E-GOVERNANCE INITIATIVES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: HELPING THE RICH ? OR, CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE POOR?

FARHAD HOSSEAIN

Abstract: The paper examines and analyzes the current status of emerging electronic and web based governance (e-governance) in developing countries. In doing so, theoretically the paper presents the state of governance and development in developing countries and analyzes the dynamics and drawbacks of e-governance in Bangladesh. The paper finds that e-governance can add tremendous dynamism in reforming public administration and can change the mode of interaction between the state and citizens. Equally, the paper also conclude that e-governance if not properly managed can become a preserve of those ‘who have’, while ignoring the plight of ‘who does not have’ access to resources in developing countries. The paper suggests that ignoring the poor and marginalized communities in e-governance initiatives can undermine the prospects of good governance and grassroots capacity building in developing countries. Based on these findings the paper therefore urges development cooperation agencies, national governments and other stakeholders to carefully, openly and critically address the challenges of good e-governance in the developing world.

Introduction

In his scholarly work Professor Guy Peters (2001) brought valuable insights in the areas of changing states, governance, and the public sector. His work brings perspectives in the administrative reforms in developing and transitional countries where he presents the contesting scenarios of the following four models of governance. The Market Models for reforming government claim that private-sector methods are almost inherently superior for managing activities, when compared to those of the traditional public sector. The Participatory State Model is completely the ideological antithesis of the market approach and emphasizes the promotion of political, democratic, and collective mechanisms by laying emphasis on public participation. The third alternative, Flexible Government Model, emphasizes the capability of the government to respond effectively to new challenges and survive in the face of change. And finally, the Deregulated Government Model is built on the assumption that if some constraints on bureaucratic action are eliminated, government could perform its functions more effectively. The work provides directions for future reforms and changes in governance.

Traditionally, governance refers to modes of managing public institutions in terms of ‘effectiveness’ and ‘legitimacy’, the essence of both may be judged on the basis of participation, the rule of law, transparency, and accountability. (Ibrahim 1997) However, over the years governance has evolved to the extent that it is no longer in the domain of public sector alone. The concept of shared governance gives increasing roles to the private and third sector [civil society, NGOs]. (See e.g. Hossain 2001, Nelson 2000, Tvedt 1998) These have led to conceptual challenges in terms of how to define governance in the complex interplay between the state, market, and society – in increasingly divided poor and rich nations. The role of development aid and assistance also has become a crucial point in this complex scenarios for governance. Werlin (2003) brings forward the insight that ‘the inadequacy of governance rather than resources is the primary reason for the gap between poor countries and rich countries’. Werlin is sympathetic and convinced of the need to carry on a research agenda where scholars find a way out of the confusion associated with our inability to know whether governance is helped or hurt by the dichotomies of centralization and decentralization. Such dichotomies can also be found e.g. between bureaucratization and debureaucratization; regulation and deregulation; more control or less control; privatization and public management; downsizing and rightsizing; strict guidelines and flexible guidelines; more expertise and more public input. This he attributed to the limitations of Organizational Theory (rational) – a finely ordered system of super-ordination and subordination in which
higher offices supervise lower ones). Cultural Theory (semi-feudalistic and tradition-bound governance theories and its failure to incorporate politics), Structural-Functional Theory (success of political systems in maintaining political support has failed). He propounded what he calls the Political Elasticity Theory, which attempts not only to reduce confusion in public administration, but also to link comparative administration to comparative politics and development studies. These, above all, are for the search for a better way of governance – i.e. good governance.

The Context of Good Governance and the State of Development in Developing Countries

Theoretically the scope of governance is wide and covers larger issues such as administrative reform, national development policies, democratization, decentralization, corruption, partnerships between the public, private and the third sector, etc. (See e.g. Turner and Hulme 1997) The notion of ‘good governance’ was introduced to international development co-operation in the late 1980s following discussions in mainly World Bank forums on the results of structural adjustment policies. Since then the concept is somewhat clouded by confusion and controversies (Kruiter 1996) despite which it has gained popularity because it can be stated that a major obstacle to the effective performance of public bureaucracies in most developing countries is the excessive concentration of decision-making and authority within central government. Decentralization within the state involves a transfer of authority. It can shift some services to the public from an individual or an agency in central government to some other individual or agency closer to the public. However, in practice, the challenges of good governance through decentralization are many. In most developing countries, there has been a tendency for independent governments to prefer delegating power within the public service (to bureaucrats) rather than giving it up to locally elected authorities. There has been much rhetoric about participation and local autonomy, but central governments have jealously guarded their power. (See e.g. Seppälä 2000; Turner and Hulme 1997; Siddiqui 1992; Khan and Zafarullah 1991) Thus, in practice, governance has remained far from gaining a merit to be called ‘good’.

Problems in Administering Development

There is a general concern that most of the development programs could not reach their goals only because the stakeholders paid too little attention to the administration of development programs. Over a decade ago Samuel Paul (1986) argued that administration or management has always been identified as a neglected factor in development project activities. Later on Ferguson and Gupta (2002) referred to development orthodoxy, one of the lessons learned from the high failure rate of development projects in the past, especially the fact that they lacked local community participation. Critiques argue that there are clear indications that in recent years development management has actually not been improved in developing countries. For example, the World Bank has found that some 51 per cent of its rural development area projects during the period of 1965 to 1985 failed to achieve the Bank’s minimum acceptable rate of return of 10 percent. (Turner and Hulme 1997) Scholars claim that the challenges of development, particularly in rural areas, are not ‘well structured’ problems, as project planning methodologies assume. In most cases they are ‘ill structured’ or simply ‘a mess’. Orthodox project planning methodologies demand large amounts of reliable data. In most developing countries such data is not available, thus planners have to make assumptions. Another challenge to administration in developing countries is political uncertainty and instability. Separation of planning from management causes serious problems – belatedly, in the 1980s, project planners have begun to recognize the problems of implementation. The lack of beneficiary participation also causes problems. All these factors make development activities vulnerable in the long and complex political processes in which aid agencies, political parties, local élites, politicians, bureaucrats, and other interest groups interact. (Turner and Hulme 1997) As a result, critiques argue that the extent of rural poverty has not been reduced in recent years – or may have even worsened. (Quibria 1994) At the same time conditionality of aid used by the donors has lead many development programs to fail in reaching their stated objectives. Donors enjoy strategic supremacy in this process through the carrot of more aid, and the stick of reduced aid. Thus this practice even confuses the context of development aid
further. Ravi Kanbur (2000) states that the (aid) debates of the last fifteen years have been nothing but arguing on conditions for aid.

In these discourses of governance, aid and development, the context of e-governance brings about a completely new perspective. There is no doubt that e-governance will become more and more present around the world in the next few years. For instance there is a belief that over the coming years developing countries and their citizens can also benefit from e-governance, as happens in many industrialized countries. (Backus 2001) Certainly, there is a need for conceptual clarity in the matter – as developing countries also have to apparently cope with the web based e-governance in the coming years.

**Emerging E-governance**

The world is going through an internet revolution where the magnetic ‘e-’ is leading us from mail to e-mail, business to e-business, democracy to e-democracy and from governance to e-governance. This ‘e-’ lead is unprecedented and it is hard to predict its future scope and opportunities that it can provide to our world. The simple concept of e-government means: conducting any aspect of government business operations over the Internet—from providing information by government to paying bills to the government. (Shafritz and Russel 2003) Backus (2001) provided the insight that e-governance is more than just a government web site on the internet. E-government is a form of e-business in governance and refers to the process and structures pertinent to the delivery of electronic services to the public (citizens and business), collaborating with business partners and conducting electronic transactions within an organizational entity. And it is the interaction between government and citizens and government and business, as well as in internal government operations – which claims to simplify and improve democratic, government and business aspects of governance.

Backus (2001) also refers to Gartner’s e-governance model where e-governance can be matured through the following four phases:

A. **Information – Presence:** E-governance means being present on the web, providing the public with relevant information.

B. **Interaction – Intake processes:** The interaction between the government and the public is stimulated by various applications.

C. **Transaction – Complete transactions:** The complexity of technology is increasing, but customer value is also higher. Complete transactions can be done without going to an office – e.g., online services for income tax, property tax, renewal of licenses, visa and passports and online voting.

D. **Transformation – Integration and exchange:** All information systems are integrated and the public can get services at one virtual counter.

However Gartner’s e-governance model does not imply that all institutions have to go through all phases simultaneously. Different departments can be in different and appropriate phases – depending on where the benefits are highest – and also where technological capacity is higher.

In terms of technological efficiency and effectiveness, it apparently looks like that the theories of e-governance can be applied in developing countries. However, in practice, models of e-governance remain a paradox between myth and reality in most countries struggling to overcome their development challenges. The development challenges of the present world and the division between the rich and the poor bring about an ethical perspective to the subject. An in-depth and practical exploration is required to explain the current status, challenges, and the possibilities of people centered e-governance in developing countries.

**State of E-governance in Developing Countries**

The new information and communications technologies are among the driving forces of globalization. They are bringing people together, and bringing decision makers unprecedented new tools for development. At the same time, however, the gap between information “haves” and “have-nots” is widening, and there is a real danger that the world’s poor will be excluded from the emerging knowledge-based global economy. - Kofi Annan (2000)
Comparable indicators of the ‘networked world’ are even more skewed than those in the ‘economic world’. One may ask the question: how? Singh (2000) presents the scenario: the richest 20% of the world’s people accounted for 93.3% of internet users, while the poorest 20% accounted for 0.2% of internet users. While the internet is in theory, the great leveler, in practice, various divides accentuated. For example, South Asia, with 23% of the world’s people, has less than 1% of internet users. Average African countries will not account for more than this percentage – if not less. While only 10% of the people worldwide speak English, almost 80% of all the web sites are in English. There is a strong correlation between the spread of telephone lines, televisions, fax machines, personal computers and internet usage. More importantly, buying capacity has always remained the central question: how many percentages of the people living in the developing world can afford new technologies? The fact of the matter is that by the end of 20th century more than 80% of the people in the world have never heard a dial tone. The above indicators by Singh (2000) may have changed or improved over the years. However his notes have got a message to the academics, policy makers and practitioners in bringing up a different perspective to the subject.

Naturally, having considered the above scenarios, the establishment of e-governance in developing world will sound ‘ambitious’ – and a major daunting task. However, in the era of electronic activities e-governance will proceed forward – even in the developing countries. In the meantime, if not carefully planned, it would foster the technological divides even further and provoke legitimate concerns about ‘inclusiveness’ and ‘exclusiveness’ into the systems of governance. In addition, the emerging e-governance will create opportunities for the ‘few’ and ignore the plights for the ‘many’. But will it lead scholars to re-think alternative definitions of good governance? A brief overview on the state of e-governance in Asia, particularly in Bangladesh will bring forward some empirical perspectives. The description and analysis in the following section are based on the e-governance initiatives of the central government in Bangladesh. It should be noted here that for obvious reasons (e.g. lack of access to classified information) the following discussions are general in nature and do not cover all aspects of e-governance (e.g. inter-governmental communication, information, etc.). However, the discussion brings interesting and practical perspectives on e-governance.

E-governance in Bangladesh: An Emerging Perspective

Despite the advancement of e-governance in various parts of the world, so far the state of web based e-governance in Bangladesh remains far behind than the Western countries. Web based activities have been going on in the country for some time – however the Government-led e-governance initiatives is still in an emerging stage. The state has got an official web page at http://www.bangladesh.gov.org/index.htm – full of information on the activities of different ministries and departments of the Government – with links to various agencies of the Government. Certainly the current web-based governance information (Government of Bangladesh 2005) is much better than that the information the site used to have for example in 2003. (Government of Bangladesh 2003) Currently different ministries are on the web – the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives has not got any e-governance information of its own – except the information on the Local Government and Engineering Department and the information on Dhaka City Corporation on the web. The country got independence in 1971 and since then the establishment of a viable system of local governance has been a challenge for the political decision makers. Despite some remarkable progress towards parliamentary democracy, it is still taking time for the central government to decentralize power to the locally elected authorities. In addition, capacity building of the government institutions remains a major challenge to this overpopulated South Asian country. The remarkable endeavor of transformation of governance through the web-based information is appreciable. Based on the progress of the provided governance related information during 2003 to 2005 one can easily guess that the central government is putting their efforts to advance their current status of e-governance. Indeed, many of the links and information can be very useful – take for example, the website of the Board of Investment (2005) or other relevant websites. However, one may argue about the provided information – e.g. how
useful and interactive these web sites are!? Who are the beneficiaries of the provided web information!? An independent research can evaluate and analyze further the present scope and the future possibilities of grassroots based e-governance in Bangladesh.

Let us imagine a scenario ‘Bangladesh has got a web based e-governance’. If the scenario would come true, who will be the beneficiary of that web based information system? Geographically Bangladesh is a small country – only 144,000 sq km of land has got a large population of around 141,340,476 with a population growth rate of 2.08%. Bangla is the official language and English is widely spoken mainly in the cities. Around 50% of the population is literate. During 2003 around 800,000 regular telephone lines were working in the country along with 1.365 million mobile cellular phones. The country has got regular radio and television broadcasts. (The World Factbook 2005) However, the World Factbook also provide the insight that among the country’s over 140 million people only 243,000 were the internet users during 2003. Definitely most of these 243,000 internet users do not come from the disadvantaged communities of the Bangladesh society. Therefore, it can be logically claimed that the benefits of e-governance will definitely go to the city based well-off Bangladeshis rather than the disadvantaged communities in the vast countryside. Indeed, this urban based internet scenario can be changed and may be made more grassroots-oriented in the coming years – but, it requires a careful planning process with a vision of inclusive democracy and systems of governance.

**The Possibilities**

An individual poor person is an isolated island by himself and herself. Information Technology (IT) can end that isolation overnight.

- Professor Muhammad Yunus (2003)

It is true that the internet is a powerful tool, which can be harnessed by many organizations. Once individuals or groups can afford it, web sites can be very effective and reliable, and save time and resources. E-governance can bring the central government closer to people by bypassing the unnecessary bureaucratic interference by the local government authorities or by the oligarchic regimes. At the same time, local governance operations can be made more transparent and accountable by initiating e-governance. Today, people can share a lot of useful information with their governments around the world. For example, Germany’s small city-state with a population of 540,000, Bremen, has reached ahead to become one of the country’s leading lights in e-governance. (EU 2003) Nordic welfare states are sharing useful information with their citizens’ everyday. This is really reforming public administration, modes of governance, thus reducing the workload of the public offices. This process is also creating possibilities for the citizens, with many more positive signs. Most importantly, the citizens are enjoying direct access to useful information by bypassing the bureaucrats and the conventional and conservative bureaucratic systems. Inter-governmental relations are gradually becoming possible through the online governance systems.

One must acknowledge the remarkable contribution Grameen Bank Family is making in the development of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in Bangladesh. (Grameen Bank 2005) Over the years Grameen philosophy has proved that ICT can be very useful to uplift the rural and disadvantaged communities in Bangladesh and beyond. (Grameen Foundation USA 2005) According to the founder and architect of Grameen model Professor Muhammad Yunus, in three major areas ICT can play an immediate role in helping the poor (Yunus 2004):

1. Integrating the poor into the mainstream economy by expanding their market, eliminating the middlemen in their business, and creating international job opportunities through service out-sourcing;

2. Bringing information, educational programmes, skills training, and healthcare services, etc, all in a very user friendly way, even to the most remote villages;
3. Empowering the poor, particularly poor women, with a stronger voice that can be heard behind the borders of their village, better access to information, and improvement in the democratic process.

E-governance is also creating awareness of the merits of information society, computer literacy and visual governance. It is also creating new jobs everyday. Many citizens are enjoying job facilities by orienting themselves with some basics of electronic services. E-governance may make traditional bureaucracies more accountable – and citizens more responsible. Good example could be the computer based tax administration. Electronic governance has got potentials for promoting electoral democracy – recent success on effective election monitoring systems in the developing countries is well known. Success stories of e-governance at micro level are numerous – and they range from the level of governmental relations to relations between public, private, and third sector organizations, as well as between private citizens. There is every reason to believe that the journey towards e-governance will continue in the future, and developing countries will also gradually start getting the benefits from this form of web based governance. However, compared to the present day dynamics of e-governance in the industrialized world, the challenges for the developing countries to reach a satisfactory level of e-governance is huge. The central point here is not on the efficiency and effectiveness of e-governance technologies, but rather on the question of how the stakeholders can make an effective use of the dynamics of e-governance for the greater number of world population who live in the developing parts of the world. If these challenges are ignored, e-governance will always be for the few, and not for the vast majority of the world’s population at our time. This will create electronic governance – but governance without democracy and without the participation of the poor.

The Challenges

Information technology is not a magic formula that is going to solve all our problems. But it is a powerful force that can and must be harnessed to our global mission of peace and development. This is a matter of both ethics and economics…

– Kofi Annan (2000)

Challenges in establishing an effective web based e-governance in developing countries are many. Let me categorically summarize these challenges in this section. The low rate of literacy in developing countries is one of the major challenges that e-governance is facing. Even literacy alone does not guarantee computer literacy, not to speak of fluency in English, in order to gain access and use the basics of e-governance. Buying capacity is always connected to the socio-economic status of the individuals – i.e. it must be asked if people at this time with average income can even buy a computer and bear the operational costs related to the computer and internet services? Even though someone has got all the required skills, the necessary economic basis and a computer, it still depends on the availability of the basic infra-structural support to actually gain access to computer and internet. This means e.g. electricity, availability of internet services, even in some cases telephones, etc. The buying capacity of the poor should not be difficult to guess. It can also be hard for a growing number of the poor in the present world to justify the use of computer in their everyday lives as even the basic services (housing, healthcare, education, etc.) are not adequately secured.

Very few scholars actually disagree with the assumption that the success of e-commerce can not be equally expected in e-governance. E-led business or governance may produce good results at the micro level. Similar web based operations may become inappropriate at macro level – since e-led operations often in the first place exclude the poor and disadvantaged. At the same time, failures at the macro level e-approach may have a direct effect on a large number of populations regionally or nationally. The legitimacy of government provided information could very much
depend on the ‘good will’ of the party-in-power. It has been stated earlier that 80% of the web resources are in English – while only a few blessed in developing world have proficiency in English. It is important from citizens’ perspective to ask: Who provides and maintains the internet information? Is the provided information useful? What citizens can do with the provided information? Is the provided information useful for the citizens in general, not to mention for any specific group in particular?

Today internet-based operations constitute a huge amount of information flow – some of them are useful, some are not, and many are simply ‘advertisements’. In order to shift governance into computer based world of operations, one has to be logical: governance encompasses all citizens - from every walks of life, no matter who s/he is. The web resources on e-governance in many countries are full of e-advertisement – like ‘meet our ministers’, ‘the cabinet’, ‘president’s bio’, etc. Access to classified information vs. non-classified information also provides dilemma in the state-citizen relation. Classified information for some and non-classified information for many does not bring democracy into governance. The concept of ‘gate keeping’ to state information will result into e-colonialism. Technology can exclude people but governance should not – the moral foundation of good governance is democracy and the inclusive nature of the state. Performance of governance should be measured not by the selection of technologies the state uses, but by the participation that state promotes in its operation. This is indeed a matter for the dynamic interplay between ethics and economics.

After considering the above challenges Professor Yunus (2004) rightly indicates that still ICT can be visualized as an Aladdin’s Lamp in the hand of a poor woman. Digital genie can come out of the new digital version of the Aladdin’s lamp at a voice command to give all the support to a poor woman who needs to leverage her energy and creativity to lift herself out of poverty at the fastest speed. But is anybody actually designing this Aladdin’s Lamp? No. None, at present. Designers are busy designing iPods and endless incarnations of mobile-phones in every size, shape, colour and combinations of camera, voice recorder, music player, PDA, note book, games, wi-fi you dare to think... . In order to overcome the present challenges Professor Yunus insists the policy makers that ICT designers should be given the challenge and opportunities to show their talent in designing equipments and gadgets which will solve the problems of the poor. These designers will have pictures of poor women in Bangladesh or Bolivia on their desks to remind themselves who they are working for. Better still, these women may be co-opted as their co-designers through frequent video-conferencing.

Concluding Remarks: Who Should be Empowered and How?

Referring to all above, it should not be difficult to understand the socio-economic status of the current users of e-governance in developing countries. So far the concept of e-governance has not emerged from the felt needs of the large grassroots based citizens in developing countries, but actually got introduced mainly by the actors (donors, international NGOs, multinational ICT companies, or similar international agencies) active in promoting transnational governmentality. Ferguson and Gupta’s exploratory article (2002) on neoliberal governmentality provided a scholarship and developed a concept of transnational governmentality as a way of grasping how the new practices of government and new forms of “grassroots” politics may call into question the principles of verticality and encompassment that have for a long time helped to legitimate and naturalize states’ authority over the “local”. Here the concept of e-governance may come through the transnational agencies (donors) to make governance more transparent. However, it seems there is no actual functioning without the presence of practical and appropriate grassroots policies. So far, the e-governance initiative has been for the industrialized countries and for the small but rich groups of people in Africa, Asia and Latin America. They are already empowered by the existing system of governance in their native countries and abroad. Therefore, talking about information technology, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (2000) rightly stated: ‘if all countries are to benefit, we must define an inclusive, long-term vision and approach for the future.’ In addition, Professor Yunus (2004) is proposing to establish an ‘International Center for ICT to Help Overcome Global Poverty’. The success of e-governance
largely depends on how the development cooperation agencies, national governments and other stakeholders react to these concerns presented by Annan, Yunus and other grassroots concerns provided by the committed visionary experts in the field.

E-governance may promote economic globalization. However, the globalization-led modernization alone does not give any guarantee for local capacity building. The strength of governance is in participation, transparency and accountability of the state activities. (Centre for Global Studies 2003) Practically e-governance may have potentials to promote the latter two – but so far without the participation of the rural poor. Many may find the domination of English language in internet resources not culture friendly way of doing business with the citizens. The prerequisites of good e-governance are also the transnational agencies’ respect for social capital and any collectivist ways of life and living in the developing world. Putnam’s work on social capital (2000) and Korten’s work on economic globalization (1996) may bring even deeper insight into the subject. The path to people centered e-governance and grassroots based e-development initiatives suggested by Annan and Yunus should by no means be ignored. Strategically, inclusion of actors of alternative governance (non-governmental organizations - NGOs, microfinance institutions, and civil society organizations) at micro level can make e-governance more people friendly than the national governments at macro level.

In this context, for a deeper theoretical insight, we may examine the four models of governance by Guy Peters (2001) presented at the beginning of this article. E-governance is suitable to his private-sector led Market Models for reforming the government. The Participatory State Model is completely the ideological antithesis of the market approach and emphasizes on the promotion of political, democratic, and collective mechanisms by promoting public participation. It can not be easily promoted by e-governance in the developing and transitional countries. However e-governance may bring along a new wave to the third alternative Flexible Government Model – which emphasizes the capability of the government in responding effectively to the new challenges and in surviving at the face of change. As a matter of fact, this is what most developing countries are doing with the emerging internet based operations. And finally, Peter’s Deregulated Government Model also suits well with the basic principles of e-governance in assuming that if some constraints on bureaucratic action are eliminated, government could perform its functions more effectively.

In a recent newspaper column Professor Muhammad Yunus (2005) urged the Government of Bangladesh to prioritize the Government’s developmental goals in their Poverty Reduction Strategy as follows: 1. Continuous poverty monitoring; 2. Redesigning the financial sector (pro-poor oriented); 3. Bringing all ICT facilities to Bangladesh at the fastest possible means, and ensuring universal access to ICT; 4. Strengthening and empowering local government institutions; 5. Quality education for all children of poor families; 6. Quality healthcare for the poor, particularly for mothers and children under five; and 7. Promoting good governance. Despite some achievements, over the years the Government’s performance in the above areas has not been very satisfactory. Therefore, it is interesting to observe, how the Government react to his suggestions. Yunus’s column also practically indicates a vision on how could the Government of Bangladesh reach the above goals (e.g. by generation of electricity, capacity building of the sea ports, regional cooperation with the Asian neighbors, etc.). In this regards, one can only hope that in order to survive in the 21st century’s competitive world, the Government would have the capacity and willingness to understand and implement these suggestions.

From historical perspective the initiators of e-governance may also learn from the early technological innovations. Why not try to understand what contribution did the ‘radio revolutions’ and the ‘television revolutions’ make during the last century in the developing countries? While controlled by the government, these two earlier forms of information technology mainly served the interest of the ruling regimes in the developing world. Can internet based e-governance make a real difference? And if the answer is yes, how this can be achieved?
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