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Bhoomi Project as an E-Governance Initiative: A Study of Select Districts in Karnataka

Mass Communication

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ABSTRACT

Rural and remote areas of most developing countries have less population density and suffer from an almost complete lack of communication technology infrastructures. New information technologies are very powerful means for providing education and training. They are also a means to accelerate the growth of the rural economy which subsequently helps in alleviating poverty and in improving living conditions in rural areas. The present study intends to conduct an in-depth analytical study of communication technologies and rural development with special reference to select districts in Karnataka based on field research.

Introduction

The research on E-governance is broadly covered under the topic of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Development. In the extant literature on ICT for Development assumes a categorical significance and many publications, web sites and conferences use the same phrase as their title or subject category. As a theme this topic resonates across disciplines, be it information systems, development economics, development studies or administrative sciences. Papers have argued the role, function, use and relevance of ICT for development, as also the various meanings of development and its inclusion of ICT. The contention of this paper is that e-government projects are also development projects and have to be assessed as such.

The public sector, academia and the international community have been preoccupied with good governance in developing countries since announcement of the *Millennium Development Goals.* Optimization of governance models has featured prominently in public sector development. Globalization and the information society gave rise to E-governance. Governments worldwide are investing increasingly in information and communication technologies (ICTs) across a range of applications. The by-product of e-government, in addition to being seen as a global project of technology transfer, is public sector reform, achieved by improving government processes that connect citizens and support interactions within broader society. (Taneja, Vikas and Parashar, Sakshi; 2011: p 1).

At first glance this may appear to be a pointless exercise as by very definition this seems to be true and uncontroversial - e-government projects are a part of ICT for development. However, some points about the manner in which e-government systems have been written about in the literature show that the development aspects of e-government systems are not entirely clear and need to be highlighted. First, most reported literature on e-government systems tends to focus on the narrow aspects of project design and implementation issues. The reports tend to evaluate the systems from the perspective of projects whose implementation goals have been tightly defined and that can be measured by parametric methods. Larger issues and impacts are considered, but in a peripheral manner, and are mainly used to show the achievement of project goals.

Second, in the developing country context, e-government projects are large public interventions that impact the lives of millions of people. Even though many projects have simple goals, such as reduce the time taken to acquire some document, or increase the transparency of some procedures, the projects affect the way thousands of people work and make a living. These systems introduce radical and disruptive changes in people's lives and their impact has to be understood in this larger context.

Third, by definition again, e-government projects are promoted and sponsored by government departments. Governments and government departments are accountable to the public and their role in initiating and building these projects has to be evaluated in the public space. Development theory brings to the fore the methods for understanding matters of public accountability (resulting from public policy). Thus, ICT projects are best understood when seen from the lens of development theory. This latter aspect is missing from the existing literature on e-government systems (Rahul De, 2006).

'Bhoomi' Project:

'Bhoomi' (meaning land) is the project of on-line delivery and management of land records in Karnataka. It provides transparency in land records management with better citizen services and takes discretion away from civil servants at operating levels. The Revenue Department in Karnataka, with the technical assistance from National Informatics Centre (NIC), Bangalore, has built and operationalized the Bhoomi system throughout the state. The Bhoomi has computerized 20 million records of land ownership of 6.7 million farmers in the state.

Under this prestigious Bhoomi E-Governance project of the Government all 20 million land records of 6.7 million land owners in 176 taluks of Karnataka have been computerized. This system works with the software called "Bhoomi" designed fully in-house by National Informatics Center, Bangalore. While the project is largely funded by Government of India; some critical components of this project are funded by State Government

The First on-line Kiosk of India was started in Sakleshpur. The former Hon'ble Chief Minister of Karnataka Shri S.M.Krishna officially inaugurated the first Land records Kiosk in his home town Maddur on 6th February 2001. Bangalore district's first Computerized taluk Bangalore (South) Taluk was inaugurated by Shri Venkaiah Naidu, former Hon'ble Union Minister for Rural Development and Shri S.M.Krishna, former Hon'ble Chief Minister of Karnataka on 13th July 2001 on the day when Vidhana Soudha (the Government headquarter building) celebrated its 50th anniversary.

Objectives of Bhoomi:

The stated objectives of the Bhoomi land records digitization project are as below: (Chawla R: 2003)

1. Improving the quality of service to the citizens: (a) Allowing farmers / citizens easy access to their records; (b) Infuse transparency in providing the services to citizens
2. Ease of administration: (a) Facilitating easy maintenance; (b) Prompt updation of land records; (c) Making land records tamper proof
3. Generating meaningful MIS out of the system relating to land records
4. Ensuring self-sustainability of the project: (a) Robust revenue model; (b) Public-Private partnership, where possible.

Highlights of Bhoomi

- Fully online system to carry out mutations on land records data

- Finger print biometrics authentication to ensure full proof authentication system and to enforce the concept of non-repudiation.
- Facility to scan the field mutation order passed by revenue authorities and the notice served on the public.
- Land record centre in each taluk office for public interface.
- Synchronizes with the regular field work done by Village Accountants and Revenue Inspector.
- Provision for interfacing of Touch Screen Kiosk at taluk office.
- First in mutation process thereby eliminating any favouritism.

The above features would help in bringing total transparency in land records administration with added advantage of security and reliability.

Scope of the Study

The importance of the research was limited to rural development. The study focused on field work in selected districts of Karnataka. This research tried to study the possible effects through experiments on communication technologies in rural development.

Methodology

Convenience sampling technique was adopted for this research. The sample consisted of the rural people. In the terms of geographic units' different villages from different taluks of the selected four districts helped for demographic categories. Study data for this research work has been collected through first hand details of information. The region selected consisted of five villages from eight taluks of selected districts of Karnataka. All people who were identified as using any form of electronic service provided by the government were included in the study. The total number of respondents in the study was 600.

Findings and Discussion:

Upon its launch in Karnataka, Bhoomi was immediately hailed as a highly successful system by the media. The results of a survey conducted on users showed that the system was easy to use and there was an improvement over the manual system. The survey was conducted in 4 districts of Karnataka and had 600 respondents. A summary of the survey results is as below:

1. About 77.7 percent respondents have termed that they were aware about the e-governance programme in their region. 81.3 per cent respondents have termed that they have aware about Bhoomi project. 75.2 per cent respondents have termed that this programme helped in developmental process.
2. About 17.8 percent respondents have termed that they are getting the information about Bhoomi project through direct communication, 65.8 percent of them getting it through mass media, 14.3 percent getting it from the workers and 2 percent respondents are getting information about this project through some other ways.
3. Of the users who had used the earlier, manual system and also the Bhoomi system, 78% found Bhoomi to be simpler to use. In the manual system about 60% of the respondents had to meet 2-4 officials for their work, whereas with the Bhoomi system 79% could complete their work by interacting with kiosk staff itself.
4. About 74% of users of Bhoomi stated that their documents were error-free, whereas 63% said so for the manual system. 28% respondents had to make more than one trip to the kiosk. The average time spent in the queue is 27 minutes. 3% of users had to pay a bribe with the new system, as opposed to 66% in the manual system.

Bhoomi meets the first stated objective as the report clearly shows that the system is easier to use and lesser number of officials have to be met to obtain an RTC certificate, takes less time to obtain the certificate and less bribes have to be paid. Transparency is provided by the mutation request procedure, where a queue discipline is forced by the system and citizens know the status of their requests from the queue details.

Limitations and Conclusion:

This paper provides an in-depth analysis on Bhoomi Project. It provides useful insights to those using e-governance services. This paper has a number of limitations which are worth nothing. Firstly, this is a quantitative study and the sample is too small to make major generalizations. Secondly, the study being an exploratory nature, more qualitative and quantitative focus is required. Thus the paper lacks a strong theoretical framework.

Prior research that has examined Bhoomi has reported mainly on the project aspects of economic feasibility, change management, process re-engineering, costs and benefits, and some user-based features for efficiency and transparency of transactions (Bhatnagar, S, 2004; pages 97-109) and (Parthasarathy B, 2005). The challenge of e-governance to serve a billion people should not fail to be a significant focus of the government. A very possible step should be undertaken to harness its delivery be it in the technological area.