What are Obstacles to the E-Government in Vietnam?

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An effective model of e-government comprises ways of dealing with interactive relations between three parties: government, business and citizens.

The first is the government-to-government relation. This level is usually started first when building an e-government. In Vietnam, there have been some activities at this level with a system of on-line legal information which updates some government activities through websites run by bodies of central and local governments. The second level is between government and businesses. It is the most-expected level in any e-government project. Many activities could be done on-line, such as bidding for supplying goods and services to governmental bodies, applying documents, sending complaints, getting licenses, asking questions about legal matters, etc. HCMC authorities have also opened websites to deal with complaints from businesses. The third is the government-to-citizen relation. At this level, authorities supply public services to individuals. The program to manage real estates, land registration, birth and death certificates, etc. run by the Gò Vấp authorities is one of effort to introduce the e-government model at this level.

Social and political meanings in expectations of the e-government is a sensitive subject although there is no denying that this model is very effective because it helps reduce the transaction cost. This meaning is particularly important in Oriental countries, including Vietnam where the administrative machinery is clumsy and ineffective. While Western governments pay full attention to simplicity and efficiency, Eastern societies stress the control over the personnel instead of their jobs, and traditional value other than the efficiency. "Asian traditional values" are appreciated when mentioning "the miraculous growth of East Asian economies," but they lead to bad consequences, such as corruption, bureaucracy, nepotism, etc., which become great obstacles to the efficiency under the globalization trend. The application of the e-government will reduce unnecessary interactions between individuals in transactions between authorities and relevant parties. This is an idea that could accelerate the administrative reform in many Asian countries where the first obstacle is the personnel problem.

Determination to build the e-government is the motive that makes the e-government a reality. Although all governments accept that the e-government brings about many economic and social benefits, only a few governments applies this model at any level, even the U.S. – the most developed countries, is not typical of the e-government model. This means that the building of the e-government depends more on the governmental factor than on the electronic one. The determination to build this model is not necessarily a condition for success. According to the World Bank, 85% of projects to build the e-government in developing countries have ended in failure and only 15% gained success. The failure means that the model couldn't supply public services and brings benefits to businesses and citizens. These facts allow us to think that there are other obstacles to the determination to build this model by governments.

Internal factor is the first obstacle to the realization of the model. The internal factor could be interpreted as limitations in the government's ability. Foreign experience shows that the failure of the project to build the model comes from the lack of a vision and a well-devised plan. This usually leads to vague and scattered goals set forth by the project while the financial resource for the project is very limited.

External factor is usually the legal infrastructure that is not perfect enough to allow the government to operate on-line services. For example, many developing countries have no ability and facilities to legalize the e-signature. The next is technological limitations because the ability to employ the information technology and get access to the e-government differs over citizens and prov-

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inces. And the last obstacle is the lack of fund for such projects.

Thus, what is the biggest obstacle to the project to build the e-government?

The first argument maintains that external factors are not the biggest obstacle because governments could quickly develop the legal infrastructure for the e-government. In addition, the information technology is available for everybody in the trend of globalization. The lack of fund and digital divide are considered less serious if the governments have determination to develop the project. This is the case of developed countries. At present governments of OECD countries are perfecting the legal infrastructure for the e-government and most of them have legalized the e-signature.

Although most experts consider external factors as minor, technological facilities still constitute a big obstacle to the e-government project. If the technological facilities of the government can't integrate into the wave of technological advances, the operation cost will increase. For example, the replacement of electronic cards by smart cards needed for the e-signature forces governments to replace their facilities. The business world has to spend a lot of money when adjusting to the e-government model. These difficulties may make governments more reluctant to introduce the model although they have had determination to do it. Thus, the technological obstacle is not small and it has become a basis for the second argument about the cause of failure to build the e-government. While fund and ability to get access to the information technology of the public are no problems to developed countries, they constitute great obstacles to developing ones. In the first phase of the project in England (1999-2000) for example, the government had to spend more than 480 billion pound. This is really a large outlay for developing countries.

In 2000, Vietnam signed the e-ASEAN frame agreement in which it committed to build the e-government (although it hasn't been publicly declared). The project to computerize public services in 2001-2005 (it is usually called the Project 112) was started in 2001 was the initial effort in this direction. Ministries and local governments have responded favorably to the project by opening their websites to allow access for the public. Up to early 2005 when the project has to be completed, basic objectives seem hard to achieve. For example, the project planned to reach the total sales of US$500 million for software and train some 50,000 programmers but what it has obtained up to 2004 were US$150 million and 36,000 programmers only.

Some international reports also show that the Vietnamese government was slow to apply the e-government model. The e-readiness rankings prepared by the Economist Intelligence Unit in cooperation with IBM ranked Vietnam 60th among 64 countries in 2004, and 56th among 60 in 2003. The UNPAN report ranked Vietnam 112th among 191 countries (compared with the 97th among 173 countries in 1993) in terms of the e-readiness of the government. In Southeast Asia, Vietnam was ranked higher than Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and East Timor only. It seems that Vietnam made no progress while others were trying to improve their situation.

The slowness of the building of the e-government in Vietnam also comes from obstacles common to developing countries. Such projects involve many difficulties the world has faced and Vietnam, moreover, has its own ones. Analyzing these difficulties and work out measures to overcome them is necessary and requires a lot of time and energy. Benefits from the e-government are very obvious. Even if it will take us a lot of time, we must carry out the project because it helps accelerate the administrative reform. We still appreciate the Oriental tradition of giving priority to the human being as the most important factor of the society but we must ensure that all institutions and organizations created by human beings should be businesslike and effective. Interactions between the government, businesses and citizens should show respect for national traditions and give priority to business and efficiency. Taking benefits and costs of the e-government into account we saw that the net benefit for the society is much greater and it is worth more determination from the government and the community as well.∎