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Internet for Accountability – The Colombian Experience
Sharing Information and Knowledge to Fight Corruption – Challenges and Opportunities

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Internet for Accountability – The Colombian Experience

Why to use Information and Communication Technologies? – ICT in electronic government - e-government.

In 2006, Colnodo developed the research study, "Social Use, Appropriation and Impact of the Internet as a Tool for Accountability in the City of Pasto"[1], that aimed to explore how the local government has developed transparency and accountability by using Internet as a tool for accountability.

This case study was selected as one of the five winners of the initiative "Andean Experiences in e-government: the Citizen Participation Problem" convened by the Faculty of Latin-American Social Sciences– Flacso Ecuador, with the financial support of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Canada.

This study explores the theoretical framework for the use of ICTs in public administration, aiming to enhance the relationship between the government and its citizens and the processes aimed at strengthening democracy as explained below:

ICT use, government, democracy and public administration

Nowadays it is recognized that one of the elements for building citizenship is the usage and access to the free flow of information and communication that allow individuals and groups to get, know, manage, and analyze diverse information coming from different sources. Likewise, the relevance of the production and dissemination of information is also recognized. These processes of continuous exchange and flow of information between the government and civil society can increase transparency, and participation, providing the citizens with more resources and competencies to

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1   This study was developed by the researcher Olga Patricia Paz Martinez, Project and Administrative Coordinator of Colnodo.

supervise and make governments accountable.

In Latin America this cooperation is undermined by several factors such as the weak capacity for negotiation and the poor access to information. Nevertheless, there are ways of making good usage of ICTs to promote community building practices since Internet could facilitate swift interactions between the public administration and civil society(De Souza; 2002).

The usage of ICTs in the public administration is what is known today as electronic administration. It involves mainly three aspects (Criado; Ramilo; 2003):

- Service providers, **(e-administration)**; it is referred to the management, information, service processes, complaints and feedback

- The promotion of **e-democracy**; involves the strengthening of a new political relation between government and citizens and includes the consultation and dealing of complaints; the participation in the decision making processes and the supervision of the government actions by its citizens,   demanding transparency and accountability. Three outcomes could be expected when using ICTs in politics: they can make the situation worse; they can contribute to the resolution of problems, or they can create new problems that cannot be resolved by ICT themselves (Subpirats).

- Outlining public policies (**e-governance**); by participating actively in the drafting, management, implementation and evaluation of public policies.

A recent approach suggests the implementation and use of ICT in the public sector as an opportunity to shift to a relational administration, that is to say, a public administration that transforms its relationships with citizens and that considers and involves different stakeholders for the provision of services, promoting a democratic participation and governance (Criado; Ramilo; 2003).

The concept of a relational public administration arises from the need of a public administration that responds to the demands of its citizens by facilitating their participation and promoting an ongoing communication with them. The incorporation of ICTs could support the implementation of a relational public administration. However, the challenge is not the use of technology in itself, but to open more direct spaces of communication to facilitate the dialog among leaders, public officers and citizens.

Coleman/Gotze puts forward four electronic democracy models defined accordingly to the degree of

participation (Araya; 2005):

- Electronic democracy of public opinion; Citizens are consulted through opinion tests, but without participation in the decision making process.

- Direct democracy or referendum; a consultation in different areas is made through Internet and the opinions are considered in the decision making process.

- Electronic democracy based in local communities; the organizations and local groups have new electronic tools to interact with the local and national government as well as with other organizations.

- Civil commitment; is the most complex and democratic model since its emphasis is on the usage of new technologies in the deliberative processes of democracy.

Deliberative democracy requires inclusive participation. To do so, citizens need - among other things, to have access to balanced information and full communication channels between government-citizen and citizen-citizen. Access to reliable and timely information allows citizens to make informed decisions when they are consulted or participating in deliberative processes. This means to move from an informative model of unidirectional distribution of information or a consultative model with an incomplete two way direction where citizens are consulted but there are not proposals to be discussed, to a deliberative model where there is an active participation of citizens in the decision making processes. ICTs offer new opportunities to relate citizens with government officials and favors deliberative democracy that promotes a two way communication (Araya; 2005).

Nowadays there is great hope around the cyber democratic project based on a global government, a transparent state, cultural diversity, a collective ethos awareness, an inclusive, transparent and universal communication space, and greater freedom and responsibility for citizens. (Lévy; 2004).

Electronic government – electronic democracy

The concept of electronic government is referred to the modernization of the state, transparency in the public administration and in new opportunities for the interaction between the government and its citizens by using ICTs in an efficient and productive way. They were used for the first time in the nineties to follow up the public institutions' work through the incorporation of ICT. The electronic government is an expression of the information society that puts forward the strategic and intensive

use of ICTs in the public sector. (Araya; 2005).

The first experience of electronic government arises at the second half of the 90's. Europe was a pioneer in the field with the *Telecities* project, created and financed by the European Union so the governments could apply ICTs to urban administration. In Latin America countries like Brazil have moved forward by promoting management models that avoid using paper by using electronic documents. In the last few years, Brazilian citizens have declared their taxes on line and have been using the electronic vote for presidential elections. E-government, does not involve just having Internet portals or facilitating paperwork and providing information, but the exercise of democracy and the strengthening of citizenship[1].

E-government is understood as the provision of services and information from the government to its citizens. On the other hand, e-democracy is understood as the participation of citizens and the interaction and permanent deliberation between government and citizenship. However, in reality the programs of e-government generally take into account both, the innovations and challenges in the governmental management to achieve a more competitive and transparent performance and to make more efficient the services provided, and the dialogue between citizens and the government aiming for a greater participation. The usage of ICTs involves transforming the administration from within and externally with the citizenship.

In this research we understand e-government including both perspectives.

Other challenges for e-government is to improve the access to organized reliable and significant information to respond to the user needs, reduce the administrative costs, increase the efficiency and the trust of the citizens in the administration, decentralize the administrative functions, increase and improve the offer, simplify the processes, reduce the bureaucratic paperwork and establish a process of accountability involving the participation of citizens. These challenges involve a change in the perception of what public service is meant to be. It has to be integrated in the globalization and internationalization era, excerpting somehow influence on the exercise of power and everything that involves public decision making.

Summarizing, e-government entails three promises for the government: more efficiency, more transparency, and more communication with the citizens. For the citizenship the promises are: more

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1   For more information on cases studies in the region see: BONILLA, Marcelo y CLICHE Gilles, editores. "Internet y Sociedad en América Latina y el Caribe", particularly the part corresponding to the social impact of Internet in the local sphere. FLACSO, Ecuador, Internacional Development Research Centre, IDRC, Canadá. 2001.

and better information, more control and spaces of influence and leverage and a better quality of life. However, these promises when tested can turn out to be quite different (Araya; 2005).

Thus, the e-government initiatives would have to offer the necessary resources to facilitate the active citizenship participation, which is not always easy[1]. Likewise, the promotion of e-government solutions is not reduced to the provision of online services. It has to involve the transformation of dense information and processes to be provided through online services. This involves the formation of human resources capable of linking the dynamics of physical and online management and the integration of e-government initiatives within the working plan, the budget, the organizational culture and the operations of the public administration.

'The Internet for Accountability' Project

In 2001 the "National Association of NGOs for Electronic Communications" – Colnodo (www.colnodo.apc.org) was invited by Nexos Municipales (www.nexosmunicipales.org.co) to the workshop "ICTs for the Local Government ", in order to make a presentation on how ICTs, particularly Internet, could strength the accountability of public administration with their constituencies. To achieve this, Colnodo requested support from Transparency Colombia in order to receive guidance on how and with which actors it would be possible to make the workshop presentation.

Transparency Colombia (www.transparenciacolombia.org.co) invited a group of majors to see if they could participate in this initiative. The municipality of Paipa was selected given the interest shown by its major (Rodolfo de Jesús Díaz), who was working on the project "Municipalities Accountable for their Public Funds" lead by Transparency Colombia.

It is important to highlight that at the time, Paipa civil society organizations and the local administration had already in place a local initiative for the transparent management of public resources called "El Convite Paipano por la Integridad: Para el manejo de los recursos públicos y la gestión social sin corrupción". Likewise, the municipal administration was already committed to this initiative in order to facilitate

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1   A good example of the integration of Internet in e-democratic processes is the design and set up of the participatory budget in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in which the active involvement of the population reached its highest levels. The role of Internet in this initiative is evident in three different stages: at the initial stage Internet was used to convene and mobilize the population. In the second stage it was used to promote the initiative at a local and national level. In the third stage the use of Internet supported the existing participation mechanisms, enabling the following up and ensuring transparency. See: PORRAS, José Ignacio. *"Internet y las Nuevas Oportunidades para la Deliberación Pública en los Espacios Locales". Article published in Nueva Sociedad 195, January - February, 2005, pages. 102-116.*

accountability, Thus, The Internet for Accountability Project, included the Internet usage to facilitate this process.

Since then, Transparency Colombia has worked to achieve its strategic objectives - the strengthening of citizenship in the fight against corruption and the creation of an ethical infrastructure in the public sector. It has been considering Internet, particularly, "Social Internet" as a good way of enhancing the transparency of the municipalities' public administration.

Likewise, in the framework of the " Strengthening of Good Government" Program, Transparency Colombia has set up and put in place methodological tools to promote transparency in the management of public affairs, together with the municipal administrations and civil society organizations through:

- The transparent management of the municipality's information via Internet.
- The accountability of the City Hall with its constituency.
- The development of municipal plans for transparency and the fight against corruption with the participation of the most important social actors and institutions of the municipality.

 As a result, an Internet tool was developed by local civil servants, social organizations, grassroots organizations, Transparency Colombia and Colnodo to facilitate the following up of the municipality public management.

The development of this tool included:

- Consultation with social and grassroots organizations on the relevance of the information published in the Web page.
- Training of social and grassroots organizations on the use of Internet and of the municipality's page.
- The outline of the page sections that support the major accountability.
- Design of a standard model for the presentation of information in the pages aimed at strengthening transparency in public management and citizenship's participation. This model includes information about budgets, plans, programs, projects, investments, procurement, local authorities' decisions, local and national legislation, studies, social organizations, departmental functions, timetables, paperwork and accountability, among others.
- The usage of accessibility standards in the Internet site defined by the Web Accessibility Initiative to guarantee the access to the information that is published in the page, by the citizens.
- The outline takes into account the e-government guidelines established by the government to publish information online by governmental organizations.
- The formats that are used to publish the information in the system use open standards to guarantee the

access from any computing platform.
- Free hours of Internet access to the grassroots organizations and observers.
- Public campaign that promotes the usage and access to the pages of the municipalities.
- Development of an indicator system to monitor and evaluate the project.

Even though the experience was not presented in the workshop, the project continued its activities until the launch of the site, "Paipa Transparente": www.transparencia.paipa.gov.co.

After this experience, Transparency Colombia developed a project that wanted to replicate the experience developed with the Paipa municipality in other cities. The first phase of the Internet for Accountability project was developed with the financial support of USAID - Casals & Associates, in association with Colnodo and concluded with the improvement of the tool and the implementation of sites in the municipalities of Popayán, Rionegro, Buga and Pasto, where the staff of the municipalities collaborated to improve this tool.

The tool that resulted from this phase of the project was donated to the national government through the Vice-presidency of the Presidential Office. The tool was evaluated and improved by the Connectivity Agenda (www.agenda.gov.co), who decided to implement it through the program Territorial e-Government in 627 Colombian municipalities that received internet connectivity from the governmental program Compartel (www.compartel.gov.co). The implementation started in December 2005 and is still an ongoing process. Up to date, November 2006, there are already installed 582 web sites.

The Connectivity Agenda opened a tender for the follow-up and training of the municipalities in the usage of Internet, desktop tools and administration of the sites. This process was won by a group of universities that are developing these activities working in the field with the municipalities that are part of the project.

Today Colnodo is offering the technical support. Telefónica - Telecom (telecommunication company) brings the technological support for the maintenance of the municipalities' sites.

In the last phase of the project, lead by Transparency Colombia (2005 – 2006) with the financial support of USAID, new improvements to the tool have been made and a new version has been developed for the State and Local Financial Offices.

All the tools are available under Public License GNU (www.gnu.org) and can be downloaded in the page of the project, available at www.iprc.org.co. This page includes also an online version of the tool, support documents, access to technical support, a frequent asked questions system and videos that facilitate the usage of the tools by governmental staff and citizens.

From this experience, two initiatives have been integrated to the project facilitating important features for the improvement of the system:

● Met@logo, www.metalogo.org. The main objective of Met@logo is to improve the communication and cooperation capabilities between small cities and Latin America communities and their small and medium companies (PYMES), through the use of ICTs. The project looks for a way to facilitate municipality's tools that promote the use of e-government tools so local businessmen will have access to online paperwork processes.

● Follow up of the Millennium Development Goals. Through this component, the municipalities will be able to publish and make available to the community, information regarding the comprehension of the millennium goals and to bring information of the status of the municipality through indicators. This project is an initiative of the German cooperation Agency, GTZ, the Human Development Section of the National Department of Planning, and the Colombian Federation of Municipalities.

Tool Characteristics

In order to guarantee the timely publication of information by the civil servants and to facilitate the access of information by the community, it was decided to use a content management system developed by the Association for Progressive Communications – APC (www.apc.org), called Action Applications (www.actionapps.org) which allows civil servants to update the page preventing any technical dependency for the administration of the sites.

The tool is based on open source software (php, MySQL, Apache) that is usually distributed under Public License GNU (www.gnu.org) freeing municipalities from the payment of licenses and stimulating technological development.

The usage of open standards guarantee that in the future, public and private organizations will be able to exchange information in a more efficient and transparent way, guaranteeing the inter-operability between systems.

Conclusions

Internet for Accountability is an experience that shows how a proposal initiated by grassroots organizations municipalities and civil organizations and accepted and promoted by the government, is more likely to be

accepted and implemented at a national level, since it integrates the contributions of multiple stakeholders committed to its development. Likewise, the way information is compiled, processed and presented is simple and easily accessed by communities.

This initiative shows that participatory processes involving all stakeholders in an inclusive and transparent process are more likely to be accepted. Likewise, they facilitate the inclusion of new stakeholders willing to join efforts which provide the community with tools that facilitate access to information.

In Internet for Accountability, it is important to highlight the interest shown by multiple stakeholders in developing the ICT tools for reaching the communities with a single technological product to enhance the dissemination of information.

Probably ICT is not the answer to all needs, but without any doubt they are indeed a great opportunity for developing countries. However, it is important to remember that in many Latin American countries access to Internet is still very limited. In the case of Colombia, only about 10% of the population has access to Internet. According to the February 2006 Quarterly Report of the Telecommunications Regulation Commission (CRT) 9,9% of Colombians have access to Internet (4.356.000 Colombians, of a total of 44.000.000 inhabitants), a figure that although has increased in recent years continues to be low in comparison to other Latin-American countries. According to the July 2005 CRT Report, only 25% of Internet users are outside the country's main cities, living in small cities and towns.

Presently, in Colombia, there is an opportunity of spreading the access to Internet via the mobile phones network since it is estimated by the Commerce and Industry Office that there are around 22 million mobile phone users[1] and many of them have the possibility of accessing the Internet (WAP) and text messaging through their phones.

The initiatives that have been developed show that the use of ICT is of great interest for the communities that do not have and easy access to them. Therefore, it is necessary to work together with the community identifying their needs and setting up services that allow access by using these new technologies. In this way the citizens will be well informed to take action, and hold their governments accountable. It is through information that citizens can provide feedback, question, criticize. Information is also an input for citizens' participation. In Colombia this is a challenge given that generally speaking, Colombian citizenship is weak and badly informed and educated.

Finally, included are the recommendations of the case study developed by Colnodo "Social Use,

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1   Although The Public Services Office estimates that this figure is high and more likely to be around 18.800.000 users of mobile phones in Colombia.

Appropriation and Impact of the Internet as a Tool for Accountability in the City of Pasto" These recommendations aim to:

- Develop organizational systems for the management of information and communication in the municipality offices.

- Design and implement communication strategies that integrate the electronic means with traditional means of communication for the dissemination of information.

- Design and develop ways of working for the production of Web content.

- Promote initiatives of e-government

- Produce and disseminate reliable, timely and relevant information.

- Evolve from a unidirectional model to a bidirectional model of information.

- Improve the internal communications mechanisms using ICT

- Support civil servants in the maintenance of the information systems.

- Integrate the citizens as participants and interlocutors

- Scale up the offer of services, information and interactive tools on the Web.

- Participatory evaluation of at least three aspects: the technical functioning of tools, the information production process and the impact among users.

- Committed governments. The governmental staffs have to be well trained, with decision making power and committed to incorporating new technologies in their administrations.

- Needs Assessment in order to know the different expectations of stakeholders, which are their information and services needs and their possibilities of interacting with local governments

- Improve the infrastructure of ICT. It is necessary that public administration outline policies and programs to expand the access, usage and ownership of Internet within the local administrations, particularly among citizens.

- ICT training. In order to increase the use of ICT it is necessary to provide certified training courses among different sectors of society.

- Promote the inclusion of ICT in primary, secondary and higher education, and in health and local government.

- Disseminate successful projects

- Evaluate online governmental initiatives according to qualitative and quantitative indicators.

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