

Chapter 22

Designing and Implementing E-Government Projects for Democracy and Social Change in India: Actors, Behaviours, Influences, and Fields of Play

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ABSTRACT

Attracted by the new Information and Communication Technologies, actors across the world have adopted computer-based systems for use in government as a means of reforming inefficiencies in public administration and public service provision. This book chapter, through the study of an electronic property tax collection system in Bangalore, India, seeks to unravel the social dynamics shaping similar e-government initiatives. The research upon which this chapter is based analyses prevailing actor behaviour, motivations, and interactions; examining not only the interplay of local contingencies and external influences acting upon the project's implementation and transformation, but also the disjunctions in these relationships which inhibit the effective exploitation of ICTs in the given context.

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the last two decades, globalisation and Information Technology have been rapidly dismantling traditional barriers to trade, travel, and communication; fuelling great promise for progress towards greater global equity and prosperity. Attracted by the 'hype and hope' of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), developmental actors across the world have adopted complex computer-based network systems and related ICTs for use in government as a means of reforming the

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inefficiencies in public service provision (Ciborra, 2005). However, whilst a number of these electronic governance or e-governance projects have achieved significant results, evidence from the field indicates that despite the reported success stories, the rate of project failure remains particularly high (Dunleavy et. al., 2006). Consequently, there has been an increased questioning of traditional democratic politics in Western liberal democracies, largely due to a decline in and a lack of opportunity for public participation in these processes (Virkar, 2014).

Concerns such as these are largely thought to be embodied in (amongst other phenomena) low voter turnout during elections; a trend particularly noticeable amongst young people where only half of those eligible to vote actually do so (The Electoral Commission Report, 2005). This is especially worrying and problematic for governments, as it speaks of growing political apathy and a broader, more general disillusionment with current political institutions, actors and practices. Whilst it is impossible to comprehensively untangle all the reasons for the decline in civic participation in these countries, there is little doubt that many citizens feel distanced from any sense of political relevance or power, often under the impression that not only will their votes and individual voices be drowned out in the clamour of the crowd, but that the rules which govern their daily lives are drawn up by politicians and bureaucrats whom they will never meet and who are usually extremely difficult to contact (Eggers, 2005).

Leading commentators have described the political processes and institutions integral to Western democracies as undergoing what has been variously described as ‘a crisis of legitimacy’, a ‘credibility crisis’ or a ‘crisis of democracy’ (cf. Habermas, 1985; Archibugi & Held, 1995), and are fast reaching agreement that the fundamental flaw lies in traditional decision-making practices which are, in their current form, often democratically inadequate as they fail to provide extensive and relatively equal opportunities for citizens, communities, and groups to contribute towards the shaping of decision-making agendas (Sclove 1995). The focus of discourse and scholarly activity, both in academic and policy circles, has thus gradually shifted away from a more centralised, top-down conception of ‘government’ – those formal institutions and processes which operate at the level of the nation state to maintain public order and facilitate collective action (Stoker, 1998) – towards the notions of ‘deliberative democracy’ or ‘governance’, ideas which, whilst traditionally synonymous for government, have been captured in recent theoretical work as signifying ‘a change in the meaning of government referring to a new process of governing; or a changed condition of ordered rule; or the new method by which society is governed’ (Rhodes, 1996: 652).

Governance may hence be seen as ultimately being concerned with crafting the conditions for ordered rule and collective action, or with ‘the creation of a structure or an order which cannot be externally imposed, but which is the result of the interaction of a multiplicity of governing and each other influencing actors’ (Kooiman & Van Vliet, 1993: 64). It is, in other words, a conceptual way of capturing shifts in the character of political rule which has been stretched to encompass a range of different transformations; including an emphasis on drawing citizens and communities into the process of collaborative participation in political processes and the creation of new forms of governable subjects (Newman, 2005).

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The idea of governance, and by extension e-Governance, may be therefore said to comprise of two distinct but complementary elements: that of e-Government – which encompasses all the formal institutional

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