

Chapter 62

Engaging Citizens and Delivering Services: The Housing Corporation in Trinidad and Tobago

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ABSTRACT

Globally, governments are attempting to transform their societies with the widespread use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Public agencies consider ICTs as powerful tools to deliver services to citizens and encourage engagement. Debate surrounds issues of e-government and how it can be used to transform service delivery and engagement to citizens. For developing countries research indicates that most of these attempts can be explained as e-government versus e-governance. This article examines initiatives by the Housing Development Corporation in Trinidad and Tobago to provide service delivery to citizens and encourage their participation through electronic means. It also evaluates the effects of the agency's initiatives to citizens and its ability to interact with them. Using content analysis of the agency's website and survey interviews, the study examines four categories taken from two research questions and suggests the extent to which these efforts signal the development of e-government practices by this agency.

INTRODUCTION

Fascination with information technology has penetrated every aspect of human life, work, engagement, business and services. Globally, governments are attempting to manage ICTs in a different way (Cocchiglia & Vernaschi, 2006; Fountain, 2001; Heeks, 2006; West, 2003, 2004; 2005). For many, the challenge is moving beyond just having a government website on the Internet to actually using electronic means to engage citizens and deliver services and encourage their participation in the process.

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E-government and E-governance are interrelated since they relate to the use of ICTs, yet they have differences (Ndou, 2004). E-government can be considered as a micro concept that distinguishes electronic government as a form of developing online services to citizens and the delivery of government and information and services online through the Internet and other digital means (Ramnarine et al., 2010; West, 2001). Conversely, e-governance is a macro concept that deals with the whole spectrum of the relationship and networks within government regarding the usage and application of ICTs (Ramnarine et al., 2010). Therefore, e-governance goes beyond the scope of e-government.

Both e-government and e-governance have the potential to provide opportunities for participation through the use of ICTs which can in turn help improve the way public services are offered and strengthen citizen engagement in administrative and political decision making. It is more than just introducing technology into government activities and processes, but of creating opportunities for democracy with citizens.

Despite the numerous studies on the power and possibilities of using ICTs as a means of transforming societies, the reality is that a number of e-government and e-governance ventures in some parts of the developing world have failed to provide the results needed (Roach & Cayer, 2010; Roach, 2012). Some writers have noted that a significant number of initiatives have suffered from serious deficiencies in the way they were planned and implemented (Heeks, 2006; Roach & Cayer, 2010). E-government and e-governance projects face new kinds of challenges, some of which include the digital divide, leadership, human resources, cost, education and marketing to name a few (Cocchiglia et al., 2005; Roach & Cayer, 2010; Roach, 2012; Saxena, 2005; VasIU & VasIU, 2006; Yigitcanlar, 2003).

In Trinidad and Tobago (TT), the HDC, is a state-owned agency focused on supplying houses and facilities for communities which are reasonably priced to citizens from lower to middle incomes (MOHE Website, 2013). This study examines how the HDC is able to use e-governance to provide service delivery to citizens and how it is attempting to encourage citizen engagement through the same (Research Question One). Furthermore, it will explore how the HDC is able to provide clients with after-sale home care by creating opportunities for citizen interaction using information technology (Research Question Two). In order to facilitate a clear understanding of this, the study uses four categories based on these questions. They include: 1) the relationship between e-governance and its use by the HDC to provide service delivery to citizens; 2) how it (i.e. the HDC) encourages citizen participation through electronic means; 3) the effect of HDC's e-governance initiatives on citizens and its ability to interact with them; and 4) HDC's management of such e-governance initiatives.

A number of key points need to first be considered. First, the study will identify the existing literature on e-government. Second, the study will discuss HDC's structure, services, products and responsibilities. Third, the study will provide the methodology used. Fourth, data will be analyzed and discussed. Fifth, the study will conclude with a summary of the findings, make recommendations and indicate future implications.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

This section focuses on a review of the academic literature which will emphasize the role of ICTs such as the Internet in transforming the way government institutions improve service delivery, and how it encourage greater citizen participation in the decision making process. It begins with a discussion of the

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