Chapter 6

Information and Communication Technologies in Administrative Reform for Development:
Exploring the Case of Property Tax Systems in Karnataka, India

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ABSTRACT

This chapter critically examines the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in governmental reform processes in development through a case study of the Indian State of Karnataka. This study explores the increasing use of ICTs for property taxation and its impact on municipal government reform processes within this developing world context. The case study is focused on a collaboration between the government of the Indian state of Karnataka and the eGovernments Foundation (a non-profit private sector organisation) between 2002 and 2006. This collaboration was designed to reform existing methods of property tax collection by establishing an online system across the municipalities of 56 towns and cities within the state. The case study describes the interactions between new technologies and changing information flows in the complexities of public administration reform. In doing so, this paper examines the interplay of local and external factors shaping the project's implementation. On the basis of this analysis, this case study suggests that disjunctions in these local and external relationships have inhibited more effective exploitation of ICTs in this development context.

INTRODUCTION

Technology, twentieth century modernists prophesied, would dramatically alter the landscape of local, national and international politics. Although the idea of a communications network spanning the globe is not new, the past decade has witnessed the burgeoning growth of new Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), such as the Internet, which reached nearly one-quarter

of the world by 2009. The diffusion of ICTs has enabled the electronic production, transmission, processing, communication, and consumption of increasingly vast quantities of information. What effect will technological change have on the political and governmental arena? Historically, developments in communication technologies have resulted in changes in the way in how governments function, altering existing administrative processes and challenging public agencies to find new ways in which to communicate and interact with their citizens. Today, ICTs are seen to possess the potential to change institutions as well as the mechanisms of service delivery, bringing about fundamental changes in the way governments operate and transforming the relationships between governments and citizens (Misra, 2005).

This chapter engages with issues related to the use of ICTs in the governmental process through a case study of the use and impact of the Internet and Internet-related technologies on municipal government within a developing world context. Given the paucity of empirical research on the interaction between the context of development administration and the process of technology adoption, this paper attempts to trace a collaboration between the government of the Indian state of Karnataka and the eGovernments Foundation (a not-for-profit private sector organisation) between 2002 and 2006. This collaboration was targeted at reforming existing methods of property tax administration within the state and, in the process, establishing a system of online property tax collection across its 57 towns and cities. The case study examines the interplay of local contingencies and external influences, finding them to play a key role in the project's implementation and eventual impact.

GOVERNANCE, GOVERNMENT AND ICTs: A CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION

Since the 1980s, the accelerating pace of globalisation has prompted the growth of literature on how globalisation affects governance. This literature is comprised of a number of disparate "islands of theory" that focus on small parts of the larger question of the impact of globalization. Three domains of thinking have emerged as the most popular within development discourse over the past few years.

The first is that of the 'race to the bottom'; where national governments, locked in fierce competition to keep highly mobile capital within their borders, are forced into lowering labour and environmental regulatory standards and reducing spending on social welfare (Legrain, 2002). Another cluster of literature focuses on the growing importance of non-state actors such as Multinational Corporations (MNCs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and transnational activist networks. A third cluster focuses on the ability of international institutions to effectively support global governance (Drezner, 2004). While distinct, these different strands of thinking share one basic conclusion: rapid development is leading national and international actors to place tremendous demands on the state and its institutions, such as demands for increased accountability and transparency in political decision-making and bureaucratic functioning.

During the same period, discourse and scholarly activity, both in academic and policy circles, has shifted its focus away from a more centralised, top-down conceptions 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 more bottom-up notion of 'governance' and its reshaping and improvement. The idea of governance, while traditionally a synonym for government, has 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, pp. 652-53) by a set of relationships between the state, the market and society. Governance is thus seen to be concerned

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