

Transparency of Administrative Structures: E-Government?

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SUMMARY

During this last five years, many governments in the world have become aware of the potential of the new Information Technology (IT) in enhancing their services and increasing their efficiency. They have deployed Web Portals and Government Online Services in order to make the government's services and employees directly and easily accessible to the citizens and to make a better use and a better dissemination of information.

This paper presents a pilot E-Government project in Morocco, which aims at becoming the reference in this country in the future.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Morocco, there exist several Government Portals (the Finance ministry, the Customs office, etc.) that allow citizens to get informed about a specific ministry's mission and/or administrative structure and points of contact. Many of these portals allow also downloading data and forms. Yet, these portals are not considered as E-Government systems because their primary goal is to inform and not to deliver online services. At local collectivities (local governments), the situation is even worse since there is no one single web portal that has been developed by any specific local collectivity. Indeed, since the collectivities and Wilayas are becoming the major actors in the economic development of regions, it is crucial for them to take advantage of new IT in order to inform and to disseminate the information, to promote Investments and to be close and accessible to the citizens.

Formally, there is an official discourse and a moral engagement from the public authority to promote the use of IT in the public sector to enhance the well being of citizens in terms of: Simplifying procedures, speeding up the delays, achieving an equal opportunity, etc. In practice, there is too few evidence to support this official discourse. The statistics provided by the Secretariat of State for Postal Services and Information and Communication Technology are alarming in the sense they show how weak is the IT penetration in the public domain in Morocco [3]. For example:

- More than 40% of machines and devices used in the public sector are completely obsolete (7 to 10years old),
- More than 70% of administrations are connected to the Internet with only one or two PCs and a line with a maximum speed of 64KB,
- Only 2% of civil servants use word processing and/or Spreadsheets,
- Less than 1% of civil servants use E-Mail,
- The use of E-Mail in local collectivities is absent,
- Around the half of ministries do not have a web site. Existing web sites are mainly about static information,
- Less than 1% of Moroccans own a PC.

Yet, in the last 7 years, considerable efforts have been made (and are still in progress) by the government in terms of telecom infrastructure, legislation rules, expansion of Cyber Cafés, decreasing the PC prices, etc., in order to ameliorate this situation [1]. These efforts concern also the reform of the public administration (known as the new public management) for various reasons, namely:

- New Public Management needs fresh blood
- Transparency in processes
- Boundaries, complex organization structures: The stovepipe approach is over so governments should appear online as a completely integrated system, e.g. a citizen can

easily renew their license without having to deal with the complex organizational structure.

- In addition to Transparency, social control, interactions, community participation, de-bureaucratization and above all efficiency are the open ways by employing new technologies to e-government.
- Regain trust of its citizen (e-democracy)
- To provide all facilities in order to compete with other receiver of foreign investments.
- To speak the same language (platform) with other more developed countries.
- To take advantages of state of the art technologies.

There are also other reasons on behind the moral engagement of Morocco in promoting the use of IT in the public sector. These reasons are related to the global context whereby the European countries (just next door to Morocco) cannot allow that the technological discrepancy between them and developing countries is steadily increasing and getting bigger and bigger. This will make the cooperation and the communication between the two parties very difficult, or may be impossible in the long-term future. We have to enjoy the open opportunities to transform the Internet and the others information technologies in favor of citizenship and social and political democracy.

Our research team has recently launched a Pilot E-Government project to be used as the reference in Morocco for local/national governments to demonstrate the feasibility of this technology and to give clear guidelines on how to proceed.

2. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of the project is to develop a pilot E-Government system for the city of Ifrane in Morocco that will allow citizens to request and receive governmental services in an easy and efficient way.

- The system that we aim to develop will significantly contribute in:
- Simplifying procedures to request and receive services;
- Speeding up the delays of requesting and receiving services;
- Achieving an equal opportunity for processing requests and delivering services;
- Increasing transparency/Visibility of administrative procedures;
- Allowing online access to general information about Ifrane city regarding a variety of domains (tourism, economy, history, architecture, weather, etc.);
- Making an efficient use of the government human resources by simplifying/reorganizing tasks.

In parallel, this project intends also to raise series of research questions concerning the social impact and political implications of e-government:

- Given the high rate of illiteracy in Morocco, to what extent would e-government be compatible with the context of Moroccan society in the long run?
- If we agree that the use of modern ICT has a great potential for facilitating government services to citizens, what segments of Moroccan society are more likely to benefit or to be excluded from such technologies?

- In order to meet the expectations of wider segments of the Moroccan society at large, what kinds of political, social and economic strategies can be thought of and utilized so as to integrate a greater number of people into ICT and “democratize” access to them.

It is very difficult to speak about the potential of IT or e-government without evoking the question of culture. An important question imposes itself: does the Moroccan population today have an “e-culture”? It would be unrealistic to respond positively to this question. However, there has been a growing use of Internet among Moroccans and the mushrooming of “cyber-cafés” in major cities and even remote villages is now clearly being noticed. Another purpose of this project is therefore to evaluate the effect of ICT on “traditional” culture.

Is an “e-culture” likely to develop in Morocco? What are the constraints or impulses for such a culture? To what extent will the development of an “e-culture” contribute to the enhancement of the social and economic well being of individuals and communities in Morocco? Taking e-government as an example for exploring the potential of a culture of information technology, this project will attempt to shed light on these questions that are not yet seriously being asked in the present context of Morocco.

The IT in general and e-government in particular can become important components of Morocco’s economic and social change. In this regard, an awareness of the Moroccan government of the “digital divide”, and how to start thinking about societal issues and economic development as information-driven, is part of the strategy we refer to above [4]. As the world becomes more and more “Internetconnected”, developing nations such as Morocco will have to consider more seriously the importance e-commerce and e-government for national well being, employment, and the creation of a more competitive market economy. In our research project, we anticipate that the success of this strategy will eventually depend on what effectively citizens are trained to be “Internetconnected” and communities “wired”. E-government promises to make government service-oriented, reliable, innovative, more efficient, responsive, transparent and legitimate. In the area of administration and finance, there are electronic procurement, changing address, registering to vote, registering new company, tax filing, etc. In human services are job searching, social security benefits and integrated case management. Healthcare features tele-medecine, tele-radiology and claims processing. Public safety institution can set up a platform for declaration to the police, most wanted lists and crime statistics. Courts and criminal justice can have e-filing of court documents, video arraignment and ticket adjudication. The Transport sector benefits from automobile and driver’s license registration, traffic flow and intelligent transportation systems.

3. DEVELOPMENT METHODOLOGY AND OUTCOMES EVALUATION

Clearly we had to choose between the two well-known strategies in implementing E-Government systems [2]:

- The top-down approach, which implies executive directive and/or legislative mandate driven projects;
- The Bottom-Up approach, which implies perceived need driven projects.

If implemented as part of a state effort and an institutionalized policy, the gradual introduction of IT into Morocco (top down approach), and e-government more specifically, will very likely contribute to a significant transformation of the traditional administrative structures of the country. An important goal of this research is to conceptualize a strategy of change as new technologies start to pave their way into different working environments. Within the past ten years, Morocco has witnessed the emergence of a vibrant civil society. It is our contention in this project that a more successful implementation of IT would have to take advantage of the growing role of the civil society as an important tool for social mobilization (bottom up approach). Our perspective will bridge the gap between these two conventional approaches that we believe to be complementary and not mutually exclusive.

Therefore, our concept of "e-government" does not preclude the potential of a coordinating strategy to make e-government more effective by recurring to alternative forms of social organization such as the civil society [4]. Actually, E-Government can be seen as a new management theory about how to reform government by replacing rigid hierarchical organization structures with more dynamic networks of small organizational units; replacing authoritarian, top-down decision and policy making practices with a more consensus-driven, bottom-up approach which facilitates the participation of as many stakeholders as possible, especially ordinary citizens; adopting a more 'customer'-oriented attitude to public services; and applying market principles to enhance efficiency and productivity.

As we want our system to be the reference in E-Government in Morocco for local collectivities, we shall find out clear measurement and quantitative evaluation criterion to know:

- How much does it contribute in simplifying procedures to request and receive services?
- How much does it contribute in speeding up the delays of requesting and receiving services?
- How much does it contribute in achieving an equal processing of requests and delivery of services?
- How much does it contribute in attracting investors and enhancing businesses?

Answers to these questions will not only consider technical benchmarks but also, and more importantly, the socio-cultural dimension of Moroccan citizens and how their cultural background and the education level will impact positively or negatively the acceptance and the use of the system.

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