

A Few Misconceptions about eGovernment

Thomas Parks, The Asia Foundation

Over the past few years, the positive benefits of eGovernment have become widely recognized among government leaders in Asia, and efforts to implement IT-driven government reforms are quickly becoming prevalent in government across the region. But in most cases, the transition from general acceptance of eGovernment to successful implementation has been plagued by a variety of obstacles, and commonly held misconceptions. These misconceptions will often have an inhibiting or ultimately detrimental impact on new initiatives. Consumed by technology-related enthusiasm and technical concerns, government leaders will often fail to address more fundamental obstacles of a non-technical nature, such as political and bureaucratic resistance, overly ambitious projects, or corruption. Many nascent eGovernment projects will never move past the first step because of misperceptions that eGovernment is only for the technologically advanced, Internet-enabled urban centers. Using examples from across Asia, the author challenges some of the most common and debilitating misconceptions. eGovernment will have a transforming impact on government in Asia, but the most important successes may come from some unlikely places, with relatively simple ideas, led by a new generation of government leaders.

We are making progress. Today, most of the discussions on eGovernment have moved from “what is it?” or “should we do it?” to “how do we make it happen?” Across Asia, government leaders have recognized the transformative potential of eGovernment, and have incorporated IT-driven reforms into their agenda. The private sector and civil society are increasing their pressure on government, and finding some practical ways to help the process along. Citizens, especially those who have had a taste of effective eGovernment innovations and their beneficial impact, are increasing their demands on government to move faster. But the track record of eGovernment initiatives in Asia is mixed, and the vast majority of governments have yet to take the first step. So, while there is general acceptance of the potential of eGovernment, there is confusion on how to successfully plan for and implement eGovernment.

Now comes the hard part. Unsuspecting government leaders are quickly realizing that turning their eGovernment vision into a reality can be far more complex and challenging than they expected. National governments around the world have consistently fallen short on eGovernment projects. In April 2002, Gartner Group made a startling announcement that “more than 60 percent of all e-government initiatives either fail or fall short of expected outcomes.”¹ This striking figure underscores a sentiment that is common among government leaders who have attempted to implement eGovernment – it is a tough road.

Over the past three years, the Asia Foundation has met with hundreds of government leaders who are trying to move forward with eGovernment, or in many cases, are still considering their course of action. Foundation programs have sought to de-mystify the challenges to eGovernment, and support those reformers in government that are trying to move forward. Through research, exchanges, conferences, ongoing dialogue, and informal chats, we have heard some surprising feedback. It seems that many eGovernment projects are stumbling on the same

¹ http://www4.gartner.com/5_about/press_releases/2002_04/pr20020430b.jsp

set of issues, and that most government leaders approach eGovernment with a common set of misconceptions that undermine their efforts from day one. This article focuses on the most common and frustrating misconceptions that we have come across in these conversations.

But first, can eGovernment make a difference?

Yes, eGovernment can make a difference. In Asia today, there is growing evidence that eGovernment can lead to an improved business environment, greater citizen access to government services and information, and reduced levels of corruption. In Seoul, for example, when citizens and small businesses apply for licenses or permits, they now have the option of bypassing the traditionally corrupt and time-consuming application process by utilizing the OPEN system, an online eGovernment system for obtaining licenses and permits. Within the first 2 years of the OPEN system, 84% of citizens responded that OPEN had reduced corruption, and visits to government offices for OPEN-related services were down 57%.² In the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, citizens can now pay their utilities, apply for a license, and handle most government-related transactions in one short visit to a computerized government center. Previously, each transaction required hours of waiting in line, as well as corrupt payments to “expedite” the process. In Bulacan Province in the Philippines, it is now possible to calculate and submit property taxes online, avoiding the usual corrupt and arduous process. In each of these cases, eGovernment applications have had a significant impact on citizens and businesses, dramatically reducing the time and resources required to interact with government, and lowering rates of corruption.

For the rising political leader who wants to link his leadership with progress and innovation, eGovernment holds a powerful appeal. eGovernment presents an innovative and forward-looking approach to addressing the traditional problems of governance. If this rising political leader doesn't mind confronting the status quo and perhaps a few entrenched powerful interests, the introduction of IT-driven reforms in government allows them to take the high ground of modernizing government, improving government service, and improving transparency, while quietly delivering some institutional and administrative reforms under the radar. As a result, many reform-minded government officials, NGOs, and business leaders consider IT-related projects more viable and attractive than traditional reform projects, and are beginning to incorporate eGovernment into their strategy for reform. For example, the former Mayor of Seoul, Goh Kun, built his administration's reputation on the theme of anti-corruption, and the OPEN system played a central role in their overall approach. Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Chandrababu Naidu, a rising star of Indian politics, has gained wide notoriety for his efforts to transform government through technology.

The perilous road to successful implementation

Yet, former Mayor Goh and Chief Minister Naidu are the exceptions – they were actually successful at implementing eGovernment. Governments tend to be large, unruly, and suspicious of change. Implementing eGovernment can be compared to steering a supertanker through a tight bend in a channel. It can be done, but it takes a tremendous effort, a confident captain, and a little help from the currents. Likewise, those eGovernment initiatives that succeed tend to have

² <http://english.metro.seoul.kr/government/policies/anti/civilapplications/>

a combination of committed, effective leadership that can mobilize and sometimes strong-arm the bureaucracy, as well as assistance from the private sector. Furthermore, the smaller the ship, the easier the turn. Increasingly, we are seeing that projects with smaller, more manageable scope tend to have a higher likelihood of success. Some of these ideas may seem obvious, but they tend to escape the ambitious plans of many government leaders.

For those government leaders who are thinking about implementing eGovernment for the first time, and are beginning to develop plans, we suggest that they have a discussion with someone who has been down this road. They might be surprised by the advice they receive. And if they speak with more than one person, they might be surprised by the consistency of experiences. Here are a few of the insights that we have drawn from our conversations.

Most of the obstacles to eGovernment have nothing to do with technology.

It is natural to assume that the introduction of technology into government is going to be difficult because of the newness and complexity of the technology. When government leaders begin to think about what it will take to implement eGovernment, they usually start with technology. In the past decade, there have been countless eGovernment readiness assessments. Most of these assessments have focused on government technology infrastructure, technology skills, Internet access and IT literacy among the constituents, and promising technology solutions for government needs. While there has been some increasing awareness to the non-technology challenges, such as policy, institutional rigidity, and leadership, these issues do not receive the attention they deserve.

Ironically, most of the obstacles to successful implementation of eGovernment have nothing to do with technology. In fact, the technical aspects of an eGovernment project, while complex, are usually a known quantity. Every year, the hardware and software needed for government IT projects improves, becoming more user-friendly, more powerful, and generally more reliable. But when you look at the fundamental causes of failure in eGovernment projects, the reasons are usually everything *but* the technology. In most cases, projects fall short because of “human problems”, such as political resistance, bureaucratic resistance, shortcomings in leadership and project management, overly ambitious planning, and corruption.

Most eGovernment projects never move beyond the political barriers. In most cases, there are powerful vested interests that stand in the way of real change in government. Realizing that a new system will increase transparency and reduce the unchecked exercise of discretion that often leads to corruption, reform-minded policy-makers and government leaders have been stymied in their attempts to implement IT-related projects. Especially when collusion between private interests and government officials is common, it is very difficult for a government leader to mobilize the support necessary to approve then fund the project. It often takes a maverick reformer with a strong constituent base, teaming up with like-minded partners in private sector and civil society, to build the momentum necessary to overcome the political resistance. And when it comes to politically sensitive issues – such as land registration in Bangladesh, or eProcurement in Thailand – it may take years of political pressure before even the first step can be taken.

It is hard for an IT project to succeed in a hostile environment. Unfortunately, many civil servants (the people who will use the new system on a day-to-day basis) perceive IT-related projects as a direct threat to their livelihood, and they tend to find a myriad ways to ensure that the project will fail. Given the traditionally low salaries of civil servants, many government workers depend on rent-seeking opportunities to supplement their income. In the less developed countries, the majority of these workers lack IT skills and fear that they will be replaced by IT-literate employees or made redundant by labor-saving technologies. As a result, civil servants often resist eGovernment projects at every turn. Because user acceptance and cooperation is so critical to system implementation, IT projects are extremely vulnerable to bureaucratic resistance. Examples from India, the Philippines, and Thailand have shown that many projects will fail when the users passively resist the project, complaining that the system is not working or that they do not understand it, and return to the old off-line procedures. In some cases, active sabotage of projects can quickly lead to failure, as users enter inaccurate data, or damage equipment.

Very few government decision-makers have direct experience with IT. Many of the government managers who are not IT literate are often inherently skeptical of IT-related projects, and will consciously avoid them. Those who agree to support eGovernment projects almost invariably lack experience in IT systems planning, implementation, and management. This lack of experience leads to poor decisions and failed projects. For example, in Bangladesh, the vast majority of spending in government IT projects (often more than 90%) goes to hardware purchase, while the remaining fraction covers software, training, and systems implementation services. One standard rule of thumb that I used during my time as an IT consultant was that the budget for a major system implementation project should be divided evenly between three major components - software, hardware, and implementation/training services. The complex issues and processes involved in implementing an IT system require experienced leadership, especially given the unique challenges of government adoption of IT. While the required expertise can often be hired from the private sector, most eGovernment projects lack the funding to afford the most capable consultants who command commensurately high professional fees.

Many IT-related projects have failed because they attempted to address an overwhelming set of challenges that could have been avoided with a more modest or sequential implementation. In the mid-1990s, the Government of Bangladesh decided to dramatically scale up an election database and voter registration card project that the Election Commission had designed and successfully pilot-tested on a modest scale with Asia Foundation/USAID assistance through a series of local elections. Instead of expanding the project on a modest, incremental basis, as recommended by many observers, the government was determined to expand the system from the local to the national level in a matter of months. The project failed, primarily due to the immense management task and inexperienced leadership. While grand projects often overwhelm the limited institutional capacities, they also provide countless opportunities for those who seek to impede the implementation process, effectively making a difficult task impossible.

Large eGovernment projects can become bogged down in the procurement process, leading to wasted resources and project cancellation. In some cases, collusion between IT service and hardware providers and influential government officials often results in the award of lucrative procurement contracts to inferior bidders. This process can be extremely lengthy in some

countries, often taking more than a year to complete. As a result, most IT projects, especially those undertaken by national governments, are behind schedule, over budget, and of significantly lower quality than originally planned. Not exactly a good start to a long, difficult journey.

The Foundation's programs in support of eGovernment directly address many of these non-technical constraints. Recognizing that many government managers and private sector implementers encounter a common set of non-technical challenges and constraints in the process of eGovernment adoption and implementation, the Foundation will often support programs to identify common constraints and strategies for overcoming these constraints. In Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines, the Foundation is supporting a series of workshops for government leaders who are eager to move forward with eGovernment. These workshops bring them together with their more experienced peers, as well as subject-matter experts and the private sector, to develop strategies for overcoming the constraints to eGovernment. In India, Vietnam, Bangladesh and China, the Foundation is supporting research on the challenges to eGovernment at the local level and the strategies utilized to overcome these challenges. The results of this research will be used to inform those local government officials who are advocating for eGovernment but are encountering significant obstacles.

Recognizing the stiff political resistance that stifles eGovernment across the region, the Foundation is also supporting the activities of those inside and outside of government to advocate for eGovernment programs. In Thailand and Nepal, the Foundation is supporting programs to make the case for eProcurement as an effective strategy to address corruption in the procurement process. Similar programs are planned for the Philippines and Bangladesh in the coming year.

eGovernment does not necessarily mean “online government”

Many of the best known examples of eGovernment involve the delivery of public services over the Internet. The eCitizen Web Portal in Singapore is a good example of this kind of application. This web portal is the classic “citizen-centric” model for improving government services. All of the standard points of interaction between government and citizens – marriage licenses, school registration, voter registration – can be performed via the Internet through this award-winning web site. But eCitizen would not work without a predominantly IT-literate, Internet-enabled population. For an Internet-based project to be successful, there must be a relatively high percentage of the public that can access and understand the Internet.

Unfortunately, many leaders from the less-wired, less developed countries in Asia, draw the conclusion that eGovernment is out of their reach until they expand Internet access to a much larger segment of the population. In many cases, this process could take years or even decades.

This conclusion is unfortunate, self-defeating, and unnecessary. It is based on a narrow definition of eGovernment that originated from the United States and other developed countries, during the Internet boom of the 1990's. A more useful definition would include the innovative, offline examples that are coming out of India and the Philippines where local governments are setting up systems in a “one stop shop” for government services, or even on a single computer, that still have a profound impact on people's lives and local businesses. The Asia Foundation

defines eGovernment as “the application of information technology to improve the efficiency and accountability of government.” While this definition may seem simple and a bit broad, it goes straight to the point. Government can use IT in thousands of different ways to make life easier for citizens and businesses, and to reduce corruption. The Internet is just one delivery mechanism that tends to be more appropriate for more developed countries.

eGovernment can have a positive impact with only a few computers, a database, and no Internet connection. For example, one simple but revolutionary component of a land registration project in Andhra Pradesh, India offers a good example of what can be done. The Computer aided Administration of Registration Department, or CARD, project was established to address the inefficiency and frequent rent-seeking in the land valuation and registration process. Prior to the system, land valuation was performed through an entirely non-transparent system by assessors and agents, and often required weeks and some additional payments. The government of Andhra Pradesh developed a simple, but effective software program that performs the valuation based on a set of pre-determined rules. The land owner enters some details of their property, such as location, dimensions, and other factors that affect the value then calculates the value. This system can sit on a single computer. According to Subash Bhatnagar, from the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, “Land registration can be completed in a few hours, whereas earlier it took 7-15 days.”³ While the Internet can certainly be useful for most eGovernment projects, there are still a lot of very effective applications for IT within government that do not require the Internet.

eGovernment can begin in the least developed places right now

The vast majority of Asia has yet to be affected by eGovernment. While the potential is tremendous, eGovernment has only affected a tiny fraction of people in Asia. eGovernment success stories tend to be clustered around the more developed regions. The vast majority of eGovernment initiatives have been implemented in the affluent, IT-savvy cities of Singapore (the “Digital Island”), and Seoul (more than 80% of population has broadband Internet access). The vast majority of the other state and local governments have taken notice of these eGovernment success stories, but have been slow to move in this direction, and are many years from implementing anything that will improve people’s lives or improve the business environment.

Yet, the benefits of eGovernment need not be reserved for the wealthy, more developed regions of Asia. Experiences in India, such as the Gyandoot project in rural Madhya Pradesh, demonstrate that eGovernance can work in less-developed regions. This project provides government services and information (among other services) through a network of privately-run computer centers in Dhar province, a rural region of India with 60% of the population below the poverty line. As this and other projects indicate, eGovernment does not require a well-developed public telecommunications infrastructure or high levels of Internet access. Many governments are offering services through public access points or government computer centers. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, citizens do not need to be computer literate (or even literate) to utilize the eGovernment systems, thanks to a government-employed facilitator, who interacts directly with the system. To address the common problem of limited resources in less developed regions, several local governments have developed strategies to reduce their initial investment in

³ <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/egov/index.htm>

eGovernment projects, in some cases by partnering with the private sector in cost-sharing and revenue generating fee-for-service models. Governments are also reducing their initial investment in systems by adopting existing technologies (usually software applications or web portals) that are currently being used by another government, or available as a packaged solution from private sector vendors. Unfortunately, most government decision-makers are unaware of these strategies. So, the familiar justification often used by government leaders in less developed places, “we are on the wrong side of the digital divide, we cannot implement eGovernment here” is no longer a valid excuse.

The most fertile ground for eGovernment may be at the local level

Most of the high profile examples of eGovernment have come from the national level of government. But do eGovernment projects stand a better chance of success at a ministry or a municipality? You don’t have to look far to find a long list of ambitious, well-intentioned projects that collapsed under their own weight, or pushed the envelope of reform a little too far too fast.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity for eGovernment is at the local level. The politics of implementation are often simpler at the local level, as project champions have greater autonomy and can often push more through without the interference of partisan politics. Most successful projects have been initiated on a limited scale, and then scaled up in accordance with a reasonable and manageable schedule. Targeted pilot projects often benefit from a limited user population (and thus, limited potential for internal resistance), and early success on the basis of defined targets and milestones. Once success has been established and benefits have been documented, these projects are much more likely to withstand the stronger opposition that is likely to emerge with increasing scope.

Furthermore, the opportunity for impact may be more tangible and immediate at the local level. Local governments tend to have more frequent contact with businesses and citizens than do higher levels of government. As a result, improving the efficiency and transparency of local government will have a more immediate and far-reaching impact on citizens and the business environment.

With the growing trend of government decentralization in Asia, the responsibilities of local government are increasing, yet the level of available resources is not growing to meet the new demands. Local governments in Asia are increasingly forced to find innovative and cost-effective mechanisms for interacting with constituents and managing their operations. eGovernment provides an opportunity to “do more with less,” improving the level of service, while reducing costs and increasing transparency. While resource flows to local government bodies are modest, eGovernment applications can take account of resource constraints, as well as assist local government officials to access alternative resources.

High-tech solutions must be accompanied by low-tech reforms, and old-fashioned leadership, to make a difference

We've heard it so many times in the past few years – “IT is not a silver bullet”. eGovernment is no different. The introduction of technology into government without strong leadership, process re-engineering, policy and procedural reforms, and a seed change in mindsets, will lead to a failed project in almost every case.

In fact, eGovernment projects that work usually come as one component of a larger package of reforms. According to the recently released *Roadmap for e-Government in the Developing World*, government reformers should “use e-government and ICT as elements of a larger government modernization program. Simply adding computers or modems will not improve government, nor will only automating the same old procedures and practices.” Furthermore, “E-government, as with all reforms, cannot be achieved simply by drafting a law or issuing an order from political leaders.... It requires re-engineering the government’s business processes, both within individual agencies and across government.... Leaders should think about how to harness technology to achieve objectives for reform. ICT is an instrument to enable and empower government reform.”⁴

Leadership is perhaps the most crucial ingredient. Almost invariably, successful IT projects have been championed by a strong, committed leader, whose vision and ability to build support within government, secure the necessary funding, and manage the project from beginning to end has ensured the success of the initiative. In most cases, the leader can articulate the vision for the project, while engaging a core team of experienced project managers and IT specialists who can take the lead in implementation. Most importantly, the project champion must have the influence to ensure cooperation among the government workers who will use the system, as well as secure essential high-level support. In most cases, successful initiatives have been implemented by forward looking leaders who had the power to insist upon change even over the objections and obstructions of an unappreciative civil service.

Recognizing the critical role of informed, dedicated leaders, or “champions” of eGovernment, the Foundation organizes programs that support the development of key government leaders who are interested in technological change within government. For example, the Foundation arranged a study tour of eGovernment best practices in Asia for a delegation of government officials from Ho Chi Minh City that included stops in Beijing, Shanghai, Seoul, and Bangkok. The Foundation also supported the visit of a senior Thai official (who is a key champion of eGovernment in Thailand) to meet with eGovernment pioneers and experts in the United States.

How can we help?

It is just a matter of time. Information technology will have a sweeping impact on government in Asia. But the greatest impact may come from some unlikely places. While the high profile, Internet-based, multi-million dollar eGovernment projects will certainly continue to get the attention of policy-makers and the media, it is the small-scale, grass-roots projects based on practical ideas and simple technologies that will have the greatest impact on everyday people and businesses.

⁴ Roadmap for e-Government in the Developing World, Pacific Council on International Policy, April 2002, <http://www.pacificcouncil.org/pdfs/e-gov.paper.f.pdf>

The challenge for the Asia Foundation, and other organizations that are seeking to accelerate the transition to eGovernment, is to find an effective way to support the thousands of promising, locally-driven initiatives that are sprouting up in every corner of Asia.