



Pro-Poor Public Service Delivery with ICTs

Making local e-governance work towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals

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APDIP e-Notes present an analytical overview of specific issues related to information and communication technologies for sustainable human development in the Asia-Pacific region. APDIP e-Notes are developed by the United Nations Development Programme's Asia-Pacific Development Information Programme (UNDP-APDIP) based at the UNDP Regional Centre in Bangkok, Thailand. For more information, visit <http://www.apdip.net> or contact info@apdip.net

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Summary

e-Governance and e-government are increasingly being emphasized by governments, the private sector, civil society groups and development agencies as critical for strengthening good democratic governance.

e-Governance for the poor or pro-poor e-governance assists governments in reaching the yet 'unreached' and contribute to poverty reduction in rural and remote areas. At the same time, this process also enables involvement and empowerment of marginalized groups through their participation in the political process.

Despite the developmental potential, few governments in the Asia-Pacific region have planned for and implemented e-governance strategically directly targeting poor people.

This APDIP e-Note introduces the concept of pro-poor e-governance, gives two examples of e-governance projects targeted at poor and vulnerable groups, and provides a comprehensive approach to pro-poor e-governance towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The approach is comprised of seven building blocks that include policy development, needs assessment, identification of high-impact applications, utilization of appropriate mix of technologies, public-private-civil society partnerships, capacity building and people's participation, and monitoring, evaluation and feedback.

What is pro-poor e-governance and why is it important?

Reports on progress made towards achieving the MDGs show significant poverty reduction in the Asia-Pacific region. Yet, poverty remains a daily reality for many people, especially in rural and remote areas. Social and economic developments are still not fully benefiting the poor and vulnerable, and government interventions rarely target these groups that are often difficult to reach due to geographical, infrastructural and linguistic constraints.

e-Governance and e-government¹ are increasingly being emphasized by governments, the private sector, civil society groups and development agencies as critical for strengthening good democratic governance. There is increasing evidence that if implemented strategically, e-governance and e-government can improve access to public services, increase the efficiency, transparency and accountability of government and political processes, as well as empower citizens by enabling them to participate in the decision-making processes of governments.

Within the larger context of achieving the MDGs, pro-poor e-governance can be defined as e-governance strategies and applications for local service delivery that are targeted at improving the livelihood of the poor and vulnerable (see also footnote 1).

¹ In this APDIP e-Note, e-government is seen as an integral part of e-governance. e-Governance defines the ways that government institutions, businesses and citizens are using electronic means for the purpose of enhancing good democratic governance processes and for achieving better public service delivery based on transparency, accountability and public feedback mechanisms. e-Governance services involve the interaction between the citizens and the democratic processes such as online public hearings, electronic voting, feedback systems, complaint registration, signature campaigns and participation in decision-making. Pro-poor e-governance refers to a specific set of actions and recommendations to ensure that e-governance benefits the poorest segments of society for the achievement of the MDGs. In this APDIP e-Note, e-government refers to the process of restructuring internal government processes and enhanced information exchange systems between various levels of government institutions for the purpose of delivering enhanced electronic services to citizens, businesses and government institutions.

What is the role of e-governance in service delivery?

More than 60 percent of the population in the Asia-Pacific region lives in rural or mountainous areas and the majority of them are poor² without access to basic services such as clean water and sanitation, basic healthcare services, proper primary education, and agricultural extension services.

The reasons for dysfunctional service delivery are many and complex, but most often, they relate to lack of accountability, transparency and commitment in making services work for poor and marginalized citizens. In many cases, the lack of implementation and absorptive capacity of government agencies and citizens respectively are problems that hamper efficient service delivery. Inadequate targeting of the poor, supply-driven planning, elite capturing of programmes, lack of voice of the poor and their inability to reach the government and service providers, are among the most common reasons.

Often, government services fail to reach the poor in rural and remote areas, and when services are provided, they rarely reduce poverty. A key challenge for public service delivery is in designing and implementing a system that holds service providers accountable for the services delivered. The 'route' of accountability is often too long and policy makers can rarely be reached by clients, especially poor clients with information, complaints and feedback. Even if the clients are able to reach the policy makers, this does not necessarily lead to improved services because the policy makers cannot ensure that the public service provider (whether public, private or civil society) will deliver the services due to an equally long route of accountability between the policy makers and the service providers.³

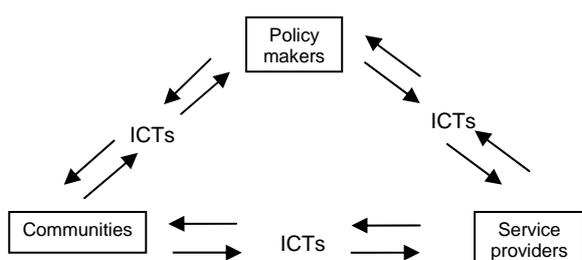


Figure 1: Enhancing accountability, transparency and efficiency with e-governance

As depicted in Figure 1, new information and communication technologies (ICTs)⁴, and e-governance applications can provide essential tools and mechanisms for poor communities to hold both policy makers and service providers accountable for a sustained supply of services.

² The urban poor also form a significant share of the poor and deprived.

³ World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People. A publication of the World Bank and Oxford University Press (2003).

⁴ New ICTs include all digital technologies such as personal computers, mobile and handheld devices, and the Internet.

Viewed this way, e-governance applications, through ICTs, represent a mechanism for delivering services more directly to poor people and for poor people to provide feedback. If countries can succeed in strengthening the linkages and making the route of accountability between policy makers, service providers and poor people shorter through e-governance, it will be a way of putting the poor at the centre of public service delivery, and at the same time, giving the poor a voice to tailor services towards the real needs of the communities.

ICTs and e-governance offer opportunities for strengthening the ongoing process of improving services by focusing on demand-orientation, targeting of the poor, monitoring and evaluation (in order to increase transparency and accountability), and providing a voice for the poor. Despite these opportunities, few governments have strategized for and implemented e-governance initiatives that directly target poor people and the achievement of the MDGs.

What is being done?

There are examples of e-governance and e-government projects that have increased access to information and improved public service delivery for poor people.⁵ One such example is Lokvani⁶ which has attempted to empower citizens and local government.

Lokvani is a public-private partnership programme by the District Administration of Sitapur and the National Informatics Centre of India servicing 3.6 million citizens in Sitapur, with 88 percent of the population living in rural areas and a 38 percent literacy rate. It provides online public services as well as a channel to influence the local decision-making process by raising grievances and petitions. These are forwarded to the respective local government officer. This service allows citizens to submit their petition online or by mobile phone and then track the status along the process of resolving the issue. This programme gives citizens an opportunity to interact with the government without physically going to a government office. Instead, citizens can now avail several government services at the local, block and town levels from existing cyber cafes. At the same time, the system provides the local government an effective tool to monitor the performance of various departments.

Another example is the People First Network (PFNet),⁷ a rural connectivity project that provides various information services to rural and remote communities spread across the Solomon Islands in the Pacific. The service is based on sending emails over a short-wave radio network. It enables networking for local farmers and indigenous business entrepreneurs by making it possible for them to maintain contact with clients, suppliers, and shippers. PFNet provides the rural, dispersed poor access to various information and resources including legal advice on family law, land and

⁵ The examples have been selected from the collaboration workspace of the UNDP e-Governance Group's intranet.

⁶ <http://sitapur.nic.in/lokvani/rojgar/allabout.htm>

⁷ <http://www.peoplefirst.net.sb>

resource disputes, and distance learning, without them having to travel to the capital.

Apart from Lokvani and PFNet, there are many other examples from the Asia-Pacific region, including Akshaya, Bhoomi, e-Seva and Janmitra in India,⁸ the Sarvodaya Programme in Sri Lanka, and the SND A TXT MSG 2 GMA service in the Philippines. The opportunities for taking advantage of these experiences are waiting to be harnessed. The majority of countries that have local service delivery on the agenda are potentially in a position to take favourable advantage of pro-poor e-governance approaches.

ICTs and e-governance, however, do not result in miracles that can turn bad governance into good governance, but used as tools under the right circumstances, they can strengthen the underlying organizational and administrative processes of a public sector reform as well as help in reaching out to rural and remote communities as part of the reform process. ICTs are necessary but insufficient. A number of parallel associated conditions such as pro-poor policies, decentralized decision-making reform, education, basic infrastructure,⁹ etc. will have to be addressed alongside. In the absence of these conditions, e-governance and the use of ICTs will probably lead to sub-optimal outcomes.

The seven building blocks of pro-poor e-governance

The UNDP-APDIP-recommended approach to pro-poor e-governance consists of seven building blocks (see Figure 2 below) for making services work better for the rural poor in the Asia-Pacific region.

The first building block is focused on developing e-government policies and strategies in a pro-poor and socially inclusive direction, in line with the government as a provider of equal opportunities for all including poor and marginalized groups. As stated in a UN report on e-government readiness,¹⁰ there is increasing demand for greater participation by citizens in civic affairs of the government as they affect citizen's rights, their incomes and their social values.

The second building block addresses the questions: what are the kinds of pro-poor e-governance services and applications that have a significant impact on local service delivery and the potential to make people change their habits towards utilizing the e-governance

⁸ These projects are part of 18 projects reviewed in a recently published book by UNDP-APDIP entitled, *Empowering the Poor: Information and Communications Technology for Governance and Poverty Reduction – A Study of Rural Development Projects in India*.
<http://www.apdip.net/publications/ict4d/EmpoweringThePoor.pdf>

⁹ Harris, Roger (2005) ICTs for Poverty Alleviation: Necessary but Insufficient – A State-of-the-Art Review. For UNDP-APDIP. <http://www.apdip.net/resources/ict-poverty-reduction/21paperreview.pdf>

¹⁰ United Nations Global E-Government Readiness Report (2005), From E-Government to E-Inclusion. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Public Administration and Development Management. United Nations, New York.

services as an everyday practice? How can these be identified and conceptualized?

The relevant applications are context-specific but identifying those that make the most difference for local governments and beneficiaries will be crucial to the success and sustainability of pro-poor e-governance. e-Governance killer applications¹¹ can support local governance processes by creating access to development plans and budget. They can be targeted at providing information services directly to people who would otherwise not be able to access them. Or they can be services to intermediaries such as businesses and civil society groups.

The third building block stresses that e-governance is not simply a matter of online interaction between government and citizens but in many cases involves a complex process of organizational transformation in order to deliver high impact information services.

The fourth building block underlines the importance of capacity building strategies and participatory planning for civil servants, local government and communities in designing, implementing and utilizing pro-poor e-governance services. The emphasis on participatory planning that involves all major stakeholders, particularly the beneficiaries and users of the services, is a precondition for the success of e-governance initiatives. In the case of pro-poor e-governance, it should include methodologies for engaging poor women and men in the design and implementation of ICT-based service delivery.

The fifth building block focuses on building public-private-civil society partnerships in the delivery of ICT-based local services. In order to ensure that services are fulfilling the needs of the poor, experience suggests that not only are public-private partnerships required but the essential role of civil society organizations, including academia, that often have crucial knowledge of communities and their aspirations, must be considered in the delivery of services.

Identifying the appropriate mix of technologies is the focus of the sixth building block. Research and experiences show that there are many different technologies that can be used to promote people's participation in government affairs. Therefore, strategies have to encourage an appropriate mix for sharing information and empowering communities. This could include not only the new technologies such as the

¹¹ 'Killer applications' (also referred to as 'killer app') is commonly understood as a computer program that is so useful that people will buy a particular piece of computer hardware, gaming console, and/or an operating system simply to run that program. Developers of new platforms tend to put a lot of effort into discovering or creating the next killer app for their technology in the hope that it will be the breakthrough needed to get the technology adopted. This has led to a burgeoning list of features on e.g. mobile phones, such as text messaging, digital cameras, etc. In this context, a killer app refers to a certain usage of that technology and service that makes the technology and service popular and successful. This usage of the term is especially prevalent when the technology existed before but did not take off before the introduction of the killer app. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killer_application

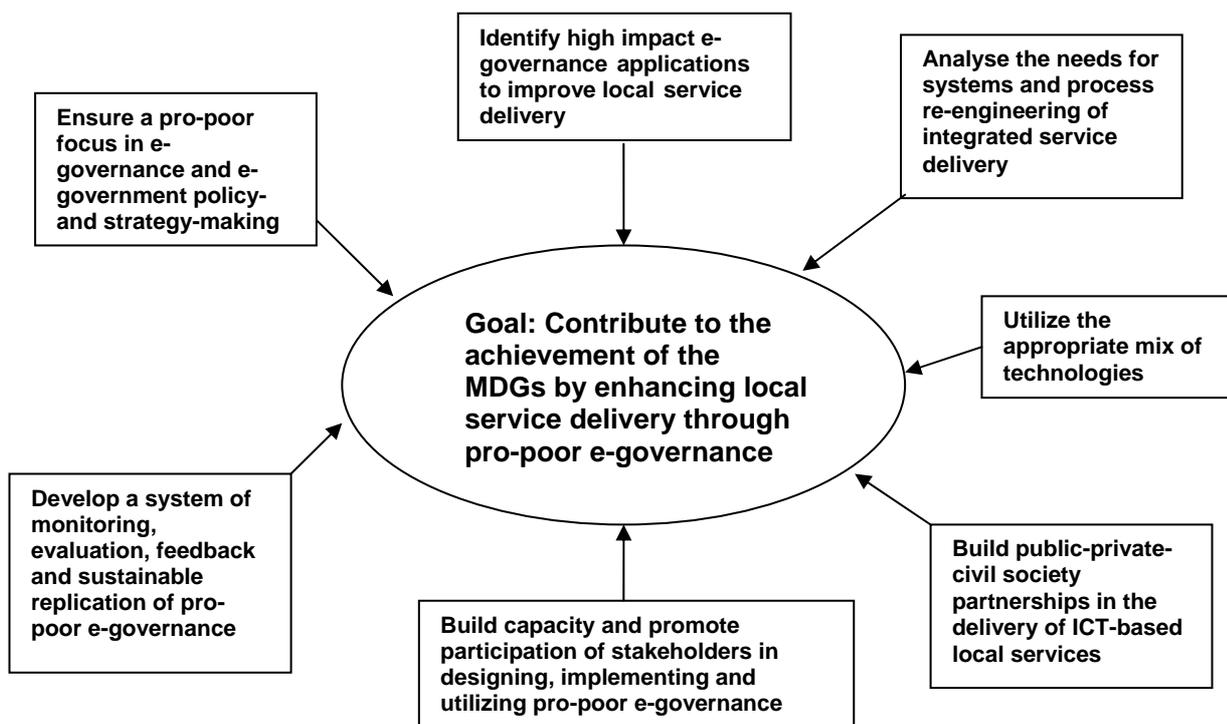


Figure 2: Building blocks for making local service delivery work better for the poor

Internet and SMS through mobile phones, but also community radio and television.

Finally, the seventh building block emphasizes the need for a comprehensive system of monitoring and evaluation of the existing projects and programmes, as well as planning of future interventions that examine how they impact the poor and vulnerable. Another valuable component is the incorporation of a feedback mechanism for stakeholders and beneficiaries of the projects.

As there are no blueprints for action, each country must approach e-governance in its own unique way based on the specific context, needs and opportunities. Pilot projects should be developed to produce models for sustainable replication and upscaling of good practices at the national level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, pro-poor e-governance provides opportunities for achieving the MDGs by enhancing local service delivery to the poor. Governments are strongly encouraged to implement e-governance for the poor as part of their national poverty reduction strategy and a way towards achieving the MDGs. This paper has introduced an approach to starting and sustaining such a venture.

~ Lars Bestle

Additional Reading

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