

E-GOVERNMENT AS A TOOL TO MONITOR GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the existing government accountability measures, there are still many gaps in living transparency in the bureaucracy. This paper evaluates a new tool – E-Government in monitoring government accountability. Using the Governance framework, it employs the tripartite paradigm of government, civil sector, and business sector. The E-government, as defined by the World Bank (2016), refers to the use by government agencies of information technologies that can transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. The mediation of technology affords an increased dissemination of information and democratization of government services, and reduces costs in terms of time, distance, and financial expenses. In this manner then E-Government propounds participation, responsiveness, accountability, and thereby, an inclusive national development. The more salient aspects of the study cover the assessment of E-Government practices in the country using the criteria set forth by the United Nations (2001) and by a local matrix suggested by Siar (2005). Lastly, evaluation and recommendations are provided.

Keywords: *government accountability, transparency, Governance framework, democratization of government services, criteria for evaluation, inclusive national development*

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of transparency came only after World War I when post-war negotiations were being conducted (Braman, 2006). In the mid-1980s, there were only eleven countries with freedom of information laws, but by the end of 2004, the total reached 59 (Relly & Sabharwal, 2009; Roberts, 2006). For today, transparency and the right to access government information are now considered crucial components of democratic participation (Bertot, *et al.*, 2010). Hence, many measures have been set in place to ensure the accountability of government officials. There are the traditional preventive solutions, post-activity assessment, and performance-based accountability. In addition, there are laws like the Local Government Code (1991) that ushered in other ways to enforce accountability.

Notwithstanding all the existing measures, however, there are still gaps in measuring the accountability of public servants accurately and effectively. Mahar Mangahas (2001) of Social Weather Stations has observed that next to inflation, the second top cause of public dissatisfaction with government is corruption.

Furthermore, he cites that the Commission on Audit has reported an estimated P2-billion loss every year due to government corruption (Mangahas, 2001:3). This situation proves the need to employ other accountability measures that are derived and called for by new schools of thought in Public Administration and by new social circumstances such as the rapid development of technology.

The rise of Information & Communications Technology (ICT) has had a vast effect on restructuring Public Administration (H. Druke, 2007). One of the tools that it has introduced is the E-Government. With the incorporation of e-government, the international landscape has noted greater access to information and the encouragement of transparency and accountability (Bertot, *et al.*, 2010).

It is recognized as a tool to curb corruption by “promoting good governance, strengthening reform-oriented initiatives, reducing potential for corrupt behaviors, enhancing relationships between government employees and citizens, allowing for citizen tracking of activities, and monitoring and controlling behaviors of government employees (Shim & Eom, 2008)”.

In view of the corruption and accountability problems in the country, the Philippines has also adopted the twenty-first century mechanism to address Public Administration issues.

Social Innovation

As OECD has explained (2003), this E-Government is “simply better government that enables better policy outcomes, higher quality services, greater engagement with citizens and improves other key outputs identified. Governments and public administrations will, and should, continue to be judged against these established criteria for success.” E-government is

somewhat a new invention. According to Druke (2007), it “defines the intra-organizational relationships, or the internal and public sector management component... refers to the interaction between citizens, government organizations, and elected officials... focuses on the decision-making and policy-making process.” In other words, this new tool makes it possible that all facets of the government from policy formation, decision making, development and provision of services, to participation are supported by technology, and thereby, making it feasible for some transactions to take place through the mediation of computers and Internet. According to the World Bank (Website, 2016), E-Government refers to the use by government agencies of information technologies (such as Wide Area Networks, the Internet, and mobile computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. Earlier, ICT head Lallana (2002) described E-Government as “a tool by which limitations of time, distance and cost are reduced, thereby enhancing citizens’ access to government services (*e.g.*, claim of birth certificates and visas, greater access to public government information like application requirements, study and employment opportunities, policies and regulations).” Citizens can access all these beyond work schedule of government agencies.

E-Government covers an array of services that also affect the tripartite paradigm of the government. There are government-to-government exchange of services, government-to-business transactions, and government-to-citizens relations. Hence, one-stop portals are now conceivable. This kind of service provider is an umbrella site that operates on top of all government agencies and departments, and with this kind of operations, it posits greater ease and convenience to the users (citizens, businessmen and even government officials). Through the over-arching web portal, the users can be led to other public information services they are inquiring about, or they are instructed about the procedures they have to follow, or even directed to the government agency or office they need.

EXPERIMENT METHOD AND MATERIALS

Method

The study primarily utilized a desk research to analyze the role and significance of E-Government in the Philippines. Specifically, it uses the Governance framework in analyzing the role of E-Government in a government, and it also applies the criteria set forth by the United Nations (2004) and by a local matrix suggested by Siar (2005) in assessing the status of E-Government in the Philippines.

Governance Framework

Modern Public Administration has given birth to various contemporary schools of thought like New Public Administration, New Public Management, Re-Engineering, and the most recent one, Governance. The framework of Governance involves all stakeholders in a society; it is called the tripartite paradigm – involving government, business groups, and the civil sector.

Governance started in the 1990s and continues to be practiced up to the present. It came after the people power revolutions all over the world (Cariño, 2008), and major international institutions, specifically the United Nations, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank prompted its creation (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2008) as a response to the social milieu then.

The UNDP (1997) describes Governance as “the exercise of political, economic, and administrative authority to manage a nation’s affairs. It embraces all of the methods – good and bad – that societies use to distribute power and manage public resources and problems.” Brillantes and Fernandez (2008) assert that the term “governance” goes way beyond the government for it involves “the institutionalization of a system through which citizens, institutions, organizations, and groups in a society articulate their interests, exercise their rights, and mediate their differences in pursuit of the collective good.” Cariño (2008) succinctly puts it as, “The new paradigm is governance for the public interest; it clearly recognizes the people as part and parcel of both the act of governance and of the delineation of the public interest.”

Moreover, Governance facilitates accountability insofar as it embraces the active participation of the citizenry. In a sense, it creates opportunities for improved democratic government that “emphasizes the interactions among citizens, political representatives, and administrative machinery; provides a special view of citizens’ opportunities to influence and participate in policy making, development, and service processes (Anttiroiko 2004:25). As such, the Governance framework is a good conduit for the application of E-Government for this paradigm opens the bureaucratic doors to other major stakeholders in the society, specifically, those of business and civil sectors.

Criteria from the United Nations (2004)

In its Global E-Government Readiness Report 2004 the United Nations asserts that the E-Government is “the use of ICT and its application by the government for the provision of information and public services to the people (UN Report, 2004).” Through it, the Millenium Development Goals that revolve around sustainable growth of countries are more feasible and attainable. The E-Government Survey conducted by the UN is hinged on three components: 1) availability of online services, 2) telecommunication infrastructure, and 3) human capacity.

The findings of the 2014 survey showed wide disparities among countries in their utilization of E-Government. A clear-cut observation is that the income level of a country is an indicator of E-Government development (access to ICT infrastructure and provision of education including ICT literacy). However, the ICT development does not translate automatically to effectiveness of E-government initiatives (UN Report, 2004).

Categorization of Web Functions by Siar (2005)

In a local study, Siar (2005) operationalized E-Governance and came up with a concrete classification of the different functions of government websites. This categorization is crucial for it serves as a good indicator to assess E-Governance based on these specific tasks. Her categorization can serve as a good framework for government accountability hinged upon E-Governance.

Table 1: Categorization of Web Functions (Siar, 2005)
Function Relevant Information/Resource

Promote citizens' awareness and understanding of their community's characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical, cultural, physical, social, and economic information • Political organization • Community/city news
Promote efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of frontline services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government services and procedures • Downloadable forms
Promote transparency and accountability of government in operations and services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government services and procedures • Programs and projects • Procurement information and bid invitations • Ordinances • Financial information
Promote citizens' awareness of the policymaking process and their participation in decision making
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on local policymaking process • Ordinances • Online polls and surveys
Promote linkage and interaction between government and citizens and other groups in society: both vertical communication (between government and citizens and other groups in society) and horizontal communication (among the different groups in society)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-mail address, phone number of city officials; feedback form; on-line polls/survey (vertical communication) • Discussion forum, chat and other similar on-line facilities (horizontal communication)
Promote linkage between government and business
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procurement information and bid invitations • Economic and business profile • Investment opportunities • Tourism information

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On a general note, given the different researches culled, only some few cities in the Philippines have E-Governance implementation that truly engages citizen participation for this situation is attributed to the limited performance measures that are found in government websites.

The Philippine Government has good E-Government practices in the country. However, there is still much to be done. The technical capability of the Philippines has to be beefed up if the country would like to capitalize more on the advantages offered by the platform. In various assessments conducted by individual researchers and international organizations mentioned above, it was shown that the country is still at an incipient stage of E-Government and much more of E-Governance.

In spite of the estimated advantages of E-Government (specifically on citizen participation), the information to be divulged to the public has to be clearly delineated also. Those people who are reluctant to use E-Government are wary of the misuse of public information. Hence, with clear policies regarding the use of information, it can be guaranteed that these details will only be used and accessed for legitimate purposes.

When it comes to the process of accessing information, it is recommended by many technical experts to have a data policy. This necessitates a law that will secure citizens' right to know and increase their participation in state affairs. Part of this package is the entire process to undergo for a right disclosure procedure to use: information that can and cannot be disclosed, method for requesting disclosure, deliberation committee on disclosing information, notification of decision, and process to appeal for dissatisfaction. However, it is noted that Internet and corruption are not fool-proof, that IT will indeed curb corruption. In fact, it was found out that it can even breed new opportunities for corrupt practices (Lio, *et al.*, 2011). Wescott (2001) even suggested that ICT can lead to an upscale of corruption. The attitude of government employees is also very important. The mindset of the government leaders and rank-and-file employees has to be changed. Yet, there is an observed reluctance on their part for it requires certain changes in their work procedures.

There can also be a lack of appreciation due to technical problems found especially in the rural areas. Hence, the government staff may not see the full potential of E-Governance for they are not given the right access to it in the first place. Together with rank-and-file employees is the status of leadership in the government agencies. The attitude of the head towards E-Governance is also pivotal because he or she will set the pace in implementing the necessary changes in their procedures. Thus, trainings have to be continuously given until a more positive outlook on the tool is created. Even if the country could achieve a more advanced stage of ICT, this would amount to little if the government employees cannot appreciate its possible impacts.

Another dimension to look into is the attitude of the citizens. Some citizens, especially perhaps among the older generations, still prefer the traditional type of doing things, that of pen and paper and face-to-face transactions. Their hesitancy in the use of ICT surely poses a limitation in the implementation of E-Governance. As the Governance framework inserts them into the paradigm, they need to espouse a right attitude towards E-Government.

Because they are the beneficiaries of all government services, they have to assume a more active role in carrying out the accountability measures set up in the government system. The current times do not picture anymore a citizenry that is laidback and passive.

The capability of E-Government cannot be denied. It is a platform that further democratizes government and its procedures and services. In spite of its potential, however, the issue on accountability does not solely rely on an effective implementation of E-Government for it just covers one aspect of the issue. It is only one tool. Inasmuch as the issue of accountability involves a multi-faceted reality, it thus necessitates a holistic approach, which encompasses not only technology but also leadership, organizational administration, and social and cultural context.

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