Micro-Policy Intervention

CONTEMPORARY POLICY DISCUSSION IN CAMBODIA

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Chapter 6 | E-Government in Cambodia

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Introduction

Thanks to the advancement of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), our lives have been transformed in macro and micro ways. At the micro level, people have access to the Internet through their smartphones and computers to seek information, connect with friends and family as well as collaborate with their colleagues at work. On a macro level, companies can use ICT to take control of their internal communication. Advertising companies have new ways to reach mass audiences. The government can deploy ICT to provide better public services, disseminate information to the public, communicate with businesses, as well as collaborate better internally. It has been a global trend for the public sector to adopt ICTs, in what is called e-governance. According to the UN E-government Survey (2018), which analyzed the scope and quality of online services and the status of telecommunication infrastructure and human capacity, there is a steady growth in e-government globally. The E-government Development Index score for Cambodia has increased from 0.29 in 2014 to 0.37 in 2018 (UN, 2018).

The trend of adopting ICTs in the public sector has occurred not only because of increased availability of ICT devices and internet coverage, but also because e-government yields great benefits. For governments and citizens, e-government can contribute to good governance and reduce corruption by promoting transparency, efficiency and citizen engagement in public service delivery (Rubasundram & Rasiah, 2019). It also supports the availability of public services such as health, education, water and sanitation, as well as sound infrastructure and utilities, which are crucial to build a resilient society, one of the main goals of SDGs (UN, 2018).

Background to the Problem

The state of e-governance in Cambodia

Making public services available to citizens via the internet, which is convenient and low cost, improves transparency, accountability, and efficiency. The application of ICTs in the operation of government institutions decreases transaction times and financial expenses, leading to improved internal workflows and more resource sharing between public sector agencies (UN, n.d.). It also acts as a two-way communication bridge between government, business and citizens. Moreover, providing public services can increase national revenue by encouraging businesses to register and pay taxes.

In 2000, Cambodia set up National Information Communications Technology Development Authority (NiDA) to establish and implement the Government Administration Information System (GAIS) with the objective of compensating for the loss of income from lowering import tariffs upon joining ASEAN (Phu, 2009; Sang, Lee, & Lee, 2009). The core objective of the project is to establish the Electronic Approval System, real estate registration, resident registration, and vehicle registration. All of the services, except the Electronic Approval System, were widely used and fulfilled their initial purpose of generating income for the government in the form of fees and taxes. Despite the increased efficiency provided by the Electronic Approval System, it was scarcely used, and only for technical documents or reports only, while other administrative documents were still handled in the traditional ways (Phu, 2009).

However, other sectors have found immense success in their implementation of e-government. In 2017, the Ministry of Public Works and Transportation launched online vehicle registration—500,000 vehicles were registered through the platform in one year (Sen, 2018). In the same year, the General Department of Taxation announced an e-payment platform for citizens to pay taxes on the department's website, as well as access information about taxation, live chat and call center numbers (Hor, 2017). Although there is no indicator to prove that the online taxation payment platform has increased tax collection, it has saved valuable time and money for citizens and businesses. Moreover, the Ministry of Economy and Finance has written a proposal to establish a one-stop business registration portal which is currently being discussed within the General Department of Taxation (Chea, 2019).

With the support from KOICA (Korean International Cooperation Agency), the Cambodian ICT Master Plan 2020 was established in 2014. There are four key focus areas:

1.   Empowering people (providing ICT trainings and promoting ICT literacy and awareness)

2.   Ensuring connectivity (building national infrastructure for e-government and improving cybersecurity, ICT-related regulations, and Internet access nationwide)

3.   Enhancing capabilities (building a national ICT ecosystem compatible with the global ICT ecosystem, industrializing ICT, developing national standardized bodies, and investing in ICT research and development)

4.   Enriching e-services (expanding e-government services, extending e-public services, enhancing e-commerce environment, e-tourism, and e-education) (KOICA, 2014).

One Window Service Offices (OWSOs): Hopes & Challenges

Improving the effectiveness, quality, transparency, and availability of public services to citizens is the focus of the government's Rectangular Strategy. The establishment of One Window Service Offices (OWSOs) and District Ombudsman (citizen offices) are examples of this commitment to enhancing public services. By transferring service provision to local councils, computerizing the process and establishing a clear information center, the public can access accurate information about government policy, which lowers the chances of corruption, and provides efficient and reliable services in a timely manner (Neb, 2017).

However, there are still some obstacles facing the operation of OWSOs. As cited in Neb (2017), the Ministry of Interior's National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development noted that some OWSOs struggle to achieve results because of a failure to educate citizens on OWSOs' services. According to the "Citizen Feedback Cards"—a survey tool used by Advocacy Policy Institute in 2012—although the average expense of some services within construction sector has decreased almost 10 times and the duration of the service has shortened across three sectors, the knowledge of prices, procedures and requirements of OWSOs remained low in all sectors. Moreover, some public servants are unaware of their right to information (Neb, 2017). In the same survey, some citizens

reported their unwillingness to use the service due to the long traveling distance, complicated processes, fear of extra expenses, long waiting period, and a distrust in OWSOs. Evidently, despite the services being provided in a new centralized office, there are difficulties in attracting citizens to use the services.

Advancements in e-education

Besides the digitization of public services, there are advances in education as well. In 2019, UNESCO, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), and the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training launched a mobile app (BEEP) for out-of-school youth to study lower secondary curriculum on a flexible schedule (World Education, 2019). Moreover, MoEYS manages a blog, called Open Educational Resources (OER), offering study materials in a digital format for students and teachers from preschool to high school (OER, 2020). The ministries are also working on further projects to digitize information and services in order to educate even more citizens. However, time, human, and financial resources are still needed to develop more concrete and secure infrastructure in e-government.

Challenges in the Cambodian ICT Sector

Even though the government is constantly working on applying ICTs to their systems, citizen participation remains low. According to the 2018 UN E-Government Index, while Cambodia ranked 145 among 193 countries worldwide, it only ranked 171 in the 2018 UN E-Participation Index (UN, 2018).

The availability and accessibility of the Internet is not the reason for low e-participation. One report, *Mobile Phones and Internet Use in Cambodia* (2016), found that at least 48% of Cambodian citizens (15 to 65 years old) own a smartphone which granted them the access to the internet; however, only 37% of the respondents claimed to use the Internet, and more men were found to actively access the Internet than women (48% and 26%). The report also presented the main purposes of using the internet: entertainment (74.4%), news (33.2%) and information seeking (30.2%) (Phong et al., 2016). Because of the increase in variety of smartphone models available, and the ability to purchase increase a smartphone for under $200 (Walker-Todd, 2020), the number of smartphone owners in Cambodia has most likely grown in the three years since that survey.

Despite the high rate of Internet penetration and mobile use, many users only connect to Facebook, not making use of the Internet connectivity to its full potential (Va, 2019). There is also a digital literacy gap between urban youth and rural youth (Va, 2019). To tackle this problem, Smart Axiata, Google and GSMA, with the support of MoEYS and MoPT, have partnered to roll out a digital literacy and internet safety program for more than 1,400 grade 10 and 11 students in Phnom Penh, Kampong Cham and Kampong Chhnang (Kanagaraj, 2019).

Micro-implementation

A)   Overview

While many Cambodians have internet access, very few utilize the full potential of this connectivity, especially when it comes to e-services. To make it a habit for citizens to seek e-services, this project proposes the creation of a mobile application that provides contacts and emergency-related information for ambulance, police and fire departments.

B)   Justification

While Internet coverage in Cambodia is growing, citizens' internet usage and perception of available access to public information and services via the internet remains limited. By looking at the previous study about the implementation of OWSOs, it is clear that it takes time and effort to persuade citizens to switch their habits and use online tools to seek information or public services. Therefore, there is a need to tie mobile and internet usage with the e-services provided by the government and to build trust in e-government solutions. Only then will citizens make it a habit to turn to digital solutions, which saves time and money. As emergency incident could happen anytime, emergency information is important to citizens because it could save lives. Therefore, the tendency of having people downloading and using the mobile application is high.

C)   Implementation

The application will have three main parts. The first is a list of contact numbers for emergencies, such as the fire department, ambulance and police departments; the user can call any department by tapping the phone number on the list. Moreover, right after the call ends, instructions will pop up that the caller can follow to take control of the situation before help arrives.

The second part is instructions for less urgent emergency situations (health, crime and fire related) that citizens can handle on their own, for instance, how to help someone who is choking, how to use a fire extinguisher, or how to report missing belongings. The third part would be a map showing places where citizens can ask for help, in case there is no response to the phone call or there is a need to go to the place directly. There will be a function for users to switch between medical centers (public and private hospitals) and police stations.

Even though it is hoped that citizens do not encounter such serious incidents and therefore may not use this application all the time, it will still be recommended to install it on their phones, just in case. Furthermore, they can prepare themselves for the emergencies by exploring the functions of the application and learning the information in their own time. After the development of the application, there will be a Facebook campaign promoting the application to the public, specifically to the people who already have access to the Internet and smartphones.

Conclusion

The advancement of ICTs has enabled its utilization in public sector which brings many benefits to the government, citizens and businesses by easing the communication and information sharing between the three actors. The government has been working on adopting ICTs in providing public services and information through various means. Meanwhile, although the citizens encounter less obstacles in accessing and using smartphones and the internet, they are still hesitant to use the e-public services due to a lack of trust and understanding. Therefore, bolstering citizens' habit of using e-public services is crucial to increase engagement and confidence in the platforms. An emergency mobile application, which provides contacts and emergency-related information for ambulance, police and fire departments, is proposed to initiate this habit-building process. As citizens use the application, they build trust and familiarity with digital public services, boosting citizen engagement in e-governance in the long run.

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