

Resiliency and Transparency for e-Governance in Times of Crisis¹
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A. The Context, Pre-COVID 19

E-governance and e-government have been common buzzwords and government strategies, even before the pandemic. These have roots some three decades or so, from the administration of President Cory Aquino to the son, President Benigno Aquino III. The son expanded e-government to e-governance, with the country's subscription to the open government partnership.

E-government refers to information communication technology (ICT)-enabled reform measures to promote more efficient and cost-effective government, more convenient government services, and more government accountability to citizens (ADB 2019). It may help resolve the lax and slow-paced government processes that can affect nation building now and in the future. It may also help in ensuring transparency and efficiency required to keep up with the pressing challenges of misinformation and cyber threats in the country.

E-governance is bigger as it extends beyond government and governing and includes other (non-government) sectors of the society, e.g., private sector, civil society organizations (CSOs) and citizens themselves. It is as Backus (2001) explained, "the application of electronic means in (1) the interaction between government and citizens, and government and businesses, as well as (2) in internal government operations to simplify and improve democratic, government and business aspects of governance." It requires digital transformation, which means individuals, businesses and governments are digitally enabled (Santos 2020). It also requires e-participation of people in the governance process, which may be a factor of their access or facility with ICT (Bannister and Leahy, 2014). Their lack of these spawn the phenomenon of exclusiveness and the digital divide.

Efforts to aggressively implement these public sector reform initiatives have been hampered by the absence of a top-level agency to oversee ICT policies and programs (Magno 2018), deficiencies in our ICT infrastructure and services, and the seeming non-agreement and non-participation of stakeholders in the e-governance roadmap that should be followed in the next decades or so. Other

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barriers include the bureaucratic (and political) culture that is averse to risk and resistant to change (Lallana, Pascual and Soriano 2002).

Before COVID-19, these have been addressed:

1. *Institutionally* through the creation of the DICT in 2016 as the primary policy, planning, coordinating, implementing, and administrative entity of the Executive Branch of the government that will plan, develop, and promote the national ICT development agenda. It replaced the Commission on ICT, which did not have that high visibility as an important department for ICT.
2. *Legally* through, among others, notable policies and laws such as *the E-Commerce Act, Free Wi-Fi Act, the Ease of Doing Business Act of 2017* and the regulation and competition of telephone companies and internet providers; and
3. *Administratively* through a common government portal, open government partnership and new policy architecture. i.e., the e-government master plan (EGMP) that can allow the country to transition from the non-integrated and agency specific applications toward an e-government model where there is sharing of data and interoperability of government offices to provide public services with better value for citizens. Online services that leverage technology to promote participation, transparency and accountability from tele commuting, telehealth, online passports, online business transactions, online payment, etc., have also been designed.

These pre-COVID e-governance responses, strategies and plans have recognized that public service delivery has evolved from the traditional model of government dispensing services via face to face and physical meetings to an emphasis on e-government and e-services per se to an integrated approach to enhancing the value of services to the citizen (Villorente 2012). Sadly, despite small gains, these important and beautiful plans and programs remain ideals to be achieved.

B. The COVID Challenge

Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis changed almost everything in our lives. The old practices we were accustomed to do not work anymore, and in this volatile, uncertain, complicated and ambiguous world, new normal or new ways of doing things are required. It however offered opportunities for the fast tracking of the digital transformation of the economy and other areas of the society, albeit catching segments of the population, especially the poor, unprepared, not too accepting and lacking access.

A recent UNCTAD Survey entitled “COVID-19 and E-Commerce” (www.techbeat.ph/e-governance-digital-transformation-urgent-amid-covid-19-crisis/) found that ” the pandemic has accelerated the shift towards a more digital

world and triggered changes in online shopping behaviors that are likely to have lasting effects as the world economy begins to recover." At our home front, there is an increase of some 73,000 online businesses during the first six months of the pandemic, said DTI (<https://cnnphilippines.com/business/2020/9/3/dti-73000-online-business-registered-covid-19-pandemic.html>). However, along with the rise in online businesses came the increase in consumer complaints from 2,457 in 2019 to 12,630 (as of August 2020). Concerns have been raised regarding product quality and standards to non-delivery of products. A rise in the so-called 'informal supply chain' has also been observed - where products, especially homemade food items made by a housewife are offered through Viber and delivered by the husband using the family car. These are transactions that are not captured by the formal economy (Basilio 2020). A PayPal consumer survey, meanwhile, found that 87% of Filipinos increased their usage of digital payments over cash during the pandemic. (<https://news.abs-cbn.com/business/11/13/20/pinoys-increasingly-preferring-digital-payments-says-paypal-survey>) leading the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (Central Bank of the Philippines) to chart a Digital Payments Transformation Roadmap 2020-2023 that seeks to develop more inclusive, secure and innovative digital financial products and services to transform the cash-heavy Philippine economy into a cash-lite economy (<https://news.abs-cbn.com/business/10/12/20/bangko-sentral-unveils-digital-payments-roadmap>).

Indeed, many processes are shifting from manual face-to-face to partial online and fully online like that of the CSC, SEC, BIR, and others. In fact, the pandemic has brought about the more aggressive adoption of remote/online processes in education, public health, other government services, commerce and trade, diplomacy and other aspects of government, private sector and civil society operations.

Thus, calls for urgent and faster implementation of e-governance and digital transformation (www.techbeat.ph/e-governance-digital-transformation-urgent-amid-covid-19-crisis/) have been made, not only for their noble goals but also for people, industries and institutions to survive, keep afloat and still be part of humanity, while bouncing back and recovering from COVID. COVID has forced us to fast track and double our efforts to cope with it through e-governance and transformation to the digital economy.

C. Existing Plans

The DICT calls for a new normal roadmap to cruise through the pandemic. Such would include a) the national broadband program; b) Wi-Fi for all project; c) digital government; and lastly, d) digital workforce and education (Caintic 2020).

The national broadband project would entail installing a national fiber backbone, cable landing stations and accelerated fiber build up all over the country. For the free Wi-Fi project, a total of 4,619 sites are now connected serving 5 million unique users (Caintic 2020).

Digital government would include a) a national government data center to ensure integration of IT systems of the government; b) a national government portal; c) a central business portal for business regulation; d) enhanced government online services; e) integrated business permit and licensing system; and f) attention to cyber security to enhance trust on the integrity of online transactions. Digital education and digital cities would include capacity building programs to elevate and propagate the learning and practical application of ICT courses, standards and best practices; help strengthen public institutions and economies; and capacitate the workforce for the 21st century VUCA world (Caintic 2020).

For the new normal to happen, digital transformation and e-governance have to be advanced and must be protected by a tight-clad 'cybersecurity' framework. However, these are based on the Internet and the digital economy, which are now the new normal, where after 25 years, the total Internet use in the country is only 45%; over 40% of Filipinos, 52% of public schools, and 57% of households still don't use the Internet. Barangays access to the national broadband is less than 20% for free Wi-Fi; less than 30% for fiber optic cable; and less than 40% for telecommunications towers. Moreover, new entrants and competition in the broadband sector are hindered by outdated policy and regulations. Santos (2020) even likens our ICT policies as analog policies in the digital age.

D. Reforms and Ways Forward

There are reforms being done incrementally at present to continue using digital technologies to innovatively transform the way they operate, share information, make decisions and deliver services, as well as to engage and partner with people to solve policy challenges of brought about by the pandemic. These include implementing existing online services and programs; greater use of social media; use of flexible working arrangements; regulating telecommunications companies to deliver faster and cheaper internet services; subsidies for online gadgets for remote learning; increased use of telehealth consultation and other services; use of software apps for logistics chain efficiency; use of online platforms for government-business/government-citizen transactions; ease of doing business streamlining efforts; designing measures to ensure integrity of online transactions through cyber security initiatives against phishing, money laundering, among others.

There are legislative, executive and other measures being proposed: Open Access in Data Transmission, Better/Faster Internet Services, Internet Transactions Act and the creation of an e-Commerce Bureau, liberalizing satellite access, common tower policy, passive infrastructure sharing, and Cyber security Policy (Santos 2020).

However, our country still lacks the capacity to effectively leverage digital technologies to provide accessible, reliable, fast, personalized, secure and inclusive services and empower people through open and participatory mechanisms. Developing multiple capacities for e-government development is essential, as digital government transformation involves far more than the integration of technology in governance. Fundamental changes in the mindsets of stakeholders, be they public servants and public institutions, business, CSOs and “ordinary” citizens like you and I, have to happen in order that a fully integrated, whole-of-government and society approach to digital government transformation may be achieved.

Thus, we should bridge the digital divide and strengthen e-resilient institutions. The young DICT has to be capacitated in terms of enhanced leadership, policies and strategies that are risk-informed, considering that we are crisis-vulnerable. Our ICT infrastructure has to be adjusted and retrofitted to withstand disruptive typhoons amidst the pandemic. In addition, we should insist for cheap and better ICT services so that citizen’s access and use of ICT will increase. Lastly, we have to progressively advocate and explain why everyone should embrace digital transformation in risk-informed e-governance as a necessary change. The latter would ensure changing mindsets and inclusiveness, leaving no big part of the society behind.

Let me end by reiterating the UN’s nine key pillars for digital government transformation and e-governance:

- **Vision, leadership, mindsets:** Strengthen transformational leadership, changing mindsets and digital capacities at the individual level [SEP]
- **Institutional and regulatory framework:** Develop an integrated institutional ecosystem through a comprehensive legal and regulatory framework [SEP]
- **Organizational setup and culture:** Transform the organizational setup and culture [SEP]
- **System thinking and integration:** Promote systems thinking and development of integrated approaches to [SEP] policymaking and service delivery [SEP]
- **Data governance:** Ensure strategic and professional management of data to enable data-driven policymaking [SEP] and access to information through open government data, among other data access and use priorities. [SEP]
- **ICT Infrastructure, affordability and accessibility to technology** [SEP]
- **Resources:** Mobilize resources and align priorities, plans, and budgeting, including through public-private [SEP] partnerships [SEP]

- **Capacity of capacity developers:** Enhance the capacity of schools of public administration and other [17] institutions [SEP]
- **Societal capacities:** Develop capacities at the societal level to leave no one behind and bridge the digital divide (UNDESA 2020).

The UNDESA 2020 E-Government Survey's key normative takeaways:

- Digital government transformation in e-governance is fundamentally about governance transformation and cultural change in support of a country's overall national development vision and strategy and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. [17] [SEP]
- Digital government transformation requires a holistic approach that is value-driven and institutionalized across all levels of government and society. It can be realized through a four- step iterative process that includes undertaking a context and situation analysis, articulating a shared vision of government transformation and how digital technologies will be leveraged to achieve societal goals, devising a strategy and a digital government implementation road map based on key pillars, and putting in place monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for continuous improvement. [17] [SEP]
- Digital government transformation should aim at promoting digital inclusion and ensuring that all people, including vulnerable groups, can access new technologies to improve their well-being. It should put people first and revolve around their needs (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020). [17] [SEP]

Let us hope we will achieve, embrace and own these next normal in e-governance and digital transformation, in due time, which is hopefully within our lifetime in order that we are more ready for the future, which is now.

Thank you for listening.

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