

## **E-GOVERNMENT IMPLEMENTATION IN ALBANIA, AS A TOOL TO INCREASE CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION AND BENEFITS**

**Imelda SEJDINI**

Department of Business Administration  
Faculty of Economics, University "Aleksander Xhuvani"  
Lgj. Brig. 17 Sul, Rr. Ali Jolldashi, Nr. 3  
Elbasan, Albania  
E-mail: sejdiniimelda@yahoo.com

### **Abstract**

*Database processing in Albania and public use of information is at an early stage of development and is still considered as future potential expectation for a better governance. The implementation of e-government in terms of exchanging information among public servants, citizens, social and economic agents; Governance transparency in relation with the citizens and media; Decentralization and strengthening of the local autonomy; as well as participation of the citizens in local governance, today is a challenge to afford.*

*Political programs of governments have not considered a priority the information management systems in Albania, especially in Public Administration, yet. Having secondary considerations, the information systems in local and central level are still not integrated and incomplete. This study examines issues caused by the missing of technology as a tool for a better governance and looks at some ways to turn into efficiency the information systems in Albania*

*Along with the introduction of information technology and networking, a great need for training is identified in order for technology use to become a tool of improving governance and increase citizens' participation in the decision - making process. Interesting implications are explored for policy makers and public authorities in order to maximize the public benefits from a good implementation of e-government in Albania.*

**Key Words:** *e-government, e-services, information technology.*

**JEL Classification:** 038, H70, R11

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Governments are turning to new technologies to enhance service delivery to their citizens, and thus improving citizens and state relations. The e-government initiatives are focusing on renewing their administrative structure and processes. Additionally, these Governments are trying to provide government information and services online for fast delivery and cost effectiveness.

E-government concept is becoming a significant decision-making and service tool at the municipal, regional and national government levels. The vast majority of users of these government online services see significant benefits from being able to access services online. International experience and major international programs – to identify ways of

ensuring that the digital revolution will benefit the population of the whole world – have demonstrated that electronic government and governance can make an invaluable contribution in creating digital opportunities for the public.

An increasing number of countries and international organizations are realizing the benefits of e-government in the economic, social and administrative sector. The drive to implement e-government has resulted in the formulation of many e-government visions and strategies, driven by their own sets of political, economic and social factors and requirements. The missions and objectives incorporated in these e-government strategies focus on a variety of goals, from online service delivery to the modernization of public administration and the competitiveness of national economy.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the results of up to now achievements of e-government in Albania, as an important tool to increase citizens' participation and benefits and to explore interesting implications for policy makers and public authorities in order to maximize the public benefits from a good implementation of e-government in Albania.

### **1.1. Electronic Government in Albania**

Albania is still fighting against its 50 years build up centralised system in this long transitional period. Networking is limited to international organisations and a few government institutions. Technology as a tool for better governance and quality management is almost missing at the local level, while the Government of Albania is strongly committed to proceed to the local government decentralization reform. Database processing and public use of information is at an early stage of development and is still considered as future potential expectation for better governance. However, several Internet provider agencies are established and there is clear public benefit out of its use showing a great mid term future rush to be part of the world network age. Given the rather low incomes for most of the people, access to technology for most Albanians is rather difficult. Recent growth and poverty reduction strategy underway in Albania presumes investments in education and health sector, a way that would provide Albanians with better tools and make them more productive and prosperous.

The Electronic government is a long process that goes through stages such as electronic information dissemination through a web presence up to the total transformation of the governance through the process of offering reliable, secure, easily accessible, public services online with an active participation of citizens and businesses. The “e-government for Development Initiative”, announced in April 2002 at the International Conference “e-government for Development” in Palermo, promoted the start up and the implementation of e-government projects in the beneficiary nations, including Albania. The Project was launched in the beginning of 2005, and is closely linked with the GovNet Project; it focuses on technical assistance in establishing a Government E-mail system, a intranet and deployment of the existing systems and databases on top of the GovNet. A training component was established to assist with improving capacities of the key IT staff in the line Ministries to ensure security and reliability of the GovNet.

## **2. SOME OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF E-GOVERNMENT IN ALBANIA AT CENTRAL LEVEL**

Electronic Government in Albania is still in its early stages and some of the achievements so far are:

- The government network GOVNET, made possible through the support of UNDP and European Commission, that is operational. Thanks to this project, the Ministries, Departments of the Albanian Government and two public service organizations (altogether 18 institutions) are interconnected through a high speed fiber optic network that has enabled the use of the following programs.
- Medium Term Budgetary Planing. Management of Human resources by the Department of Public Administration.
- Electronic system of the Ministry of Justice that enables court related background check for the citizens.
- The information system for 14 border crossings has been completed;
- The creation of up to date civil registry by means of computerization of the records is in action.

All the ministries now days have their own websites and an electronic database that display the laws and regulations, latest relevant activities for the ministries, strategic documents by enabling the dissemination of the information electronically. The publication of the official gazette and the legislation as well as offering an electronic service regarding court related background check for the citizens.

In the process of the computerization of the SAA implementation performance and legislation harmonization, particular attention should be given to the continuous improvement of the information technology related systems. This will make possible the "online" services regarding the integration process. With the support of GTZ, an information system has been established that provides prices for agricultural products, mainly fruits and vegetables in some of the country's biggest markets such as Tirana, Korce, Fier etc. The data is processed and then uploaded in the website of the Ministry. This system is not digitalized and does not offer online service.

The efforts made so far towards the electronic dissemination of the information have had a positive impact with respect to an increased governance transparency. The government has undertaken a far reaching reform program that aims to increase transparency, fight against corruption and accountability. The government is paying special attention to the creation of an infrastructure for an information society and especially equipping the citizens with identity cards and electronic passports.

The National Agency for the Information Society has carried out an evaluation of the existing IT infrastructure within the central administration and identified areas of improvement.

Although progress has been made toward the electronic government a number of problems and needs require further improvement:

- Increased awareness and knowledge across the public administration regarding the importance of the information technology in the process of electronic government and good governance;
- Improvement of the information technology infrastructure in the public administration;
- Standard definition with the aim of increasing effectiveness at work and lower operational costs;
- Increase of information technology capacities and human resources and their continuous upgrading of the skills.

## 2.1. Public Services

Public services and their effective distribution have a great impact on the economic and social development of a country. During the transformation process into a knowledge based society that a country undergoes, it is very important to offer those services effectively, promptly and in a transparent manner in line with the needs and demands of the citizens and businesses.

- *Public and electronic procurement.* The new law on public procurement allows for electronic procurement. The electronic procurement platform is a web based application that enables the automating of procurement activities for various line ministries and contracting authorities. This system allows transactions among Albanian public institutions and national as well as international business community. It also provides a secure, efficient and transparent preparation and administration of all the documents related to public procurement, avoiding thus the paper delivery of the documentation and ensuring a secure data workflow during the process. The Electronic Platform is a point of access that offers business opportunities for Line Ministries and Contracting Authorities. Economic Operators can use the services offered to locate offers as well as participate in the entire process electronically.
- The project for the computerized system of the *public finances* (treasury system), state budget and the debt system, financed by the World Bank and the State Budget has already been completed. The formulation and amendments to the anti money laundering legislation as well as the upgrade of the Information technology. The Financial Supervisory Authority was established with the aim of risk management by focusing on identifying, gauging, prevention and early elimination of main potential risks that threaten market performance. Progress has been made towards oversight of the insurance market, private pensions and securities. Nevertheless further information technology improvements are required with respect to creating a reporting and oversight platform for the insurance market and private pensions. A Financial Stability Advisory Group has been established with the aim of coordinating all the activities in this field.
- *General Directorate of Taxation* has introduced on-line methods for the declaration and payments from the largest taxpayers. According to the results of a poll on big businesses conducted by IDRA, 24% of businesses outside Tirana and 9% of those

in Tirana use as their primary source of information the website of the General Directorate of Taxation. Meanwhile the percentage of the businesses that download the declaration forms from the website is 4% which reflects the low level of confidence.

- In the *Customs Authority* “ASYCUDA” system has facilitated the real time data processing customs declaration, accelerated the processing of cargoes, improvement of the revenue control and offers updated, reliable information for the trade of goods and merchandise. This project was financed by the European Commission Delegation in Albania, through CARDS Program. This system has already been implemented in 17 customs branches and two customs border crossings. In 12 customs branches and two customs border crossings the communication with the Customs Headquarters is carried out on-line and for the remaining five customs branches communications is conducted through email. The system ensures the processing of up to 99 percent of the transactions nationwide. Some of the advantages offered by the system are; the automatic processing of customs declarations from the moment of registration up to the moment of payment, the unification of customs procedures across all the branches, direct access between the branches and the headquarters, electronic checkout of transit goods, higher data processing capabilities and statistical report generation, automated risk analysis and many more built-in functions.
- *In the healthcare field (e-health)* the Ministry of Health has already commenced working on the creation of an information system for the Management of Healthcare Statistical Package in cooperation with the Institute of Healthcare Security and the Management of Healthcare Activity is being extended to include Primary Service thanks to funds allocated in the year 2008 budget. An integrated national healthcare system is envisaged and will be made possible with the support of World Bank. Despite those efforts a lot needs to be done with respect to offering healthcare service through electronic means or e-health.
- *In the Culture Sector (e-culture)* According to the forecasts in the medium term budgetary plan, the Tourism Ministry has planned the installation of an internet network for all the subordinated institutions as well as personnel training in order to improve services and information exchange. At the same time the creation and classification of the national heritage stock, movable or immovable, state or private owned; network connection of all the institutions charged with managing cultural heritage, as well as customs branches with the aim of making the information available to the experts and control the transfers of the cultural heritage of the immovable property; creation of an integrated network of guides for the cultural tourism, widely available for public use.
- *In the Employment sector*, thanks to a project financed by the Swedish government, the establishment of information technology system for the employment in the Tirana and Korca region has been made possible. This system allows the employers to post job openings and makes it possible for employees to search them.

The latest development in the offering of electronic public services indicate that we are still in the early stages of creating an Information Society. The development is still lacking in the offering of electronic services in healthcare, agriculture, employment, culture etc. Making those services available by means of electronic communication is of particular importance to accomplish a better governance, that is transparent, efficient and conducive to cooperation with the citizenry as well as with the business community. This will encourage the economic and social prosperity in the three following areas: Government-Citizen (G2C); Government-Business (G2B); Government-Government (G2G). In particular, the broader information society of which e-government is one component, plays a role in the technological tools available, the level of access that citizens and business will have, their overall trust in electronic channels and their expectations of the types of services that should be delivered and how they should be delivered. All of these factors affect the willingness of businesses and citizens to use, or take-up, electronic services. The failure to respond to an ever-changing environment and expectations can result in barriers to e-government implementation.

## **2.2. Education and knowledge**

There are 465.000 primary and secondary school students and 65.000 high school students in Albania. There are approximately 2.900 primary schools and about 522 high schools. This amounts to an average of less than a primary school per village and a little more than one high school in every commune.

In the course of the IT master plan implementation there are 732 currently functioning computer labs in schools out of which 353 were built in the year 2008. In 37 high schools there are two computer labs; 18 schools use the internet service arranged for independently. Currently there is one computer for 45 students.

Another very important project, the "Computerization of high school student's records" was also completed in 2007. This allows the creation of a comprehensive database including all the students' records. The computerization of the "Primary/Secondary schools" is intended to be completed by 2009.

For the high school system 2000 digital projectors and 2000 Laptops were purchased, with the intention of using the equipment in mobile labs for teaching additional subjects. All the universities have currently their internal computer networks and the internet service is arranged for independently. Computer equipment in a large number of universities is scarce and worn out. A teleconferencing project among the universities has already been envisaged through the cooperation of SEM (science and education ministry) Italian Cooperation and specialist involved in scientific research. This network will provide them with the means for information exchange in scientific research for domains across the board.

The IT project for schools is a core component of the major initiative that the Government has embarked on to include Albania into the digital age. The computerization of the schools is at the epicenter of the development and this will further support Albania's aspirations to be integrated in European Union by ensuring higher standards in education. Teacher's training with respect to the teaching techniques based on the use of information and communications technology, as well as updating of the curricula is part of this program;

The government is also engaged in the inclusion of information technology students in development, training or internship programs within the public administration. The steps that have been planned and undertaken till now will contribute towards the achievement of important objectives:

- Establishment and installation of the necessary infrastructure for the development of the information society (IT-schools);
- Inclusion of the IT knowledge in our education system;
- Creation of an encouraging and supporting environment for the sustainable development of the information society in schools and universities;
- Inclusion of all the scientific and research potential in the IT realm;
- Creation and development of comprehensive human communication networks and especially research and scientific ones in the context of global society.

### **2.3. Public and business IT education**

While great efforts are being made in the e-schools program more remains to be done for the dissemination of information and communication technology among businesses and public at large. They will benefit from the advantages that the technology has to offer and at the same time become an active part of information based society. The following endeavors are being made:

- Significant increase of the number of IT publications for the citizens;
- Presentation and harmonizing of the e-education standards;
- Structural development and content enhancement as well as boosting IT education for all levels;
- Promote modern and flexible education methods based on IT, long term learning, distance learning, short term learning etc;
- Sustainable development of the academic research network as one of the pillars of an effective and updated action plan of the education institutions at a national and international level.

Efforts will be directed towards offering online services for the consumers and provide the means for them to present claims that they have for goods and services to state institutions for the consumer protection by offering at the same time consultation electronically (e-consultation). This process will be conducted in cooperation with Information Technology professional association, consumers association, Chamber of Commerce etc.

The progress made up to now, regarding the increase of the number of internet users, demonstrates among other things an increase in the level of awareness of the public with respect to the benefits and possibilities offered by the IT. By the same token an increase has been experienced in the use of the information and communication technology especially by large businesses. Nevertheless the internet penetration remains at low levels. One of the

reasons is the low level of IT knowledge as well as the benefits that the use of the information and communication technology has to offer. The measures taken for the introduction of IT related learning in the education system should be associated with education plans for the population at large that in one way or another would turn it into a wider user of information or electronic services. The education of small and medium enterprises (SME) should be given a special importance due to the benefits and opportunities that the IT has to offer. The obligation to bestow special interest for the education of small and medium enterprises, is based on the special role that the SME sector has for Albania, bearing in mind that especially the role of the micro-enterprises is considerable given the fact that they employ 77% of the workforce. While the micro and small enterprises employ 59.8% and contribute 63% of the sales, when you add the contribution of the medium enterprises, the total sales number of SME is 79%, thus constituting the very basis of non-agricultural economic sector in Albania.

### 3. IMPLEMENTATION RELATED PROBLEMS

The implementation of e-government must be considered in national and local level. In national level the responsibility for the implementation components will rest on ministries and relevant institutions, while in local level the responsibility for the implementation will belong to local public administration. Cooperation between the civil society and private bodies is relevant in this case. There are several core factors that have been identified in UN reports on ICT and have also been discussed in various forums advising developing countries in ICT and e-government projects.

**Table: Factors impeding an enabling e-government environment in developing countries**

Core Factors	Symptoms	Consequences
Institutional Weakness	Insufficient planning Unclear objectives	Inadequately designed system Cost over-runs
Human Resources	Shortage of qualified personnel Lack of professional training	Insufficient support Isolation from sources of technology
Funding Arrangements	Underestimated project costs Lack of recurring expenditure	Unfinished projects Higher maintenance costs
Local Environment	Lack of vendor representation Lack of back-up systems/parts	Lack of qualified technical support Implementation problems
Technology and Information Changes	Limited hardware/software Inappropriate software	System incompatibility Over-reliance on customer applications

The implementation phase requires translating commitment into action at both levels, national and regional. The big challenge will be bringing national strategies into overall development and

governance practices. Whereas governments traditionally guarantee a certain level of quantity, frequency, scope and quality of government services while citizens passively

receive these services, the digital advances of the global information revolution challenge these conventional means of governance. The penetration of the Internet into the public domain accelerated technological progress, triggered by the ability of the Internet to disseminate information and eliminate borders and distances. Another implementation factor is dislodging people from their culture. The empowerment of public servants is a key part of the overall culture change (Tupper, 2001).

### **3.1. Local e-government**

In the Albanian reality, a good share of local governance problems is connected to the lack of Information Systems or bad administration of Information Systems. Related to this we can mention some facts: Although many information gathered at national and central level legally or institutionally, must be furnished to the local administrations, most probably it doesn't happen; The gathered informations at every level, usually is considered as "personal", instead of being considered as a public component and as a base for realizing a service or a public function; The existent databases at central level are not developed according to common standards and moreover for different reasons are not completely usable at local levels; The nowadays Information Systems in Albania, and especially at local level does not respond to the contemporary needs and in general are based on old concepts and technologies. The majority of services are delivered in a traditional manner through public corporations established both by the municipalities and the government. In the case of market-based economies and on-going administrative reforms, arguments for contracting out public services generally are tied to demands to improve the quality of public services and to satisfy citizens' needs. However, legislation on local governments is not focused on the demands and preferences of citizens as the criteria for the choice of and priorities in public service delivery. The citizen's choice is still neglected in the formal regulation of public service delivery. Public services and their effective distribution have a great impact on the economic and social development of a country. During the transformation process into a knowledge based society that a country undergoes, it is very important to offer those services effectively, promptly and in a transparent manner in line with the needs and demands of the citizens and businesses (Kooiman, 2003).

E-government is about putting citizens and customers at the heart of everything governments do, and building service access, delivery and accountability around them. It is about using technology to break down social exclusion, and supporting the transformation of public agencies into more open, accountable bodies, which can enable and encourage citizens and local communities to exercise their rights and responsibilities, and to contribute to the modernization. Local e-government is the realization of this vision at the local level, at the point where the vast majority of services are delivered. Customers and citizens have overlapping, inter-related needs. Local e-government can assist in transforming experts' knowledge of dealing with public services in local areas. It can help transform the way public service providers do business, bringing huge gains in the efficiency and effectiveness of services. It can also make genuinely integrated, open and accountable government possible.

Local e-government is complex, encompassing the political, cultural, organizational and technical aspects of everything that local authorities and other public service providers do. It is driven by pressure for change both from the top down - as government and councils

seek to modernize their organizations and from the bottom up - as the expectations of citizens and businesses. Local e-government initiatives are complex and involve change and effort to use new and emerging technologies to support a transformation in the operation and effectiveness of government. One of the challenges to local e-government is maintaining a primary focus on the business of local government and not on the technology. To do this, public leaders must be convinced that e-government requires their serious and sustained attention. It is not about putting in a few computers or building a web site for information access; it is about transforming the fundamental relationship between government and the public (Miller and Pardo, 2000).

Public participation at the local government level includes both community and stakeholder involvement processes. The community is comprised of a distinguishable subset of stakeholders (for example, residents and small business owners whose property, property values, or economic welfare is adversely affected by the decisions). Stakeholders include parties with a legitimate interest or stake in the issues or impending decisions about the local economy, resources, planning (for example, site owners and users, government regulators, members of the community, industry and business, government at different levels). The importance of transparency in government is widely acknowledged, both to promote greater public confidence in the policy-making process and to maximize accountability. The evidence demonstrates that more and more local government departments and public sector agencies are using the web to publish and distribute official information and, to a lesser extent, to facilitate the delivery of online services.

### **3.2. Citizen Involvement**

In the business environment, the end users are involved directly or indirectly in the development of a product. In the e-government environment, the private sector should play a bigger role in its development to ensure greater progress. The community should be involved in bridging the digital divide, through the setting up of community Information Technology centers which will enable the citizens to have easy access. If the private sector and community are not in the equation, there will be no progress in the digital divide in e-government. It is the function of each government and developing country, in particular, to take the initiative in understanding the barrier to uptake the needs and expectations of the citizens or community. This, plus the improvement and communication of available facilities online, will have an increase in the usage of e-government. Additionally, the governments must rethink their strategies and focus on the mechanism of delivery and also create citizen impact which can be done by reorganizing online service delivery around customer intentions.

## **4. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF E-GOVERNMENT IN ALBANIA**

The e-government processes and systems often mean facing new kinds of challenges, and in particular developing countries have many barriers to overcome. Once governments commit to strategies transforming their governance processes, significant challenges and opportunities will arise during their implementation. Confronting these challenges directly can be a means to turn these difficulties into new opportunities. In general it is worthwhile to consider the following concerns in the e-government initiative:

- *Infrastructure development:* All countries implementing e-government have struggled to develop a basic infrastructure to take advantage of new technologies and communications tools.
- *Law and public policy:* The application of ICT to government may encounter legal or policy barriers. Legislatures must ensure that laws are updated to recognize electronic documents and transactions. They must take proactive steps to ensure that policies support rather than impede e-government.
- *Digital divide:* Class, race, ethnicity, geography and other factors could lead to groups of people being disenfranchised. In many countries, content must be provided in more than one language or dialect. E-government must also address the needs of those who are illiterate.
- *E-literacy:* Even in areas where access to technological infrastructure is nearly ubiquitous, there are still marginalized groups who are unable to make use of ICTs because they are not e-literate. E-government programs will have to take special steps to include people who are not e-literate.
- *Accessibility:* Governments must serve all members of society irrespective of their physical capabilities. Online services will have to be designed with appropriate interfaces – this may have significant cost implications.
- *Trust:* To be successful, e-government projects must build trust within agencies, between agencies, across governments, and with businesses, NGOs and citizens.
- *Privacy:* Privacy is one of the most important issues facing the Internet. Governments must be responsible custodians of the enormous amounts of personal information they hold.
- *Security:* Security is costly, but must be addressed in the design phase, as security breaches can shatter public trust in e-government.
- *Transparency:* Government transparency should be embedded in the design of ICT systems.
- *Interoperability:* Rather than adding new systems on top of outmoded legacy systems, e-government planners should develop systems and record formats that work together and across departments.
- *Records management:* New technologies are being created to help manage information. Governments have unique needs in this field.
- *Permanent availability and preservation:* Historical documentation is of special importance for governments.
- *Education and marketing:* E-government services are only useful if people know about them. Education and outreach programs will be needed.
- *Public/private competition/collaboration:* Issues of public vs. private collaboration and competition are already part of an international debate on governance.

- *Workforce issues*: Human resources must be structured and managed with e-government goals in mind.
- *Cost structures*: While planning and budgeting in a changing climate is difficult, governments should seek to invest in sustainable programs that can produce savings.
- *Benchmarking*: Governments must regularly evaluate the progress and effectiveness of their e-government investments to determine whether stated goals and objectives are being met on schedule.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have delineated some of the factors that may influence the implementation of effective e-government in Albania. The major factors that may influence the implementation of e-government include, but are not limited to: education, change of culture, change in attitudes, applying the business model and involving citizens (customers). One factor alone cannot solve the e-government problem but the synergy of all the factors will facilitate the implementation of effective e-government in Albania and delivery. The implementation of an e-government strategy is not a process of linear change, leading continually to the improvements expected by the theory. In highly complex societies, the interaction of processes such as culture, geography, politics, economic attainment, globalization, participation in international organizations, can interact in unexpected and uncertain ways. These challenges should be realized, understood and addressed by e-government strategies in order for their vision to be implemented and to contribute as highly as possible in the process of economic, social and technological development.

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