

# Chapter 19

## Development of M–Government Projects in a Developing Country: The Case of Albania

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper is a qualitative study regarding m-government in a developing country in Eastern Europe with a poor infrastructure and a democratic history—Albania. To understand why m-government is unavoidable and necessary for Albania, the authors provide an overall picture of the country's current telecommunication infrastructure, which explains some of the current e-government initiatives, and their level of implementation success and barriers to progress. In addition, this paper presents possible benefits of m-government for Albanians, along with possible future applications, challenges, and issues in their implementation.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Internet has tremendously transformed the way business organizations conduct activities. Since the 1990s, public sector organizations have also been applying the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) in innovative ways to conveniently and economically deliver services to and engage citizens, a

set of practices known as electronic government (e-government). Improved transparency, speed, and efficiency through e-government increase trust and reduce perceptions of corruption, in the eyes of the citizens and businesses. Governments also save money by dealing with people via automated online systems rather than face to face or on the phone (The Economist, 2008), integrating and innovating services, and improving employees' productivity by connecting them to the central database.

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## ***Development of M-Government Projects***

However, many e-government projects, even when designed successfully, have been either canceled or not fully utilized because of the lack of users' awareness and/or lack of technological access to these services, a problem quite prevalent in countries with poor telecommunication infrastructure. An explosion in the use of mobile technologies (m-technologies) and wireless networks, especially in countries where wired infrastructure is non-existent or poor, has encouraged and enabled governments to complement e-government services with m-government applications. M-technology for many developing or undeveloped countries can be the major or the only conduit to provide online government services to citizens, businesses, and government employees, thus removing infrastructure constraints.

In this paper we examine the difficult process of implementing e-government services and the necessity of the m-government project in an infrastructure and democracy history poor country, Albania. We selected Albania as the study target because of its unique historic characteristics. Even though Albania is a European country, fifty years of centrally planned economy under a severe communist dictatorship has left the country far behind other European countries, both economically and politically. Wanting and intending to become a member of the European Union (EU), the Albanian government has been working very hard to overcome many challenges such as poor public service infrastructures, high levels of corruption and bureaucracy, and immature democracy culture.

Even though an impressive progress has been made in building the country's IT infrastructure, the wired telecommunication infrastructure still remains poor and Internet access is one of the lowest in Europe (less than 1%). Therefore, very few users can access e-government services. On the other hand, mobile telecommunication has a high penetration rate. Over 90% of all Albanian territory is covered by wireless networks and over 75% of the population owns cellular phones. Thus, delivering online government services through mobile devices (m-government applications) would be

more plausible for Albania. M-government applications can help Albanian government to: (1) provide service access and convenience to citizens and businesses as Albania has poor wired telecommunication infrastructure, poor transportation infrastructure, and difficult terrains; (2) alleviate some of the current problems, such as corruption and a low level of transparency, thus increasing trust and efficiency; and (3) increase efficiency and effectiveness of government employees, by allowing them to have access to the information needed in real-time and update records on the spot. Therefore, Albanian government not only should start designing and building m-government applications, but it should make them a priority since e-government is still at early stages and synergy between the two can be explored and duplications avoided.

In this paper, we used a qualitative study to understand the unavoidable major project toward m-government, possible benefits and barriers, and provide suggestions on the type of applications that would be needed and work the best for Albania. We interviewed many key individuals: employees of different service providers (wired and wireless), government officials who are currently involved in the early planning stage of m-government (different ministries and the National IT Strategy Agency), IT professionals who manage e-government projects, business people, and some citizen users. Also, we obtained relevant government documents and statistics. The results of this research are provided in this paper as follows: first, we provide an overview of the unique characteristics of Albania and its current state of telecommunication (wired and wireless) infrastructure; second, we describe e-government initiatives undertaken by the Albanian government; third, we present the rationale for m-government as an immediate goal for the Albanian government, providing some suggestions of m-government applications that can benefit Albanian government and citizens; and finally, what should and can be done in the near future.

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