

Chapter 2

Municipal Mobile SMS Services: An E-Government Initiative of the Municipality of La Paz, Bolivia

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ABSTRACT

The Municipality of La Paz (MLP) has been a pioneer municipal institution in applying Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for its benefit and the benefit of La Paz's citizens in the last 10 years. In 2009 the Government of the Municipality of La Paz (GMLP) developed a new Master Plan, with the objective to further improve its management and to further reduce bureaucracy and corruption. This Plan consisted of several elements, one of them related to ICT, was the introduction of 18 new Web Services of which 9 are Web Geographical Services and 9 are Mobile Short Message System (SMS) Services. This Chapter presents how the MLP developed into a modern and efficient institution while providing services and information to its citizens through these e-Government initiatives and ultimately through the use of mobile phones using SMS. Municipalities and governments in general that are applying mobile services and information are now called "Mobile Governments" or "M-Governments".

INTRODUCTION

The Municipality of La Paz (MLP) has been a pioneer municipal institution in applying Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for its benefit and the benefit of La Paz's citizens in

the last 10 years. Its Mayor, Dr. Juan del Granado Cosio has been in office precisely 10 years and has provided constant leadership and support to all initiatives that lead to transform the municipality into a modern and efficient institution. Municipal ICT services are currently under the responsibility of the Organizational Development and Information and Communications Technologies Direction

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-489-9.ch002

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(DDOTI). Its actual Director, Luis Sergio Valle S., has been an important contributor for the content and general information utilized in this Chapter.

It is well known that ICT services provide several benefits such as increasing the flow, dissemination and processes of information while creating value and knowledge for all: governments, business and citizens. Governments have used ICT in several stages: in the 70's ICT helped the "systematization" of the public administration processes such as accounting, payroll, inventory, tax systems and others (Systems stage); in the 90's ICT helped the development of the Web portals in the Internet, which contained ample and updated information (e-Government stage) and in the 2000's ICT helped the introduction of interactive services such as e-payments, e-bidding participation, e-education, e-commerce, e-health, e-voting and others (Information Society stage). ICT also enable governments to be more efficient and transparent, however to do so requires restructuring the administration and delivery of public services by investing in human resources at all levels as well as in information and communications systems.

Early in 2008, the Government of the Municipality of La Paz's (GMLP) carried out a survey to assess the perception of the citizens of La Paz with regards to the delivery of its services. The results of this survey showed that: (i) construction permits, tax payments and cadastral services were perceived as non efficient, (ii) more information and "socialization" of the entire municipal services platform was needed and (iii) bureaucracy and corruption levels, although greatly reduced, were still relatively important and generalized. Furthermore, the survey also revealed that only 9% of the citizens of La Paz know and has accessed the municipal Web page www.lapaz.bo (GMLP, 2008) either through private Internet or through public Internet facilities such as "Internet Coffees" (estimated to be over 5,000 in the metropolitan area of La Paz).

On the other hand, 84% of the citizens of La Paz have mobile phones, mostly with SMS services (GMLP, 2008). Based on these facts, the DDOTI developed a Master Plan for the year 2009, with the objective to improve the efficiency of the municipality and to present better information about the entire services platform while further reducing bureaucracy and corruption. The Master Plan considered the introduction of 16 new Web Services on top of the 7 existing Web services. Of the 16 new Web services 9 are Web Geographical Services and 9 are Mobile SMS Services as seen in Table 1. The Mobile Services introduction constitute the first instance of the GMLP towards a "Mobile Government" or "M-Government" that extends the benefits of remote delivery of government services and information to those unable or unwilling to access the Internet, at a lower cost and ease of use, as mentioned in a World Bank Background Note (World Bank). The existing Web services and the new Web Geographical Services and the new Mobile SMS services are presented in Table 1 (DDOIT, 2009).

Municipal services through Web pages are not new and have been used worldwide for many years, whereas Mobile SMS services have been introduced in the last few years. Some examples of municipal mobile SMS services can be seen under the Literature Review section. Consequently, the GMLP has shown leadership and is in line with the process of making available the above mentioned e-services through mobile phones, so that many more citizens, mostly from low to medium incomes, will have access to them at a reduced cost.

Mobile SMS services are emerging as the new ICT tools for the following reasons: (i) they reach more people as there are more mobile phones than Internet access points, (ii) they reach more distant places including rural areas, (iii) they are less costly to operate than Internet, (iv) they are easier to operate and learn than PC's and the Internet, (v) they can be used for payments and other financial interactive services and (vi) they can be upgraded

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