



Strategic e-government development and the role of benchmarking

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 9 August 2012

Keywords:

e-Government
International assistance
Benchmarking
Benchlearning
Neoinstitutionalism
Donor–benchmarker duality

ABSTRACT

Developing information systems and e-government requires a lot of strategic and financial resources that developing countries often do not have. Facing such challenges, some countries are supported by international assistance and donors. This research contributes to explain how such assistance on the development of national information and communication technology (ICT) strategies and programs is related to e-government development. This comparative study of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, (Former Yugoslav Republic of) Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia takes a Rational Neoinstitutionalist perspective to look at longitudinal changes in these developing countries. Quantitative data such as the amount of foreign aid for national ICT strategies and the e-government index are combined with qualitative information from reports and documents. The research suggests that the effect of international assistance on e-government is generally positive in less developed countries. The analysis of benchmarking and benchlearning as e-government policy-making tools is another aim of this study, providing a critical discussion of their role and that of the donor–benchmarker duality.

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1. Introduction on international e-government assistance

The purpose of this study is to explore how foreign assistance from international donors on national ICT strategies and programs is related to e-government development. In a theoretical level, the fast developments in information systems and e-government literature highlight a persisting problem with the absence of theoretical consensus (Archer, 1982; Heeks & Bailur, 2007; Orlikowski & Robey, 1991) beyond technology adaptation (Layne & Lee, 2001) or acceptance models (Davis, 1986; Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000; Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003). More specifically, Yildiz (2007) points out at the problem of e-government research suffering from definitional vagueness, oversimplification of processes within complex institutional environments and various methodological limitations. Considering his suggestions and ways forward, this research attempts to fill some of these gaps by advancing the neoinstitutionalist debate on e-government development. Beyond the significant work done in the context of companies to analyze how people interact with technology (Geels & Schot, 2007; Harrison, Koppel, & Bar-Lev, 2007; Orlikowski, 1992; Orlikowski, 2008; Poel, 2003; Walsham & Waema, 1994), this study focuses on the policy level of public sector information systems.

By default, government assistance is given and received based on certain needs (Alesina & Dollar, 2000; Burnside & Dollar, 2000; Collier & Dollar, 2002), aiming at some positive results for both the donor and recipient (Crawford, 2001). In the case of post-communist

Western Balkan countries aiming to join the European Union and other Euro-Atlantic organizations, democratic governance (March & Olsen, 1995, 2004) has always been a priority. The term is not only about representation rights (Franck, 1992), but refers also as the institutionalization of representation beyond national states into international organizations (March & Olsen, 2004). The aim of international assistance practice in this case “is to strengthen the democratic process [...] and help public institutions become efficient and accountable. It tracks governance policy, promotes knowledge sharing, innovation and leadership, and contributes to influencing the regional discourse on governance” (UNDP Europe and CIS, 2010). In the Western Balkan countries analyzed in this research, institutional priorities are often related to international integration, democratic governance and rule of law. The assumption here is that an elaborate institutional environment is expected to stabilize both external and internal organizational forces and relationships among states, associations and coalitions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The discussion of a number of theoretical approaches on the role of international e-government assistance and benchmarking as institutionalized practices continues in the following part.

2. Theory: neoinstitutionalism and e-government development

In early neoinstitutionalist research it is noted that “organizations are structured by phenomena in their environments” as well as “by technical and exchange interdependencies” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This initial idea of organizational institutionalization of technology was not new and could be traced back to a number of previous studies (Aiken & Hage, 1968; Hawley, 1950; Thompson, 1967). However it

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was DiMaggio and Powell (1983) who tried to explain institutional isomorphism using three types of forces: coercive based on pressures, normative based on rules and mimetic based on similarities. Neoinstitutionalism stands on the idea of rules that influence the way organizations are transformed and become similar to each other, even when they develop in different ways (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; March & Olsen, 1989; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; North, 1990; Scott, 1995; Zucker, 1977). In this study, it is assumed that the same could happen through international e-government assistance between recipient countries and international organizations. Addressing the problem of missing theoretical conceptualization in e-government research mentioned earlier, three neoinstitutionalist approaches are discussed here before positioning this study along one of them.

Rational Action (DiMaggio, 1998) or Rational Choice (Hall & Taylor, 1996) Neoinstitutionalism assumes that actors and actions are rational and operate based on predetermined rules, laws, organizational forms and norms. In this study the general term Rational Neoinstitutionalism (RNI) is used for both approaches interchangeably. A number of related literature is focusing on Public Choice Theory (Ostrom, 1991), followed by New Public Management (Barzelay, 2001; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2006; Lane, 2000) an approach based on cost-efficiency and business type management of state and e-government systems. According to RNI, institutional development is conceived as an effect of strategic action of individuals or selection mechanisms (Nielsen, 2001). Rational Neoinstitutionalism has been labeled as voluntarist, intentionalist and highly functionalist (Hall & Taylor, 1996) meaning that actors have a fixed set of preferences, they see politics as a set of collective action dilemmas and is based on strategic calculus affected by their expectations about each-other.

Social Neoinstitutionalism (SNI) on the other hand, often referred to as Social-Constructivist (DiMaggio, 1998), Sociological (Hall & Taylor, 1996) or Normative (Lowndes, 2002; Peters, 1998, 2005) deals with the socially constructed patterns, institutionalized norms, culture and values influencing actors and agencies. In this research, according to SNI it can be assumed that new institutional practices are adapted because they “enhance the social legitimacy of the organization and its participants” through shared cognitive maps (Hall & Taylor, 1996).

Finally, Historical Neoinstitutionalism (HNI) or Mediated Conflict Neoinstitutionalism as referred to by DiMaggio (1998), focuses on the study of stability, historical development and changes of institutionally shaped conflicts. Based on DiMaggio and Powell (1991), Nielsen (2001) summarizes its origins from “historical institutionalism in political science” (Steinmo, Thelen, & Longstreth, 1992; Thelen, 1999) and “historical and comparative sociology” (Evans, Rueschemeyer, & Skocpol, 1985). There is a general common agreement that HNI provides a certain middle ground to other forms of neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Hall & Taylor, 1996; Hay & Wincott, 1998; Nielsen, 2001), combining previous rational choice strategic decisions, existing structures and social elements in shaping the present development of institutions and actors. HNI in this case would suggest following certain patterns of state capacities and policy legacies (Weir & Skocpol, 1985) on subsequent policy choices like accepting international assistance on national strategies.

In this study of international assistance on national ICT and e-government strategies, RNI can explain the rational policy-making role of national and international organizations by looking at the e-government index evidence and local capabilities or need. It is difficult to apply RNI here to find and explain links between international goals and final users' needs, but nevertheless, this is beyond the scope of this study. This limitation on links between international goals and end-users applies in full in the case of SNI. International benchmarking reports in general and the one from United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN) considered here specifically,

provide a universal format of evaluation that excludes any social features of the actors and countries involved. Because of this and the macro nature of the international e-government assistance on national strategies, SNI cannot be applied in this study, regardless of its possible contribution to provide a deeper understanding of the underlying causes of social actor-agency shaping forces. Finally, the e-government index records used in this study give some good historical figures for the period 2004–2010 to guide the discussion according to the HNI. However, the international assistance on national ICT and e-government strategies is a unique event in time for the countries discussed here. This limits the applicability of this approach in this case.

As a conclusion to this discussion, this study will use the Rational Neoinstitutionalist approach. Regardless of some limitations, RNI provides the best theoretical framework from the ones discussed here, considering the research question, empirical evidence and goal of this study. More recent approaches named Constructivist Institutionalism (Hay, 2006) or Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008) explain institutional creation through discourse and emergence of ideas. These frameworks could be combined with RNI to explain the involvement of donors and developing countries in rational policy-making debates and consultations. Policy development in this case goes through the stages of strategy-making, implementation and evaluation (Stone, Maxwell, & Keating, 2001). In this study, this cycle is used to explore how international assistance on ICTs and e-government is embedded in the countries involved when it is standardized through benchmarking and is formalized through national strategies by both international organizations and recipients. Furthermore, this study will explore the involvement of international assistance and developing countries from benchmarking to benchlearning. Some studies (i Montserrat, 2010; Wauters & Lorincz, 2008) look at them on micro e-government level, but so far, there is very little work on explaining benchlearning and barriers to it in an international context by using neoinstitutionalism.

Some of the literature on e-government for development (Ciborra, 2005; Cocchiglia & Vernaschi, 2006; Heeks, 2002, 2003; Von Haldenwang, 2004) looks at how information technologies can support the establishment of better governance and progress. Richard Heeks (2003) on the other hand suggests the design–reality gap approach to analyze e-government-for-development projects' failures in a developing context. However, it was Jane Fountain (2001) who made one of the first direct attempts to explain e-government through neoinstitutionalism in her book “Building the virtual state”. With her Technology Enactment Framework, Fountain differentiates the use of ICT and its actors involved stating that “the embeddedness of government actors in cognitive, cultural, social, and institutional structures influences the design, perceptions, and uses of the Internet and related IT” (Fountain, 2001, p. 88). Her study was based on three case studies in the United States. This research is trying to go a step further by exploring the embeddedness of international assistance into national e-government policies of not one, but six countries. In doing this, the aim is to advance the argument made by Yang (2003) on the immaturity and ambiguity of neo-institutionalism proposed by Fountain (2001) in accounting for institutional change by considering the balance between agent and institution in the long term. Ciborra and Navarra (2005) have also given a great contribution in this direction with their study of good e-governance, development and aid policy in Jordan. Standing on the principles of New Institutional Economics, they argue that e-government policy initiatives have gained local and international validity by donors and recipient countries as catalysts for development reforms, but implementing standardized ICT portfolios to support good governance is difficult.

The literature review in this part is a good starting point based on single-country cases of e-government institutionalization and foreign interventions in developing contexts. This research however contributes by providing a cross-national comparative analysis of international

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