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1

Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) constitute an increasingly important element in the economic planning strategy of the vast majority of developing countries (OECD, 2003; UNDP, 2004). One application that has received special attention in recent years has been the use of ICTs in the pursuit of good governance, usually under the banner of e-governance. In principle, the deployment of ICTs to improve public sector governance is not new. ICTs have for quite some time now played an important role in public sector reform initiatives mainly to improve the efficiency of bureaucracies and to enhance the quality of information for public sector decision-making. What is new is the use of the prefix 'e' and the implications of that addition. Facilitated by the advent of the internet, only recently have these technologies become affordable for mass deployment in the public sector offering the opportunity to increase efficiency of public administration and improve the interface between government and citizens.

Under the e-governance banner, a large number of development interventions, endorsed and supported by the international development community, focus on the role of ICTs for enhancing the efficiency, accessibility and democratic accountability of public administration and collective decision-making (Backus, 2001). In 2003, at the first World Summit of Information Systems (WSIS) conference held in Geneva, it was agreed that all public centres and government should have an online system of administration by 2015.¹ Since then, the support provided for e-governance projects by agencies such as the UNDP and the World Bank has been growing. The United Nations Development programme (UNDP), for example, was recently noted to have implemented 195 e-governance projects that provide information and services to citizens in 110 countries (Azzarello, 2005). According to the World Bank, 'eGovernance can serve a variety of purposes including better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information, and more efficient govern-

ment management'.² In a similar vein, the central objective as stated in the UNDP's strategic framework for e-governance is 'to empower particularly the poor, women and youth, to actively participate in governance processes and thus enhance democracy'.³ These are ambitious claims indeed. No less than to transform and enrich the democratic process.

e-Governance initiatives have proliferated in many parts of the developing world. Applications designed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public administration are sometimes referred to as e-administration projects (Heeks, 2003; Ndou, 2004). These involve digitisation of data records of individual government departments or implementing sector-specific management information systems to improve the monitoring and reporting functions of large economic development programmes. Applications designed to enhance access to government information and delivery of services to citizens are referred to as e-services projects. These projects aim to improve transparency in government dealings with the public and promote accountability to citizens through the establishment of IT-enabled centres for providing entitlement certificates and facilitating the payment of bills and other dues to government without the need for intermediaries. In rural parts of the developing world, this type of e-governance application finds expression in the telecentre movement which aims to provide a rural outreach facility for citizens to more actively participate in improving their living conditions by engaging in commercial activity and by obtaining government information and services.

However, evidence so far shows that the linkage between better technology and better governance and ultimately better development is not automatic. According to Heeks (2003), approximately 35% of e-governance projects are either never implemented or are abandoned soon after implementation while 50% of projects do not reach their stated objectives. A small percentage of cases have been reported in which e-governance projects have brought some tangible benefits to citizens and government agencies (Bhatnagar, 2004; World Bank, 2007). In some cases, direct gains of e-services applications to citizens have accrued in terms of cost- and time-savings as various government information and services can be obtained from one central IT-enabled service point rather than the citizen having to visit individual government departments. In other cases, e-governance projects have brought benefits to government agencies in terms of more efficient reporting procedures releasing staff for more 'value-added' tasks. However, success in such cases has typically been measured in terms of short-term financial gains rather than in terms of longer-term impact on improving processes of local governance and promoting development. These processes remain largely opaque to e-governance policy-makers and implementers with reform packages continuing to impose standard 'good governance' prescriptions without any explicit analysis of the contextual situation within which such systems are implemented (UNDP, 2004). Drawing on

evidence from Jordan, Ciborra (2005) shows that such intervention ultimately leads to more systems unevenly distributed within administrative departments and agencies, and resources allocated unevenly in the population.

The evidence suggests that improving systems of governance is a social not a technological activity. But this is hardly recognised in the current 'e-governance for development' manifesto. Current policy is driven by two theories. First, a theory about development and governance according to which good governance is one of the key requirements for the achievement of human development as inscribed in the UN Millennium Development Declaration's emphasis on the importance of good governance for upholding the principles of democracy (UN, 2000). One of the similarities between the policy mandate of different agencies is that governance is a wider term indicating that government institutions are not the only ones involved in operations regarding citizen welfare. Second, a theory about ICT and the promotion of good governance. Policy literature suggests many ways in which e-governance can support good governance, for example, by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of governments, improving the interface between government administration and citizens, improving transparency and accountability, enabling citizens' access to public information, enhancing citizens' participation in the public policy process, and improving inclusion and participation of stakeholders in good governance processes.

Both these theories have been adopted unproblematically in policy circles and in much of the academic literature on e-governance for development. The objective of this book is to redress this balance by critically reviewing the linkage between development and governance. So far, this type of critique has been missing from much of the literature on this topic. This is not altogether surprising: development is acknowledged to be a situated, context-specific process entangled with indigenous politics and historically formed institutions. But in practice, development is a highly practical activity with pressing economic, social and political reasons for solutions. In many cases, policy-makers find themselves under pressure to use up funds that have been allocated for carrying out 'development' activities over a period of time. Under such conditions, solutions are typically conceived in techno-managerial terms. Most analyses of e-governance projects in developing countries, for example, have been instrumentally focused and tied to project management concerns.

The focus of this book is India which has become over the years perhaps one of the best-known place in the world for information technology. However, in terms of use of information technology, the country is still very backward. In metropolitan areas, for example in the superspeciality hospitals of Bangalore or Delhi or in software companies, high-quality, well-used systems prevail. But in the villages and rural areas, usage is low. This is despite the emergence of e-gov-

ernance applications aimed at increasing government efficiency and improving the interface between government and citizens. This book is not intended to cover the whole range of e-governance applications. It specifically focuses on applications that support the national planning effort in key social sectors such as rural development, health and agriculture. These particular types of e-governance applications have an overtly developmental orientation referred to by Avgerou (2008) as 'transformational' as they have the potential to transform existing socio-economic and political processes. In this book, the focus is on improving understanding of these processes by tracing (1) the macro-level political and socio-economic factors which influence e-governance policies, and (2) the micro-level social systems such as existing ways of administration and planning and existing social networks which interface between e-governance implementation and improvements in the lives of ordinary people.

This book is divided into three parts. The review of literature in the first part of the book raises many critical issues that move beyond the conventional discourse on e-governance for development towards an alternative 'political economy' approach for understanding this topic. First and foremost, as the study topic of this book is e-governance for development, it seems crucial to commence the inquiry with an understanding of what is meant by development. Chapter 2 traces dominant ideologies in development thinking from the postwar period onwards identifying shifts in policy emphasis between economic and social priorities. The chapter includes a discussion of the ideas behind modernisation and behind subsequent conceptions of development including basic needs, participatory development and Marxist-influenced approaches. The advent of neo-liberalism describes how attention has shifted away from a broader social reform agenda towards a more managerialist agenda in development which gives priority role to markets, civil society activism and improved capacity-building.

Chapter 3 unpacks the 'good governance' policy manifesto that has been promoted in developing countries by international agencies to support their economic and political liberalisation programmes. While the bureaucratic element of this policy focuses on administrative simplification and better management capacity, the political element focuses on strengthening systems of democratisation. However, what has been overlooked is the fact that the achievement of both these elements crucially depends on understanding and nurturing existing social, administrative and political systems.

Chapter 4 traces the evolution of the e-governance for Development discourse, describes its key application areas and reviews recent research on the topic. It draws on the critical literature review of development and governance to conceptualise e-governance for development. The study framework proposed is at two levels. Of interest at the macro level are the complex forces which affect public policy-making on development such as urban or sectoral bias and on the governance strategies put in place to achieve these policy priorities. At

the micro level, the value of an e-governance project will ultimately depend on how community members are able to actualise the benefits of improved information and services within a particular setting. Interfacing between these two levels are the formal and informal local governance structures comprising administrative, political and social systems.

Part II of the book presents case studies of e-governance applications in India. Chapter 5 provides an introduction to this section describing the author's research approach and the overall research methodology adopted for the case studies. Chapter 6 gives an overview of India's policy trajectory with regards to development priorities, governance reform initiatives and e-governance direction. There is a strong technology-driven vision of development within the country which has influenced the rapid take-up of e-governance in every state of the country. However, caution is raised on two fronts. First, whether this investment is justified in the face of growing inequalities within the country and other basic development priorities. Second, whether the current corporate-facing strategy for implementing these projects will promote developmental gains for rural poor communities.

The next three chapters present case studies of e-governance application in three states in India and across three sectors. Overall development priorities in each state are identified and juxtaposed with the attempts to introduce e-governance applications for the promotion of one key development sector. Chapter 7 describes the case of e-governance for back-end administrative reform in Gujarat's rural development sector. This chapter draws on research carried out over almost two decades documenting changes in the strategies adopted for poverty alleviation and in the adoption of new governance structures put in place for managing various development programmes. Both of these have influenced the implementation of e-governance applications for reporting and local analysis. Chapter 8 describes the case of e-governance for front-end citizen-government interactions through multi-purpose community telecentres. The telecentre project has been implemented by the Kerala government with the specific aim of promoting socio-economic development among the rural population. The telecentres provide a range of commercial and government services to the public. Of particular interest is the way in which these centres have become hubs for the local farming community to meet and discuss issues relevant to their livelihoods. Chapter 9 describes the case of Health Information Systems for improving public health systems for the rural poor community in Karnataka. It begins by tracing the influence of the global health agenda on Karnataka's health priorities. At the micro level, it describes the case of an NGO-run primary health centre looking at the way in which the health system interfaces with processes of local community development.

Part III of this book presents overall reflection of the cases highlighting some of the important findings from the case studies. While this book is entitled

e-governance for Development, the reader will find a greater emphasis both in the theoretical and case material on governance and development, rather than on the 'e'. This is not by accident. It is a deliberate attempt by the author to refocus attention on the social context that shapes any kind of innovation. In the literature on the social study of IT, this may not be such a new finding but it is worth re-emphasising particularly with regards to e-governance projects in developing countries. It is often the case that governments in developing countries are under political pressure to launch these projects without understanding the important role played by local governance structures in addressing the development needs of the community.

Glossary

ICTs – Information and Communication Technologies
 IT – Information Technology
 OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
 UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
 WSIS – World Summit for Information Systems

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