the use of ICTs for service delivery due to democratic implications. They question “the consumer model of democracy and its contribution towards improved democratic relationships between citizens and public administration” (p. 190). There has been a concern among “academics, activists and elected officials that government Web sites might focus more on providing services, and less on facilitating civic involvement. This type of service orientation, they argue, treats citizens as consumers rather than partners in government, and thus inhibits public engagement with the nation’s political environment” (Ronaghan, 2002, p. 9).

There are criticisms that in order to catch up with the private sector, the public sector has largely mimicked what the former has done in e-commerce and adopted it as a model for delivering electronic services (Kaylor, Deshazo, & Van Eck, 2001). The other criticism is that e-government focuses upon relatively simple transactions. According to Anttiroiko, “the traditional representative system gives citizens two basic roles, those of voters and service users.” He hopes that the experience gained in Finland will certainly help when designing new forms of citizen-centred e-governance not only in Finland but also in other advanced information societies (Anttiroiko, 2004). Lenk (2002) points out that “the activities of public sector organisations are much more diverse than a focus on ‘services’ suggests” (p. 88). We hope that the widespread concern expressed by scholars on the hitherto “service users” dimension of the citizens in e-governance projects and confining the e-services to less complex services

would result in due attention for the role of the citizen as “voter.” Similarly the complex nature of services needed by the citizens might be addressed while implementing e-governance across the globe.

E-GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

India, a leading advocate of e-governance in the developing world was assessed to possess an e-government index of mere 1.29, indicating a minimal e-government capacity (Ronaghan, 2002). E-governance efforts in India so far have been targeted towards higher-level government organisations. A few local governments have adopted e-governance. Norris and Moon (2005) noted that “relatively few governments in the United States at any level and of any size have developed truly sophisticated e-government offerings. Most e-government in the United States today is principally informational—that is, it involves the one-way transmission of information from government to citizens, usually by way of static information pages (“brochureware”), downloadable forms, and e-mail (p. 64). Earlier, Edmiston (2003) acknowledged that in the United States “most state and local government Web sites today remain in this (publishing) stage. Currently, information tends to be quite substantial, but the ability to interact with government online, which is the next step, is much more limited, especially at the local level” (p. 26).

LOCAL E-GOVERNANCE

Regarding e-government in The Netherlands, Leenes and Svensson (2002) stated that “large national organisations implement Electronic Service Delivery (ESD) fairly successfully, while municipalities are slow to adopt ESD. This is a pity, since municipalities account for over 70% of the public services. Carbo & Williams (2004) said that around 80 % of citizens’ transactions are occurring at the local government level. With regard to the United States, Norris, and Moon (2005) stated that “grassroots governments are closest to citizens and deliver the greatest number of services directly to the people” (p. 65). However, they claimed that even in United States, “local government Web sites, measured by the number of online transactions available, are not particularly sophisticated” (p. 75). In India too, only a few local governments have adopted e-governance and are delivering services electronically. The primary cities of New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai are nowhere near these few cities. They have Web sites, which fall under “brochureware” and contain a substantial number of “dormant” or “desert sections.”

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