



Corruption as a source of e-Government projects failure in developing countries: A theoretical exposition



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ABSTRACT

While the literature has touted e-Government as a tool for combating corruption, no study has discussed so far how corruption could influence e-Government project failure. This article tries to fill part of this void in past research by proposing a contextual framework that highlights the role corruption plays in stimulating the failure of e-Government projects in developing countries. Informed by prior relevant literature on general systems, organizational information processing, corruption, as well as e-Government, the proposed framework argues that the prevalence of corruption in developing economies could restrict moral and governance capabilities of administrative systems overseeing e-Governments in a way that could lead to the failure of these entities to produce initiatives that meet stakeholders' expectations. This theoretical study discusses this idea and underscores the value of the suggested framework for guiding scientific inquiries into this important topic and helping the public officials interested in planning, managing, and auditing e-Government initiatives.

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1. Introduction

The past decade has seen increasing efforts from researchers to identify the salient contextual sources of e-Government failure (for reviews see, Avgerou, 2008; Heeks and Bailur, 2007; Müller and Skau, 2015; Rana, Dwivedi, & Williams, 2015; Titah and Barki, 2006; Yildiz, 2007, 2012; Zhang, Xu, & Xiao, 2014). Although much useful managerial insights have been offered thus far about this topic, e-Government project failure not only remains quite common but also continues to escalate in many developing countries (United Nations, 2014). This perplexing fact has been calling upon researchers to address the evident irregularity and to identify *far-reaching* contextual causes of e-Government project failure in these countries. In response, some scholars (Corojan and Criado, 2012; Heeks, 1999; Kim, 2014) have mentioned that corruption may play an influential role in stimulating the failure of e-Government projects in developing nations; but they stopped short from explaining how this actually takes place. This article will try to explore this idea by describing how corruption can act as a source of e-Government project failure in developing countries.

So far, prior scientific discussions over the relationship between e-Government and corruption remain largely one sided and focus

on understanding how the former can influence the latter. Whilst e-Government has been touted as an effective tool for combating corruption and improving governance in developing countries (e.g., Abu-Shanab, Harb, & Al-Zoubi, 2013; Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Bhatnagar, 2002; Corojan and Criado, 2012; Elbahnasawy, 2014; Kim, 2014; Krishnan, Teo, & Lim, 2013; Shim and Eom, 2008), no study has discussed so far how corruption can induce e-Government project failure (see the analysis by: Rana et al., 2015). This is unfortunate because pervasive corruption has been shown to be one of the most important contextual factors that could influence the maturity of e-Government initiatives (Singh, Das, & Joseph, 2007); important research and practical insights could be missed if researchers continue to overlook the other possible ways through which e-Government and corruption might be related.

The present study represents an early attempt to discuss the implications of corruption for e-Government project failure in developing nations. The article argues that e-Government failure in developing economies comes to exist in part because of the role played by corruption forces. It proposes that e-Government projects fail because of cultural, economic, political, and judiciary corruption effects, which distort information processing capabilities of administrative systems (e.g., capability to deal with moral and governance needs) that ultimately cause e-Government to stop short from meeting stakeholders' expectations. The basis of this theorizing comes from viewing the organization as an information processing entity that receives information from and interacts

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openly with its environment (Ackoff, 1971; Galbraith, 1973; Kast and Rosenzweig, 1973). The value of this view stems from the fact that corruption could significantly influence e-Government failure, albeit this impact might find its way through associations with other contextual determinants.

The rest of the manuscript is structured as follows. Section 2 highlights the importance of the e-Government environment and argues that both external and internal contexts can influence the outcome of the e-Government project. Section 3 reviews past e-Government project failure and identifies corruption as a key determinant of e-Government failure in developing countries. Section 4 defines corruption and identifies the main conduits through which it takes place. Section 5 introduces the theoretical framework of this study, which explains how corruption can shape current e-Government realities in developing countries. The final two sections discuss the main implications of this study.

2. The importance of context

Organizational theorists (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967) have long recognized the importance of environmental factors for the effective functioning of organizations. The logic behind this contention rests in the view that the organization is a subsystem within a gestalt of systems, thus, it is open to receive inputs from and interacts with related subsystems (Ackoff, 1971; Kast and Rosenzweig, 1973). In his seminal work, Leavitt (1964) viewed the internal environment of organizations as a network of four interrelated and mutually adjusting components: people, task, technology, and structure. Organizations, however, differ in their capabilities to deal with inputs from the environment (Duncan, 1972). According to the organizational information processing theory by Galbraith (1973), this difference depends on the capabilities of an organization to receive information inputs from its environment, interact with these inputs, and manipulate them to enhance their flow in order to achieve optimal performance. Research has shown that the external environment could impose restrictions on the internal environment of the organization by hindering its structural and information processing capabilities (Duncan, 1972; Galbraith, 1973). Organizations fail because of their incapability of dealing with information challenges posed by their environment effectively.

Similarly, the e-Government literature has highlighted the importance of context for e-Government performance. For example, Aladwani (2013b) found support for the importance of culture for understanding cross-country e-Government quality ratings. Weare, Musso, and Hale (1999) also found support for the connection between external environmental factors and the diffusion of municipal-level e-Government websites in a large state in the US. Only so can a government develop effective and successful websites" (p. 160). Put another way, the dynamic environment of the e-Government website places continued pressures on e-Government resources and information processing capabilities. Moreover, the literature is packed with articles pinpointing internal causes of e-Government failure (for a review see, Avgerou, 2008; Dada, 2006; Heeks and Bailur, 2007; Titah and Barki, 2006; Yildiz, 2007). In sum, both the external and internal contexts can play important roles in shaping the outcome of the e-Government project.

3. Understanding the context of e-Government failure

Reports about e-Government failure in developing countries are frequent in the literature. In a paper dedicated for understanding failure risks for e-Government initiatives in developing countries, Heeks (2003) estimated that approximately 85% of such projects

are either total or partial failures. This alarming failure estimate led some researchers to question the actual benefits of e-Government projects to developing countries (Ciborra, 2005). With such a weak foundation for meeting the highly publicized e-Government benefits, the next logical step will be to understand the root causes of e-Government failure.

The extant literature has identified a long list of contextual sources of e-Government failure in developing countries spanning the full spectrum of individual, organizational, technological, legal, political, social, and cultural characteristics. For example, some researchers (e.g., Akman, Yazici, Mishra, & Arifoglu, 2005; Aladwani, 2013a; Choudrie and Dwivedi, 2005; Dwivedi and Williams, 2008; Fu, Chao, & Farn, 2004; Gauld, Goldfinch, & Horsburgh, 2010) have found that individual characteristics such as age, gender, education and the like play important roles in accepting or rejecting e-Government projects. Other scholars (Aladwani, 2011; Luk, 2009; Wachira, 2012) found that organizational characteristics such as organizational culture and collaboration significantly influence e-Government success. Another group of scholars (Aladwani, 2013b, 2013c; Carter and Belanger, 2005) highlighted the importance of technology characteristics such as portal quality and innovation attributes for citizens' acceptance of e-Governments. At a different level, Schuppan (2009) described a model for explaining e-Government failure in developing countries that covers wider conditions including environmental and cultural characteristics. Similarly, Kamal, Hackney, and Sarwar (2013) identified significant political, stakeholder, strategic, and social issues relevant to e-Government failure in Pakistan. Weerakkody, El-Haddadeh, Sabol, Ghoneim, and Dzapka (2012) also highlighted the necessity to address political, fiscal, and social issues when developing and implementing e-Government in transition economies. Last but not least, Moon (2002) drew the attention to the role of financial, technical, and human capacities, as well as legal issues in shaping e-Government implementation effectiveness.

The above brief review shows that past research has rarely discussed the influence of corruption on e-Government project failure, thus we currently know very little how this happens. Despite the fact that the topic remains surprisingly understudied in the literature, the preliminary signs from the literature regarding the potential importance of this influence is beginning to appear. For example, Singh et al. (2007) affirm that pervasive corruption is one of the most important contextual factors that can determine the maturity of e-Government initiatives. Other studies have touched upon this issue and looked at it from the side of how e-Government can fight corruption (e.g., Abu-Shanab et al., 2013; Bertot et al., 2010; Bhatnagar, 2002; Corojan and Criado, 2012; Elbahnasawy, 2014; Kim, 2014; Krishnan et al., 2013; Shim and Eom, 2008). For example, Corojan and Criado (2012) discussed how e-Government in some Central American countries encouraged transparency and accountability and reduced corruption. Like most other e-Government scholars, the two authors have not discussed the influence of corruption on e-Government projects. As a result, the current article will try to fill part of this void in prior research by presenting a framework that explains how e-Government failure in developing countries could come to exist because of direct and indirect corruption effects. The value of understanding corruption within the context of e-Government stems from this thesis: e-Government failure could be impacted in a significant way by corruption, even if this influence sometimes is mediated through the influence of other contextual variables.

4. Corruption: a missing contextual challenge

Corruption has been defined in many different ways depending on the academic background of the researcher(s) (Anand, Ashforth,

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