

Chapter 9

E-Governance and ICT Enabled Rural Development in Developing Countries: Critical Lessons from RASI Project in India

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ABSTRACT

Proactive economic policies combined with the ICT revolution of the past decade have brought about many changes in managing businesses and organizations in developing countries like India. The progress achieved through this revolution has also led to exploitation of ICT for better governance and rural development. As a result, several ICT projects have been initiated to foster improved governance and facilitate rural development by appropriately linking public and private institutions. RASI (Rural Access to Services through Internet) is one such government-private initiative to promote e-governance and ICT enabled rural development. Our longitudinal research is to analyze the factors related to access to and usage of the services offered through this project in Erode district of the state of Tamilnadu in India. Data for this empirical research was collected through survey and interviews during two time periods (2004 and 2006). Our findings show that the project has largely deviated from its objectives due to lack of government support, non-scalable technology and ownership issues. Based on our findings, we provide a set of recommendations to policy makers and implementing agencies.

INTRODUCTION

Even after 50 years of independence and successive planning efforts, significant rural development in India is still a dream rather than reality. One of the distinguishing features of India is that the rural India constitutes 700 million people living in 600,000 villages. These villages contain 72 percent of India's labour force and they are primarily employed in agriculture, forestry, fishing, etc. Delivering basic services and offering scope for economic and social development for these rural masses have been the biggest challenges faced by the governments. However, ICT (Information and Communication Technology) revolution of the past decade and key economic policies of the government have facilitated a new way to bring about development. While viewing government as a service provider, citizen is a consumer of public goods and services. Today's broad exposure of the public to private sector products and services in the new economy has caused expectations of government services to rise. In this research paper, we have attempted to evaluate empirically the overall effectiveness of one such Internet-based service delivery network. Our longitudinal study relates to the project RASI, kiosk based service delivery network, which is implemented in the state of Tamilnadu in India. The paper is organized as follows: We present a review of relevant literature followed by research questions and methodology. We then present the summary of the project, data analysis and a detailed discussion of our findings. We conclude with a set of implications for policy makers and directions for future research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

We begin our literature review by defining the term 'e-governance'. ICT, especially the Internet technologies, has changed the way how core activities are carried out in organizations

and institutions. It is obvious that governments around the world are also in the pursuit of deployment of ICT-based solutions for facilitating good governance. Role of ICT in government has two dimensions. The first dimension is the use of ICT to automate internal processes of government and establish linkages across various departments. This is commonly referred as "e-government" which relates to the processes and structures pertinent to the electronic delivery of government services to the public (Fraga, 2002; Saxena, 2005). Perhaps, the second dimension of ICT use in government referred as "e-governance" is the ultimate revolution in bringing together all the stakeholders (citizen, private organizations, NGOs, research community etc) to link with e-government systems. Therefore, e-governance is an evolutionary and ICT based model that seeks to realize processes and structures for harnessing the potentialities of ICT at various levels of government and others for the purpose of enhancing good governance (Bedi et al., 2001; Holmes, 2001; Okot-Uma, 2000, Saxena, 2005). Although, the terms e-government and e-governance are used interchangeably by researchers, for the purpose of our research, we follow a broader definition stated by Commonwealth centre for e-governance: "e-governance is the commitment to utilize appropriate technologies to enhance governmental relationships, both internal and external, in order to advance democratic expression, human dignity and autonomy, support economic development and encourage fair and efficient delivery of services (Riley, 2001). Many other authors have also defined e-governance in this broader perspective covering both internal and external linkages through use of ICT (Heeks, 2001; Marche & McNiven, 2003; Zwahr et al. 2005; Grant & Chau, 2005). Probably, the next stage in use of ICT will be the evolution of "e-democracy" which refers to the processes and structures that encompass all forms of electronic communication between government and the citizens, such as information sharing, voting, polling, or discussion, thereby enabling citizens

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