Implementing governmental and democratic processes using electronic systems is the subject of much debate around the world. Electronic voting has grabbed the headlines, but in reality, this constitutes just a small part of the effort to establish electronic communication between citizens and governmental functions (G2C and C2G). The goal is to provide access to information and to open up decision-making processes to citizens (e-participation) to encourage a grass-roots engagement of citizens with democratic processes.

This goal might sound utopian, but the result could well be dystopian, with as many opportunities for abuse as for benefit. We can’t underestimate the potential for opposition. Those whose control and power could be diminished might resent the fundamental change this presages in the relationship between citizens on the one hand and politicians and civil servants on the other.

This department doesn’t allow enough space for an exhaustive global survey. (For more information, see the Commonwealth Centre for Electronic Governance’s surveys on e-government, e-democracy, and e-inclusion at www.electronicgovindia.net.) Rather, I focus on developments in Latin America. In particular, I look at some of the activities reported on at last year’s EU-Latin American Workshop on E-Government and E-Democracy held in Chile (www.eu-lat.org),¹ such as Mexico’s public procurement system, CompraNet, and Chile’s Agenda Digital.

To some, Latin America might seem a surprising place to look for such activities. However, just as wireless technology enabled some countries to leap-frog wired infrastructures, adopting e-government processes is often easier when there’s less of a venerable and entrenched establishment to reorganize. Additionally, Latin America’s willingness to seek change has made it a strong candidate for e-government.

Mexico’s e-government services

Mexico was an early adopter of e-government services. In 1996 it implemented CompraNet, a comprehensive Internet-based public-sector tendering and procurement system (www.compranet.gob.mx). In 1999, the system received the Bangemann Challenge Prize for the best e-commerce Internet portal (see www.challenge.stockholm.se). I discuss its strong points here; a more critical assessment appears elsewhere.²

CompraNet facilitates approximately US$25 billion in procurement transactions for over 250 federal agencies and numerous municipalities.³ Project development and implementation was motivated by the Mexican government’s desire to

- Remove opportunities for private-sector procurement surcharges by disintermediating (eliminating intermediaries or middlemen in the supply chain) public-sector tendering
- Open up government procurement to a wider range of potential suppliers by making procurement processes less costly and more accessible
- Improve the efficiency, competitiveness, and transparency of public-sector procurement

Now, with at least 80,000 companies registered with CompraNet and almost half a million individual users,³ the system is rapidly increasing its volume of transactions. In addition to successfully achieving the goals just listed, CompraNet has better prepared Mexican corporations for e-commerce. Furthermore, it helped uncover inconsistencies in purchases made to furnish Vicente Fox’s presidential palace—the so-called “Towelgate” scandal. The transparency and access to information afforded by CompraNet made public the exorbitant price being charged (and paid) for towels supplied.

CompraNet’s success has also paved the way for the deployment of DelcaraNet, a system for completing and filing tax returns (www.declaranet.gob.mx), and TramitaNet, a catalog of over 2,000 federal and state forms with the appropriate documentation and submission guidelines (www.tramitanet.gob.mx). Moreover, through further integration, a government-wide portal (www.gob.mx) has been constructed that organizes information and services from over 100 government institutions around citizen needs in a thematic rather than institutional fashion. In fact, this por-
Brazil and Paraguay’s use of electronic voting

E-voting has been a fixture in Brazil’s political landscape since 2000 (though Brazil first experimented with e-voting as early as 1996). Brazil is now exporting its technology to other Latin American countries just as Mexico is sharing its e-governance experiences. Both Argentina and Mexico have carried out e-voting pilots using Brazilian machines. The procedure and Brazilian technology are set to sweep the continent.

For example, Paraguay used e-voting for the first time in its general elections in April 2003, with cooperation from the Brazilian Electoral Council. Although only 46 percent of the voters used e-voting, it was highly successful in terms of efficiency—voters adapted easily to the new technology, speeding up the voting process—and it also helped reduce electoral fraud. It was also well received—98.7 percent of those who used it said it was easier than traditional methods, and participation was 6.6 percent higher among those registered for e-voting (67 percent) than for the traditional method (61 percent).

Chile’s Agenda Digital

Chile launched its Agenda Digital this year, a two-year program of focused initiatives feeding into a national strategy lasting until 2010 (www.agendadigital.cl). Its objective is to realize information technology’s potential nationwide, both inside and outside of government.

The program is in response to an extensive report on the information society published in 1999 and the subsequent establishment of the Digital Action Group. Agenda Digital’s coordinator is the undersecretary for Economy, Álvaro Díaz, who has recognized that “despite the advances in digital technology, there is a big gap between Chile and the developed countries.” Consequently, the Chilean government established a program comprising 34 initiatives, which started a discussion among 170 representatives of more than 50 institutions comprising the Digital Action Group. Key actions that DAG is recommending include increasing Internet access, providing greater broadband access, improving InfoCenters (locations providing services and training and facilitating C2G and G2C transactions), and developing e-commerce opportunities. Furthermore, Chilean President Ricardo Lagos says his government will be in the vanguard of IT take-up in Latin America (see www.dicex.net/el+pais/gobierno/noticias/1001.aspx). He has stressed the importance of modernizing the institutions that promote development—in the public sector, in particular (see www.modernizacion.cl). According to a United Nations report that analyzed the status of e-government worldwide, Chile is now ranked 22nd in terms of e-government readiness (and first in southern and central America), second for governmental Web presence, and third for e-participation.

Key Agenda Digital participants include Carlos Cantero (elected senator for the Antofagasta region; see www.cantero.cl) and life senator Fernando Flores, who is well known in computer science for his work on computer-supported cooperative work and his book coauthored with Terry Winograd, Understanding Computers and Cognition (Addison-Wesley, 1987).

Activities under the Agenda Digital umbrella include:

- Developing a system for electronically managing medical leaves, sick pay, and allowances. The Health Ministry, the office that oversees private-sector healthcare providers, the national health foundation, and the office for Social Security are partners in this project.
- Initiating e-services for handling registration marks and patents. The Departamento de Propiedad Industrial of the Economics Ministry is in charge of this project.
- Developing an electronic version of The National Commission for the Environment’s environmental impact evaluation system (www.e-seia.cl). This system is similar to Mexico’s Tramitanet in that it aims to simplify the procedures for planning and for assessing emissions and environmental impact by making them entirely electronic. The goal is to provide faster turnarounds, greater transparency, clearer rules, and increased cost savings. The project was initiated in 2001 and went live in 2004.

In a related initiative, the National Congress, an organization that includes the national library, the chamber of deputies, and the senate, is developing an agenda and a prototype implementation to help automate the legislative process and integrate external sources that inform the legislation. The goal is to make the process transparent and accessible to both citizens and their representatives. Included in the design is a mechanism called the virtual senator through which citizens can contribute to the lawmaking process.

Chile also has an e-procurement system similar to Mexico’s CompraNet and is working on many other electronic initiatives.

The international community’s cooperation

The European Union is playing a part in this revolution through its International Cooperation (www.cordis.lu/inco/home.html) and Alliance for the Information Society programs (http://europa.eu.int/comm/europeaid). The programs are funding a range of projects under the themes of e-health, e-government, e-learning, and e-inclusion across Latin America. Highlights include:

- SILAE (Servicios de Iniciativa Local en Amazonia Ecuatoriana), which supports grassroots efforts of indigenous peoples to participate in local decision making and infrastructure initiatives.
- eGOIA (Electronic Government Innovation and Access), which is building a demonstrator for citizen access to public services at a range of levels (focusing on the region in and around São Paulo).
- Met@LoGo (Meta e-Local Governance), which aims to narrow the digital divide by improving communication and cooperation capabilities between small cities and communities in Latin America and their small and medium enterprises.
- EMPLENET, which aims to reduce un-
Enthusiasm for electronic procedures is strong in Latin America, and there’s plenty of evidence, simply from the volume of activity, of a willingness to innovate when ready-made solutions aren’t available. A major driver is the desire—or necessity—to save money. Implementing similar procedures as deployed in Europe or the northern Americas is implausible given Latin America’s population size and the size of its various national economies. Unemployment, the accompanying poverty, the digital divide, and social exclusion are significant factors. The Guadalajara Declaration, the result of a summit of the heads of state and government of the European Union and Latin America in May 2004, recognizes these factors: “In view of the social impact of information and communication technologies, we call on Ministers of both regions to consider the social cohesion aspects in the agenda of the next LAC-EU Information Society Forum.”

The activities reported here are just the first steps of a long, hard journey for Latin America, but they also offer valuable lessons for the so-called more developed countries.

References


