E-Governance in Nepal: Prospects and Challenges

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Background

The growing application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and their subsequent use on strengthening interaction among public entities, civil societies, communities and citizens has given rise to a new governance paradigm known as e-governance. E-governance is ‘the application of information Technology to the processes of government functioning to bring about simple, moral, accountable, responsive and transparent government. It came as a quest of making the public institutions more transparent, accountable, and efficient for the better delivery of public services. Using the ICT as a tool it helps to improve governance to be more effective, transparent, professional and cost-effective. Therefore both the developed and developing countries today are found adopting ICTs for making their government efficient, transparent and customer friendly.

In Nepal, the public, private and the nonprofit entities have been in the process of introducing ICTs for their performance. The e-policy in Nepal focuses on using e-government especially for the delivery of programs and services and the usage of information infrastructures for improved internal administrative procedures. To augment the e-governance initiatives a number of legal instruments have been introduced and necessary institutional mechanism has been created. However incidence of digital divide both at individual and institutional level is common in Nepal. In this context, this paper discusses of the prospects and challenges of implementation of e-governance in Nepal.

Government to E-governance: conceptual clarity

Four words government, governance, e-government and e-governance are common uses in administrative literatures (also see Box 1). The Weberian philosophy states that the constitutional legitimization provides the government a monopoly in terms of societal control. Thus, the government, in brief is taken as an institution that is formally constituted, bureaucratically organized, and usually constitutionally legitimated.

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Governance started to attract policy attention and get into development discourses around the period of late 1980s. Governance as a concept came in recent times to the increasing interaction of three actors – state, market and the civil society. It is taken as a process rather than immediate decision. It is a set of continuous process that usually evolves slowly with use rather than change dramatically. Good governance started to drive policy debates as a means of securing development and growth, thereby requiring governments to be open and predicable. This openness and predictability of government functioning is further echoed at e-governance.

The terms of e-government and e-governance are often used interchangeably. E-government is the use of information and communications technologies (ICT) to transform the traditional government by making it accessible, transparent, effective and accountable. Following UN’s five guiding principles show’s the key notion of e-government

- Building servicers around citizens choices
- Making government and its services more accessible
- Social inclusion
- Providing information responsibly, and
- Using IT and human resources effectively and efficiently

E-government does not mean putting more computers on the desks of government officials and is more than just a government website on the Internet.

In a simple way ‘e-governance’ is viewed in the perspective of two major shifts in socio-economic arena – governance and information revolution. It uses electronic means to support and stimulate good governance. The emergence of ICTs along with a strong wave of globalization, and has a profound impact in the development of e-governance notion.

E-governance is not only the usage of ICTs but is determined by political, social, economic and technological aspects. It establishes a relationship between government officials and citizens, providing greater access to government information and services by making the government accessible online; promoting citizen participation

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2 Riley, B. Thomas (2003?). E-government vs. E-governance: Examining the differences in a changing public sector climate. Commonwealth Centre for E-Governance

by enabling citizens to interact more conveniently with government officials, such as by requesting government service and filing required documents through website; increasing government accountability by making its operations more transparent, thereby reducing the opportunities for corruption; and supporting development goals by providing business, rural and traditionally underserved communities with information, opportunities and communications capabilities\(^4\). Thus it increases the flow of information accelerating the process of decision making by optimizing resources, and making the mechanism for decision making self-regulating.

The objective of e-governance is to support and simplify governance for all parties - government, citizens, businesses and its employees. Two major objectives of e-governance are ‘service to the public sector’ and ‘efficient government’. The ‘service to the public’ fulfills the public’s needs and expectations satisfactorily on the front-office side, by simplifying their interaction with various online services. The other objective ‘efficient government’ helps for government operations to facilitate a speedy, transparent, accountable, efficient and effective process for performing government administration activities. Significant cost savings (per transaction) in government operations can be the result.

**Implementation of E-governance in Nepal**

The introduction of e-governance in Nepal has not a long history. E-governance is expected for supporting good governance initiatives of the government by enhancing efficiency and effectiveness; improving information dissemination and service delivery mechanisms through use of ICTs; and stimulating the development and growth of ICT sector within the country. To implement the e-governance initiative there is a need for infrastructure development, improvement of law and public policy, building e-literacy, enhance accessibility, ensure privacy and security, and development of workforce. In addition there is a strong commitment from the leadership for the development and give attention for strategic investment, collaboration and citizen participation. Once government makes strategies to transform the governance process, it must prepare to meet the significant challenges and opportunities that will arise during implementation. One of the key functions of developing the e-governance is introducing IT Policy in 2000 in Nepal. The IT Policy specifies its broader objectives as\(^5\):

- To make information technology accessible to the general public and increase employment through this means,
- To build a knowledge-based society, and
- To establish knowledge-based industries.

In addition a number of legal instruments created to develop IT sector for augmenting e-governance in Nepal. Some of them are among:

- IT Policy, 2000
- Electronic Transaction and Digital Signature Act (ETADSA), 2057 (2000)
- Copyright Act, 2059 (2000)
- Telecommunications Policy, 1999
- Telecommunication Act, 1997 Telecommunication Regulations 1997
- National Communication Policy, 1992
- National Strategy Paper on ICT (National Planning Commission)

Some of the important institutions created towards ICT sector are among Ministry of Science and Technology (MoST), High Level Commission for Information Technology (HLCIT), and Nepal Telecom Authority. In addition to these governmental entities, a number of private organizations which offer tele-services including telephone, and internet services. There are 22 Internet Service Providers (ISPs), six VSATs (Very Small Aperture Terminal), eight radio paging service provider, and some 15 software-developing companies have been operating their services. The government has also emphasized BOT system and permitted FDI for the development of this sector. (Source: [http://www.apdip.net/projects/dig-rev/info/np/] accessed on 13.03.2010).

**Increasing trend of ICTs utilization in Nepal**

Effective application of ICTs in public administration and governance area in Nepal remains relatively low. Even though the trend to use personal computers (PCs) and networking has been increasing, there is conspicuous lack of systemic approach to deployment of ICTs based delivery models in the administrative set-up.

The administrative structure is yet to make forays into databases, MIS intranets and meaningful web presence – basic attributes that determine e-readiness in Nepali bureaucratic set up to plunge whole hog into e-governance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 2: ICTs in Ministry and Departments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ministries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With web page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With emails</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of total 26 ministries 25 ministries have already introduced web and 22 ministries email IDs. While only around 50 percent of the government departments have the web presence (See Box 2). In addition to governmental departments, academic institutions, private organizations and the NGOs have also increased significantly and coming up with web presence. In a way there is an overwhelming increment for using telephone and mobile phones (See Box 3). In 1999, the teledensity reached one line per 100 inhabitants which was 1.4% in 2003, and expected to 15% by 2017. It was the private sector that first connected Nepal to the internet in 1995. PC penetration in Nepal is continually on the rise and is at an estimated 0.96 per 100 people. The ISPs source reveals that the number of subscribers to their services has an annual increment of 50 percent. There were only 35,000 users in 2000 which has increased by ten times in 2009. These trend shows that there is a growing trend for the application of ICTs in Nepal. It is estimated that business organizations use 30 percent of internet services followed by international organizations based in Nepal and private home users by 20 percent each. The NGOs occupy 15 percent share, educational institutions 10 percent, and government entities just limited to only 5 percent.

**Challenges of implementation of e-governance in Nepal**

Despite the government of Nepal has positively giving attention towards the development of ICTs and subsequent implementing e-governance, a number of issues has yet addressed. Some of the challenges for successful implementation of e-governance are presented as:

- information transparency
- legal issues
- resources availability
- infrastructure including connectivity in rural areas
- capacity and awareness
- political will and government action
- assessment of local needs and customizing e-governance solutions to meet those needs, and
- content (local content based on local language).

**Box 3: Trend in phone users in Nepal**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2009</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telcom GSM mobile</td>
<td>299,000</td>
<td>3,955,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,955,000 Telcom CDMA mobile</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>611,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86,000 Spice GSM</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,218,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mobile density rate</td>
<td>1.52%</td>
<td>27.22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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In addition these issues some of the legal issues are among legal validity of electronic documents, admissibility in legal proceedings, and legal validity of electronic transactions (Ibid.).

Compared to urban areas, rural areas are lack of accessibility of telephone penetration where 85 percent of the total population (27 million) lives. Nepal Telcom source shows that only 1963 Village Development Committees (VDCs) out of 3915 VDCs have been served with at least one PCO. However, telephone penetration has been heavily skewed in favor of urban areas as a significant number of VDCs remain underserved.

To underscore the major challenges for implementing e-governance three major reasons can be given as follows:

- lack of regulatory/legal framework for public key infrastructures, digital signature, digital certificate and cyber laws;
- physical infrastructure in terms of availability and quality of communications networks and bandwidth feature prominently while comtemplating full-fledge e-governance;
- paucity of resources such as human resources financial resources; and
- political will and government action

**Conclusion**

The government of Nepal views e-governance in terms of its potential for bringing about a major paradigm shift in the way public administration functions and also as a potential means of augmenting basic tenets of good governance. E-Governance has been taken to break the barrier of geographical diversity by using ICTs which can help its effective and efficient transformation. In Nepal, various sectors such as education, health, agriculture, tourism, trade, among others have been using information technology. The number of telephone/internet users has been increasing significantly and legal and necessary infrastructures has been created.

But challenges exist with regards to making full fledged e-governance a reality due to various reasons. Besides providing service to citizens, it's important to empower and motivate government employees to expect better service from them. E-Governance should transform the government workers into empowered knowledge workers. There is still considerable lack of awareness and knowledge on e-governance related issues among policy an decision makers. In addition the success of e-governance will depend on attitudes, knowledge and skills specially within the public sector that are required to initiate, implement and sustain e-governance initiatives. Then only it helps to influence the general publics’ perception of the trustworthiness and effectiveness of their Government.

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