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EGOVERNANCE - A GROWING PARADIGM IN GERMANY AND INDIA

Bardo Fraunholz, University of Koblenz, Germany bardo.fraunholz@uni-koblenz.de
Chandana R Unnithan, Deakin University, Australia chandana@deakin.edu.au

ABSTRACT

EGovernance is fast becoming a focal issue with governments worldwide, enabled by the ICT revolution. Many economies are adopting eGovernance as a medium of reaching out and empowering the average citizen, stretching tax revenues and cutting down transaction costs. In this paper, we have examined Germany and India, two disparate economies in terms of development yet similar in administrative structures against a backdrop of insightful socio-economic fabric. We have taken a positivist approach and used the exploratory research method, supported by the transaction cost economic theory to draw broad conclusions on similarities and differences in eGovernance adoption, within these economies.

INTRODUCTION

EGovernance is a paradigm that is rapidly becoming a focal issue with governments worldwide, as all levels of administrative leaderships are experimenting with and learning to exploit new media technologies. Many countries are adopting eGovernance as a means of reaching out to citizens, involving them in the administrative process. Empowering citizens, thereby stretching tax revenues and reducing government transactional costs seem to be one of the key drivers of this growing paradigm. EGovernance is not merely re-engineered citizen services facilitated by technology, but requires new styles of leadership; policy and investment debates; new ways to access education; and new ways of organizing and delivering information to the citizens. As reflected on many government vision statements, Governments at national, regional and local level seem to recognize that they have a key role to play in creating ‘knowledge societies’ that can exploit knowledge and derive competitive advantage using opportunities provided by digital technology. Any good governance involves the national level administration, which creates a conducive political and legal environment; the private sector that generates jobs and income; and the society, which facilitates political and social interaction via mobilizing groups to participate in the economic, social and political activities. Leveraging the Information Communication Technologies or ICTs - governments may enable participation, create infrastructures and foster a sense of citizenship cultural identity. Indeed, many economies realize that ICTs are a catalyzing tool for digital governance.

For the purposes of this research, we selected two economies - Germany and India, which are disparate in terms of development, but relatively similar in terms of administrative levels i.e the National and State level governments. Germany is a developed country with a population of 82.5 million spread over 16 States, while India is a developing country with over 1.2 billion population spread over 28 states. Both economies are federal republics with elected governments at the National and State level administration - although the actual election process is different. Studying the two disparate economies against the backdrop of socio-economic fabric has revealed interesting insights. The paper highlights some predominant government initiatives including legislation and possible driving factors towards enabling eGovernance regime. In parallel, we have also explored the access and availability of ICTs, Internet diffusion and few related facilitating factors that may have influenced the move towards eGovernance. In addition, we have briefly reflected on the possible drive of the governments to establish eGovernance as mirrored on the respective websites.

METHODOLOGY

We have taken a positivist approach to the research where social realities are viewed as a complex of causal relations between events – themselves depicted as an emerging patchwork of relations between variables (Blakie, 1993). The findings reported in this paper are exploratory in nature, based on synthesized secondary data analysis recommended in preliminary IS research (Neuman 1997) which involved synthesizing existing data collected for other purposes than for the research and making inferences. Subsequently, we have analyzed our findings through the lens of Transaction Cost Economics (Coase 1937; Williamson 1993; Pant and Hsu 1996), which essentially suggest that the costs of organizing economic activity are reduced through eBusiness and drawn broad conclusions from a cross-economy perspective. These preliminary findings may be useful for thought leaders and policy makers in the respective economies. Additionally, academia can develop research/further perspectives on eGovernance into other countries, as well as more in-depth into the reviewed economies.

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ROLE OF ICTS IN EGOVERNANCE

Information technology based decision support systems have driven the adoption of eGovernance (Spletstoesser, 2002) as it allows mobilization of mass attitude by electronic means (Porebski, 2002) and subsequently empowerment of citizens (Alexander and Pal, 1998). As the Internet enables keeping transactions of public administration open 24/7 days, eGovernance is increasingly becoming possible even in lesser-developed nations, through public information kiosks or cyber cafes. The literature on the role of ICTs in eGovernance is largely speculative and ideological, often not real (Rheingold, 1993). Actual research that takes socio-economic issues that relate to eGovernance within economies appears to be nascent.

THE GERMAN EXPERIENCE

The national structure of Germany as it is today is based on the old independent states with some modifications to deal with necessary changes resulting out of World War I and II. This structure is relatively young, with the central government having most of the legislative power with mandatory State approval on all matters that relate or affect the States. The language is uniform through the economy with regional dialects. The cultural differences though present are relatively insignificant. Privacy and personal security legislation is very strict and therefore any eGovernance implementation constitutes a significant endeavor. The impetus of eGovernance comes from the Ministry for the Interior, where a task force has been established. Being a relatively small country with high-density living and a very good communication infrastructure, information access can hardly be seen as a problem. As far as the Internet is concerned, Broadband (12 percent of the Internet users are on ADSL or Cable with another 33 percent using ISDN) has a very high dispersion, at a very low cost flat rate with unlimited downloads. Education and income play a central role in the provision of computers and Internet usage (Kai, 2001) as well as in the participation of eGovernance. The general level of education can be described as high with a wide middle class income. However, reunification is still a significant factor for information access and Internet usage. A recent Study has shown that the Internet usage in the former GDR (German Democratic Republic) is still about 30 percent less than in the west.

The German Federal Government has committed itself to advance the use of Internet technology as the main channel of communication between the Government, Industry and the citizens. On of the main hurdles during the past years was the implementation of electronic legally binding transactions and therefore, the need for legislation regarding digital signatures was felt. The foundation for this legislation was the EU Directive 98/34/EG, which had to be transformed into national law. This legislation was passed in the 'Signaturverordnung' on the 16th August 2001. One major issue with the digital signature legislation was the lack of technical standards. Therefore, it was required to introduce standards that made a digital signature indisputable and safe. This had to be done in accordance with the earlier legislation (Signaturgesetz 22nd June 1997, amended in 2001) specifying those standards. All standards must now be certified by an authorized body in accordance with the regulation passed by the watchdog for telecommunication and postal services (Regulierungsbehörde für Telekommunikation und Post). With all the necessary legislation in place there is strong move forward to implement eGovernance with interaction between the agencies and the population. Therefore, the day is not far when the citizens may be able to submit their tax returns online, without the need to send in separately signed paper copies as proof. Among the initial eGovernance initiatives may be online registering of place of residency, obtaining birth certificates, or possibly even online voting.

All the federal ministries and governmental departments provide very comprehensive websites with information on what they are doing, the legislation, staff, and any other information that might be of interest. There is a high level of transparency at all levels and all websites are well maintained and kept up to date. This is done with significant effort and accuracy because it is a way to ensure government and citizen as well as press relations. In fact, the web has unprecedented been utilized as a media for a general election campaign for the election in September 2002. There are comprehensive studies and intensive planning on providing a fully integrated governmental service on the federal level by the year 2005; in fact the federal government has committed itself to do so in an initiative called BundOnline 2005. A model implementation has been finalized which can be used as best practice for the implementation at all levels. This ambitious project will provide online access for citizens and industry to more than 350 government services. The cost of the project is estimated to exceed €1.65 billion - with an estimated future annual saving of € 400 million.

Most of the State level websites are hardly interactive and there is no apparent planning in progress. The state of Rheinland-Pfalz for instance has introduced comprehensive information based websites for all ministries. However, these are hardly interactive and there is no apparent planning in progress. This may be due to the fact that the structure of Germany does not necessitate any interaction at the State level. At this level we see most citizen/business – government interaction. It will be interesting to see how BundOnline 2005 will influence or even trigger any further development.
THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE

In India, the participation in eGovernance is largely determined by the purchasing power of citizens, which translates into access to ICT based services; adult literacy, and general fragmented attitude of the society - in each region or state. However, over this fragmented layer, there has been the profound influence of the mushrooming software/ICT professionals (commonly known as knowledge workers) who at present constitute the majority of the upper-middle class, working population. These professionals are pushing the boundaries of change within the social fabric, and demanding higher participation in the governance enabled through ICTs. As early as 1975, the cascade effects of the 'knowledge worker' sentiments was felt, when the government of India set up the National Informatics Center with a view to informatics-led development and decided to introduce decision support systems within government ministries and departments, to facilitate planning/implementation of socio-economic programs, during the fifth planning period. The National Association of Software Service Companies formed in early 1990s, supported by growing ICT support, venture capitalism and increasing foreign investment as a result of privatization was a catalyst in forming the eGovernance backbone. In 1999, taking in the all around socio-economic growth with the emerging digital economy, the government created a new Ministry of Technology (MIT, 2000) by merging the Department of Electronics and the National Informatics Center with the Electronics and Software Export Promotion Council. In 1999, Government of India decided to set up a National Institute of Smart Government as a tripartite venture between government, business and community.

Although India’s tele density is 2 fixed lines per 100 persons, and is very low on PC ownership due to purchasing power, the ministry of Information technology envisions Internet based information facilitation for the common public by various government agencies at all levels to be made available by 2005; by establishing 100 million Internet connections and one million Information kiosks (i.e. 1-2 connections per village) by 2008 with private sector and unorganized sector participation; promotion of Indian language content over the Internet; re-engineering of government processes leading to eGovernance and launching of mass campaign on IT awareness. In addition, technological developments permit the network used to carry broadcasting signals for carrying telecommunication and data. With a critical mass addicted to cable television – the conversion to low cost cable Internet services has again facilitated access to the Internet based government service delivery. Together with Nasscom, the government of India is committed to push eGovernance in India, as reflected in the announcement of Information Technology Act 2000; initiation of National Internet backbone setting up; announcements of national long distance service beyond the service area to private operators; free right of way facility with no charge to access providers to lay fiber optic networks along national, state highways; interconnectivity of government and closed user networks; and establishment of public teleinfo centers (PTIC) with multimedia capabilities (Muni and Vijayaditya, 2002). All National and State Administrations have websites that are comprehensive and multilingual. They are informative, but not very interactive at this stage. Interestingly, the sites and information seem to be linked at national and state level, reflecting the 'unity in diversity' theme of the government. Center for Development of Advanced Computing through GIST technology with directives from the government initiated and commissioned the project of developing Indian language tools with natural language processing in evolving script and font standards to run a common eGovernance thread through the 95% population speaking 18 officially recognized, disparate languages. The national and regional level administration, customs, ports, the public tax system and education system pioneered eGovernance within India. Subsequently, the hospital management system to improve healthcare services for the patients in government/specialty hospitals was implemented.

At the next level, the southern states of India, which holds the major literate and knowledge worker density, pioneered many citizen services in the State ministries. These included providing web-based access to land data covering allotment, transfer, mortgage, surrender etc for industrial and housing development; Stamp registration facilities including online property registration, valuation, report generation, tax collection; citizen database services including issue and record of death and birth certificates; utility services including electricity and water; issuing of licenses through the regional transport authority. Kerala - one of the southern Indian states with a unique multicultural, multilingual social sector, high literacy levels and high participation of women in all sectors of government and education, and telecommunications network connecting the remotest villages implemented eGovernance at the grass root level of village administration, with the guidance of a scientific society. Data on houses, land holdings, age, health, religion, marital status, employment etc are collected by voluntary workers in a survey lasting 45 days, fed into a system using language specific keyboard layout implemented for GUI in a Linux environment. The relational database server will then co-ordinate the concept of ERP and single office accountability in service rendering and replicated for statewide network. Many of the other states have initiated similar eGovernance initiatives broadly in the areas of education and local level administration.

DISCUSSION

From the exploratory research, it is evident that both the economies are moving towards adoption of eGovernance at different levels.
The main drive for the adoption of eGovernance in Germany is the reduction of transaction cost. However there is also a political statement that Germany is right up there - taking part in modern development. With citizens willingly paying for broadband access to the internet the provision of eGovernance seems an easy and cost-effective way to provide services and at the same time there is a possibility to make political activity more attractive to the mostly politically frustrated population.

In India, there seem to be two essential drivers to eGovernance adoption – empowerment of the citizen and reducing transaction costs. There seem to be a realization that the average citizen needs to participate in governance, to realize the founding principle of federal democracy i.e a government for and by the citizens. The second driver is to cut down transaction costs of the governance, thereby stretching the taxes paid by the average citizen to provide more services across the economy. With the growing adoption of Internet and opening of public kiosks to increase the reach to every citizen, eGovernance is fast becoming a reality. All government service delivery online and even electronic voting is not too distant, and is being experimented in some States. Evidently, the reduced cost of delivering services online and the convenience it offers is not only appealing to the government but also to the citizens.

CONCLUSIONS

With a federal structure present in both countries there is a strong urge to provide integrated services to the population. Government responsibilities – especially the level responsible, is often not transparent to the individual and the provision of eGovernance at all levels will make it easier for the citizen to objectively interact with governments at all levels.

In Germany there seems to be a top down approach because the federal government has committed itself to a comprehensive eGovernance implementation. The states still need to do a lot more work. At the council level there is awareness that eGovernance provides a great opportunity. However the lacking common concept forces local governments to adopt an individual nonuniform approach, without knowing what a consolidated future concept will provide for.

The ICT revolution and digital convergence seems to have enabled the spread and adoption of eGovernance in a highly populous economy like India, with different socio-economic segments. EGovernance is high on the agenda of Central, State and Local governments with the growing push of IT professionals who demand participation in governance and efficient government services delivery. The government as well as the mass population is expecting eGovernance to be a vehicle towards a resurgent India.

It is clear that eGovernance is gaining momentum in both the economies, perhaps with varying reasons. Nevertheless, it seems to be a positive driving force in both economies. It will be interesting to see how eGovernance is going to shape future government – citizen relationships and the impact it has on the development of democracy and political activity of individuals.

REFERENCES


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