

Chapter XLI

Toward E–Government Sustainability: The Information Network Village Project in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

As a nationwide e-government project in South Korea, the Information Network Village project was launched in 2001. It was designed to increase accessibility to e-government services by reducing the digital divide in rural areas and to improve the income level of local residents by boosting regional economy through e-commerce. As of 2007, more than 300 villages are working on- and off-line. Information centers, networked to high-speed Internet, were built in each village. Personal computers were distributed to most households and a website of each village was created to facilitate e-commerce activities. Government reports and evaluation research highlight the performance of the six-year-old project. This chapter revisits, not the performance, but the governance structure, the implementation process, managerial capability, and the administrative value of the project for the purpose of further strengthening its enabler-role in reducing the digital divide and expediting regional development. Policy lessons are summarized to foster the sustainability of e-government projects with consideration of diverse perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Internet and other information communication technologies (ICTs) has fundamentally changed the environment as well as the

process in which governments deliver public services to citizens, business, and other government entities. Internal and external relationships of the public sector were transformed by applying ICTs to promote government accountability, increase

administrative efficiency, and induce active public participation. Most countries around the world and most localities within a national boundary try to ride the crest of the e-government wave. In their process of implementing e-government projects, however, many countries are facing the issue of the digital divide as a major barrier or risk (Malecki, 2003; Norris, 2001). South Korea is no exception. While e-government in South Korea is working as a powerful enabling tool to increase efficiency, enhance transparency, and facilitate public participation (Choudrie & Lee, 2004), there are regional disparities in network infrastructure and human resources, as well as economic and knowledge gaps that need to be addressed (Im & Seo, 2005).

As a nationwide effort to reduce the divide, the Information Network Village (INVIL) project was launched in 2001. The project was initiated by the government recognizing that the benefits from its successful ICT applications and strong e-government capability should be shared with the entire population for a continuous and stable development of the country. Within a short period of implementing the project, many government reports highlighted the positive aspects of the project and its performance (Korea Association of Local Informatization, 2006a & 2007; Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs, 2006). Evaluation research reconfirmed its achievement by elaborating the government reports. Kim and Kim (2004) reviewed the income change of village residents in mountainous areas who took full advantage of the project's e-commerce capacity for marketing local specialties. Kim (2007) emphasized that active on-line communication and interaction among village residents contributed to the rehabilitation of regional communities. Lee (2005) characterized the project and its performance as a strategic way toward a nationwide innovation rather than a regional change. Other studies provide policy recommendations for improving the program management by analyzing under-performing

aspects of the project. Jung and Son (2007) suggested that a successful INVIL project should not only supply PCs or ICT equipment to rural areas, but also integrate local attractions, socio-cultural diversity, and technological components of the project. In particular, tourism was shown to be a critical factor in improving regional economy (Choi, 2005). Seo (2005) warned that excessive emphasis on e-commerce could lead village residents to narrowly define the project goal as maximizing financial profitability, and to undervalue other aspects of the project such as community building, universal access, and democratic participation.

There are also critical voices against the project. Citizens Action Network (2005), a non-profit organization in South Korea monitoring budget process and transparency in public agencies, selected the INVIL project as a case of wasting government money because the project could not foster the villages' capability to generate financial resources for their own management. Unless each village finds a market niche for e-commerce activities, governments should either keep supporting them or reshape the implementation strategy and the target group of the INVIL project. Special reports by the Kukmin Daily News, a major national news paper, are very skeptical of the project's performance. Site visits to the villages along with in-depth interviews with the residents reveal that most of the PCs and ICT equipment distributed to the villages are underused and a limited number of villages are maintaining e-commerce activities (Lee, 2007).

Most government reports and the existing research findings on the INVIL project are focused on the number of villages constructed, the rate of PC penetration, and the boundary of Internet-based activities and participation. Early achievement following the introduction of the project could be influenced by a temporary surge of social attention and residents' participation in the project as a local event (Jang, 2007). In particular, performance evaluations by public

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