

## CONCEPT NOTE

### **Pro-poor eGovernance in Asia and the Pacific** **- *Making public service delivery work better for the poor***

#### **Rationale**

For the developing countries in Asia and the Pacific, eGovernance is increasingly being emphasized as a way for governments to strengthen good governance. If implemented strategically eGovernance can not only improve efficiency, accountability and transparency of government processes, but it can also be a tool to empower citizens by enabling them to participate in the decision making processes of governments.

Few governments have implemented e-government strategically directly targeting poor people. This is despite the fact that more than 60 per cent of the population in the Asian and Pacific region lives in rural areas and the majority of them are poor. If implemented strategically, e-government services for the poor are a way for governments to reach the yet unreached with government services and hereby contributing to poverty reduction in rural and remote areas. This means not only enabling governments to reach out to marginalized groups and communities and meet citizens' expectations through providing e-government services but also being able to involve and empower these groups through their participation in the political process.

#### **Development challenges**

The lack of accountability, lack of transparency and lack of commitment are major obstacles to make services work for citizens. In many cases government services fail to reach the poor in rural and remote areas of Asia and the Pacific and when services are provided the quality is often inadequate to have impact on poverty reduction. A key problem when public services are delivered is the lack of a direct way for the citizen client to hold service providers accountable for delivering the service. The 'route' of accountability is too long and the client (the poor) will rarely be able to reach to the policy maker with information, complaints etc. Equally problematic is that even if the client were able to reach the policy maker it would not necessarily lead to improved services because the policy makers cannot ensure that the public service provider (whether public, private or NGO) will deliver the services due to an equally long 'route of accountability' between the policy makers and the service providers.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People. A Copublication of the World Bank and Oxford University Press (2003).

As depicted in the figure below, communication, ICTs, and e-government applications play an essential role in entailing a way for the poor to hold both policy makers and service providers accountable for a sustained supply of services.

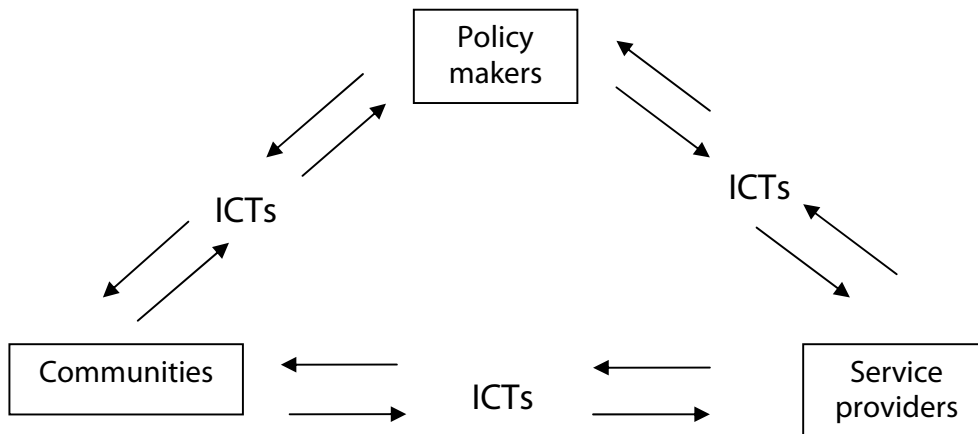


Figure 1: Enhancing accountability, transparency and efficiency with eGovernance<sup>2</sup>

In this way eGovernance through ICTs represents a mechanism for delivering services more directly to them. If countries can succeed in strengthening the linkages and making the 'route of accountability' between the policy makers, the service providers and the poor people shorter by using eGovernance it will be a way towards putting the poor at the center of government public services and at the same time giving them a voice to tailor services towards the real needs of the communities.

In Cambodia, lack of access to information and participation in decision making processes has prevented the rural poor from participation in community activities which in turn has contributed to gaps between government policies on service delivery and the needs on the ground. The lack of access to information and sufficient knowledge to understand legislation and fundamental rights is a serious issue for creating a citizens-inclusive, transparent state. All citizens, including the poor need to know about legislation as well as their own fundamental rights in order to be part of society and the gap in access to information and knowledge about rights makes them especially vulnerable to exploitation. The decentralisation process and the creation of commune councils with expanded

<sup>2</sup> Framework developed for ADBs sixth telecommunication forum in Ha Noi Oct. 2004 in a presentation on findings of the study on improving basic social service delivery with ICT in rural areas of the greater Mekong subregion by Lars Bestle. The triangular approach is developed with inspiration from the World Development Report 2004 on Making Services Work for Poor People.

coverage of village development committees is a step in the right direction as these councils and committees in this process are seen as central bodies for public service delivery at commune and village level. From a preliminary point of view it appears obvious to strengthen these with access to information and eGovernance services as an integral part of building a state based on democratic governance.

### **Responses: What is being done?**

Some of the best examples showing that eGovernance have had dramatic impact for improved public services are to be found in India. One case in point is that of the Bhoomi Kiosks in the State of Karnataka, which has pioneered a computerized land record system serving 6.7 million clients with easy access to records of rights, tenancy and cultivation. Maintenance of such records is essential for obtaining loans and for transferring and inheriting land. Under the old manual and paper based system, farmers waited for months as well as paying a bribe of more than Rs 100. The village accountant controlled the process with little transparency and accountability in the sense of monitoring from officials or clients. Today, farmers can get a record of their land rights in a few minutes at an information kiosk (Bhoomi Kiosk) without paying the bribe – instead they pay a fee for the service of Rs 15. While the service is carried out they can follow the process on a computer screen. It is estimated that Bhoomi saves farmers more than Rs. 800 million in bribes and 1.32 million days in waiting time.<sup>3 4</sup>

Another example from India is that of e-Seva implemented by the Government of Andhra Pradesh which has set up e-Seva (e-service) to enhance easy access to government services. e-Seva kiosks are set up by the government providing access to perform payments of services, applications and responses in relation to more than 45 integrated state and federal services through the system. This ranges from paying water and electricity bills to getting a drivers license and paying property taxes. It used to take around half a day for a citizen to go to the electricity Department and pay the monthly bill. In Hyderabad alone 3.5 million bills are paid every month. Citizens' cost for paying the electricity bill represents a wage loss of about US\$ 45 million in one city alone, given the number of other bills and services that require citizens to go to government offices and wait in long queues during valuable working hours. In the eSeva system, one trip to the eSeva kiosk is enough and all routine transactions

---

<sup>3</sup> Based on Bhatnagar, Subhash (2004): E-government: From Vision to Implementation – A practical guide with Case Studies, Sage Publication, Delhi, World Development Report 2004: Making Services work for Poor People, Oxford University Press and UN ESCAP annual publication 2005 on 'E-government Services for the Poor' by Bestle and Oo.

<sup>4</sup> Although the Bhoomi example most often is touted as an example of e-governance success it has also received criticism. Some opponents argue that since the land records are fraudulent in the first place the system doesn't help much. The computerization may help because of the savings and reduction in waiting time but it doesn't necessarily help to create dependable and reliable land records - on the contrary it reinforces an unfair system.

with the state can be done at once without paying the usual 'speed money'. The goal of the government of Andhra Pradesh is to have 100 % access throughout the state including the rural poor by 2005.<sup>5</sup>

The opportunities for taking advantage of the Indian experiences are waiting to be harnessed in a whole range of countries in the Asia Pacific region.<sup>6</sup> The majority of countries that have public administration reform or decentralisation on the agenda are potentially in a position to take favourable advantage of eGovernance approaches. Having said that it should be noted that ICTs and eGovernance do not supply miracles that can turn bad governance into good governance, but used as tools and 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 for this to happen but also insufficient as it requires more than ICTs to make the impact. A number of parallel associated conditions such as pro-poor policies, decentralised decision making reform, education, basic infrastructure<sup>7</sup> etc will have to be addressed for making ICTs and eGovernance efficient tools for democratic governance.

As there are no blue prints for action each country will have to approach e-governance in their own unique way according to the specific needs and opportunities as well as the state of public sector reforms. In some countries the potential is more obvious than in others.

### **UNDPs regional response**

To help eGovernance underway in the context of the UNDP Regional Centre in Bangkok, we recommend a comprehensive and holistic approach to the challenges of succeeding with eGovernance in developing countries in Asia Pacific consisting of four interconnected building blocks leading towards the same overarching goal of making services work better for the citizens including the rural poor in Asia and the Pacific

---

<sup>5</sup> This example is based on C.K. Prahalad (2005): *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid – Eradicating Poverty through Profits*. Chapter 5. Reducing Corruption: Transaction Governance Capacity, p. 89. Wharton School Publishing, University of Pennsylvania.

<sup>6</sup> UNDPs Asia Pacific Development Information Programme is in the process of finalizing a study dedicated to the issue to be completed later this year. The title is: *ICTs for Governance and Poverty Alleviation: Scaling up the Successes. A study of ICT projects in India*.

<sup>7</sup> Harris, Roger (2005): *ICTs for Poverty Alleviation: "Necessary but Insufficient" – A State of the Art Review*. For UNDPs Asia Pacific Development Information Programme.

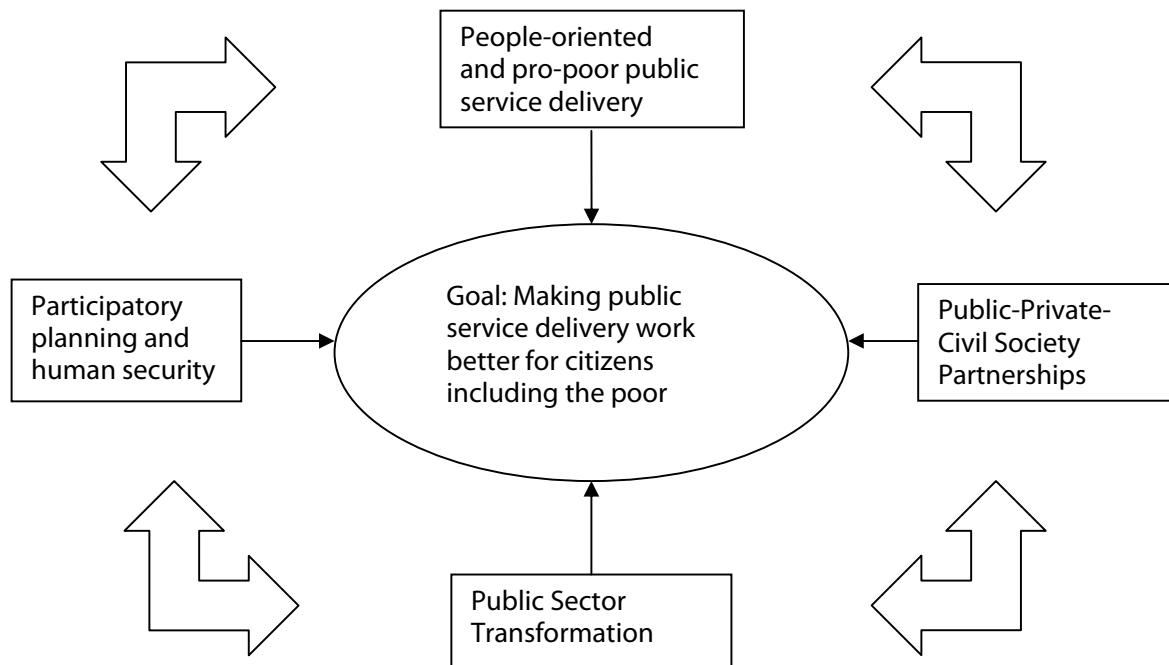


Figure 2: Interconnected building blocks of making public service delivery work better for citizens (- including the poor of Asia and the Pacific) through eGovernance.

The first building block is focused on improving pro-poor public service delivery contributing to poverty reduction through scaling up the successes. Moreover, as successful eGovernance depends on public sector reform that works towards putting people at the centre of public service delivery rather than government institutions, the second building block involves technological, architectural dimensions that focus on organisational, business re-engineering aspects. With the third building block we wish to emphasize participatory planning by all major stakeholders as a precondition for the success of e-governance, as well as underlining the importance of capacity building strategies for civil servants and policy makers in the process of succeeding with eGovernance. Finally, the fourth building block emphasizes public-private-civil society partnerships as one essential response to the challenge of provision of public services in terms of creating ownership and sustainability of large scale eGovernance approaches.

As cross-cutting themes we address the strategic level of moving from vision and goal to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

The regional approach will be implemented through a series of workshops with documentation of selected case studies on eGovernance from the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, a survey of existing e-governance initiatives in UNDP's Country Offices in Asia Pacific will be carried out to assess lessons learned and potential for enhanced assistance from a regional perspective. A capacity building, assessment, and training proposal will be developed along with an electronic network and discussion forum on e-governance concerns for practitioners. In order to move this beyond mere awareness raising and documenting best practices, we will pursue an opportunity to include select countries in a pilot program on eGovernance for the poor in Asia and the Pacific.

### **Focus areas of a regional approach to eGovernance in Asia and the Pacific**

Focus area	Objectives	Proposed regional activities
People oriented and pro-poor public service delivery	To enhance efficiency, transparency, accountability of public service delivery to citizens including the rural poor	- Survey on eGovernance initiatives in Country Offices - Assessment of needs, problems and opportunities for eGovernance - Synthesis of lessons learnt and best eGovernance practices from the region
Participatory planning and human security	To incorporate human development and human security into mainstreaming e-government	- Study on best practices for public sector transformation - Assessment of e-government strategies
Public Sector Transformation	To change the design and structure of the public sector to include disparate organisations and focusing on delivering value to the citizens including the poor	- Study covering models for effective public-private-civil society partnerships - Capacity building needs assessment - Electronic Knowledge Sharing Network - Regional workshops - eGovernance Sub Practice Workshop
Public-Private-Civil Society Partnerships	To incorporate public-private and civil society partnerships to optimise public service delivery	- Sharing of lessons learnt and modalities regionally - Modalities for scaling up the successes - One regional pilot initiative for a selection of relevant countries across Asia Pacific or one sub-regional initiative

*Lars H. Bestle, Programme Specialist, UNDP-APDIP  
Bangkok Regional Centre  
[lars.bestle@undp.org](mailto:lars.bestle@undp.org)*

November 2005