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Winter 12-13-2008

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Recommended Citation

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The new public management, e-government and the notion of 'public value': lessons from Mexico

by

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Abstract

E-government has increasingly become one of the keys government's interests. This paper discusses e-government within the context of governmental reforms heavily influenced by the New Public Management (NPM). The general vision of NPM supposes that the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) will enhance efficiency, policy effectiveness and democratic values (OCDE 2003). Based on the concept of 'public value' developed by Moore (1995), we discuss how e-government policies impact government's political agendas, and not only the process throughout government deliver public services. ICT, we argue, do not only change the platform used to serve public services but also the nature of these public services. Our central argument is presented as follows: if e-government is strictly following the NPM prescriptions (efficiency and accountability), there is a risk of missing the social and political implications associated with the use of ICT in the public sector. Works addressing such other social and political values are the exception in the literature of e-government. Thus, in this paper we aim to open the way for a deeper discussion of the effects of e-government policies on public values. We draw on an empirical case from Mexico to illustrate our main arguments.

Keywords: e-government, new public management, public value, developing countries, Mexico.

I. INTRODUCTION

E-government has increasingly attracted attention, not only as part of many government's agendas but also among scholars (Heeks and Bailur 2007). Even though e-government has grown rapidly as a topic of research (Gronlund and Horan 2004), there is no universal accepted definition of the concept (Yildiz 2007). In literature, one may find references to other terms such

as “digital government” and “electronic government”, which are sometimes used as synonyms of e-government and, at others, as a different way of conceptualization. Yet there are some approaches that define e-government according to its stages of development (Layne and Lee 2001; UN & APSA 2002), and still others referring to the relationships between government and different stakeholders: citizens, business and other governments (Means and Schneider 2000).

E-government is therefore not universally defined, even if the common focus is put on the application of information and communication technologies (ICT) to improve the internal management of the government, and to offer flexible and convenient services to the public (Fountain 2001). Yet scholars even refuse to consider e-government as a new concept; rather, they affirm, it is just a new term to rename an old phenomenon: the use of ICT in the public sector (Bretschneider 2003). As a result, the lack of a standard definition is pointing up the limits of the concept and its study (Yildiz 2007). However, it is not the purpose of this paper to provide a unique or unambiguous definition of what e-government is, nor to consider e-government as distinct from previous uses of technology in public administration.

Rather, in this paper we propose to question the impact that e-government initiatives may have on government’s agendas in contrast to the general vision of New Public Management (NPM), which supposes that the use of ICT enhances efficiency, service quality, and public sector accountability. Based on the concept of ‘public value’ developed by Moore (1995), we discuss how e-government policies impact on government’s political agendas, and not only on the processes underpinning public sector services delivery as mainly discussed within the NPM discourse. Our central argument is presented as follows: if e-government is conceived within the NPM prescriptions (efficiency and accountability), the broader impact of the digitalization of e-government services appears neglected. This broader impact often lies on the effects ICT can have on social and political values associated to public sector service delivery (Cordella 2007). Works addressing such other social and political values are the exception in the literature of e-government. In this paper, we aim to open the way for a deeper discussion on the effects of e-government policies on public values. Thus, we aim to supersede the limitations associated with the adoption of private sectors indicators of success in the public sector, as in the case of NPM (Moore 1995).

We would like to acknowledge, however, that this paper is a first attempt to bring the notion of public value into the discussion of e-government. As such, it is still exploratory and should be considered as a starting point for further discussion.

Having said that, to achieve the aim of the paper we start by reviewing the academic literature that seems useful to understand the phenomenon of e-government deployment in the context of public sector reforms. Thus, referring mainly to the literature on public administration and political science, a detailed review of the NPM fundamentals is conducted. On this ground, we provide the theoretical and practical implications that the NPM ideas have had on e-government deployment. As such, the conception of e-government embedded in the NPM domain seems to concentrate mainly on efficiency driven performance measures, neglecting some other political and social implications. It is on this ground when we place our main discussion. In order to illustrate the main arguments, we present an e-government initiative carried out in Mexico. The case was studied retrospectively using diverse research tools, which are presented in detail in section four. The case empirically illustrates how the core values of NPM have indeed informed the design and implementation of e-government initiatives. We discuss the case and its implications by bringing the notion of public value into the e-government debate. As mentioned, we aim to open the way for future debates in the field of e-government research. Concluding remarks follow.

II. THE NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT FUNDAMENTALS

During the 70s, the global depletion of public resources and the reduce quality of public services combined with a deep social dissatisfaction, led to the end to the fruitful age of the “Welfare State”, and the beginning of a new stage in the production and provision of public services (Kettl 2005). Even when the timing of the transformations was different among countries, extensive changes occurred in the political and social structures of the western world leading to a radical public sector reforms and government transformation agenda all over the world during the last two decades (Aucoin 1995).

Inside this wave of changes, new modes and forms of management in the public administration were gaining predominance in the public sector scenario across many liberal democratic governments. These reforms were found to have a series of common characteristics, grouped and labelled under the notion of New Public Management (Dunsire 1995; Gruening 2001; Hood 1991; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000). Articulated as a policy framework, the reforms under the NPM agenda were seeking to solve the problems of a public administration that was too big, too inefficient and too expensive and therefore unable to serve public services as it was supposed to do.

The public sector reforms initiated in the United States under the Clinton administration in 1993 were probably among the most ambitious projects of public sector reforms that incorporated NPM strategies (Kettl 2005, p.22). In line with what Osborne and Gaebler (1992) named as “Reinventing Government” –marketization and entrepreneurial administration of the public sector-, the Clinton administration committed to create “a government that works better and costs less”. Thus, “Reinventing American government” meant to make a more efficient, cheaper and effective government (Kamarck 2007).

As a model, the NPM has been dominating the arena of public administration debates becoming a prevalent term in the field. The NPM literature as a whole, however, is rooted in different research fields with diverse directions (Barzelay 2001). Thus, there are different conceptualizations about what the core elements of the NPM reforms are. For instance, Donald Kettl (2005) summarises that the reforms were built under six components: productivity, marketization, service orientation, decentralization, policy and accountability. Dunleavy *et al* (2006) categorize the early stages of NPM components under three main themes: disaggregation, competition and incentivization, each of them are strongly influenced by business practices and public choice theory. Based on the work of NPM proponents, Batley and Larbi (2004) define three broad categories of NPM principles: organizational restructuring, the use of market type mechanisms and a strong orientation on performance. Accordingly, Pollitt and Bouckaert (2003) state that the NPM reforms were pursuing three main objectives: to reduce public spending, to improve population’s perception about public sector performance, and to seek for accountability mechanisms.

In addition, positions from scholars differ when identifying NPM as a new paradigm in public administration (see for instance Lynn Jr 1997; Barzelay 2001; Gruening 2001), or as a specific governance strategy (Lane 2000; Sørensen and Löfgren 2007). Despite the open debate regarding NPM main attributes, and the different names (e.g. Reinventing Government, public management revolution, public management reforms) used to identify policies aiming at achieving these objectives, scholars have observed the NPM's common features are: downsizing, accountability, focus on performance, concern for results, decentralization and organizational disaggregation, the "importation" of several private sector practices (such as contracting out, privatization, customer orientation, competition and personnel management), and the separation of politics and administration (Batley and Larbi 2004; Gruening 2001). In addition, a *broader and more intense use of information and communication technologies* has also been identified as one undisputable characteristic of the NPM (Gruening 2001; Hood 1991; Kettl 2005; Borins 1997).

Despite the fact that some NPM approaches are less explicit, the use of ICT is a transversal and a crucial element in many of the key components identified in the NPM governmental reforms. Indeed, e-government initiatives became embedded as part of NPM political and managerial reforms in many countries around the world (Cordella 2007). Yet, even when we might be facing the end of NPM as a public sector reform driver (Dunleavy et al. 2006), there are still important implications for the use of ICT and the definition of E-government policies; "NPM practices are extensively institutionalized and will continue" (2006, p.2). This makes mandatory to explore how NPM ideas have shaped e-government policies and to study what are their consequences in terms of the political agendas that are deeply committed to e-government initiatives.

III. THE NPM AND ITS THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR E-GOVERNMENT

NPM provides a major set of ideas on which so much of current e-government initiatives are based (Hammer 1990; Chadwick and May 2003). Since the diffusion of Internet-based technologies, ICT were perceived as a tool to introduce a process of rationalisation of public

offices and customisation of public services (Cordella 2007). The Organisation For Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) claims:

Reform of the public administration has been on the agendas of most OECD governments well before the advent of the term “e-government”. But e-government is an important component of today’s reform agendas because it: 1) serves as a tool for reform; 2) renews interest in public management reform; 3) highlights internal inconsistencies; 4) underscores commitment to good governance objectives. (OECD 2003, p.41)

E-government can help administrations do their job better by reinforcing good governance objectives and administrative reforms are necessary if e-government is to be successful. E-government and reform are therefore mutually reinforcing. (OECD 2003, p.25)

The interconnection between NPM core ideas and e-government is thus explained by the potential benefits that ICT can bring to the re-organisation of internal strategies in the public sector. Building on the experiences of the private sector, ICT are perceived as a powerful tool to rationalise, streamline and re-engineer organisation procedures (Cordella 2007). Both scholars and practitioners have recognized that e-government can be an enhancer to achieve a more efficient, effective and democratic public sector (Gronlund and Horan 2004; Kamarck 2007). Almost a decade ago, when the e-government term began to be used, it was common to associate it with the existence of official Internet Web pages providing government information and guides to some public services (e.g. UN & APSA 2002). In recent years, this narrow view has been transcended: e-government is more often conceptualized as the generalized use of new information and communication technologies to provide public services, to improve public administration performance and to enhance democratic values (Heeks 1999; Gil-Garcia and Pardo 2005).

In practice, this means that e-government can enhance public administration reforms by achieving some of the core values of the NPM agenda (Bellamy and Taylor 1998; Heeks 1999). From a practical and policy oriented perspective, the OECD provides an illustration to this point. The Organisation defines e-government as “the use of information and communication technologies, and particularly the Internet, as a tool to achieve better government” (OECD 2003, p.23), where ‘better government’ refers to meeting the challenge of enabling a more responsive, efficient, effective and participatory government (OECD 2003, 2005a).

Beyond what might be understood as policy argumentation, we have that many e-government initiatives have been actually designed following the main pillars of the NPM. Efficiency gains by cost savings in the public sector and streamlining of services delivery are common goals in many e-government programs carried out around the world (Fountain 2001; Hackney, Jones, and Losch 2007; Heeks 1999; IDABC 2005). The use of ICT and its impacts on efficiency is mainly related to improving internal operating systems; examples here are the use of managerial tools such as financial systems, data collection and transmission, payment processes, internal communications and human resources management to generate savings. In addition, the availability of information and delivery of services online was one of the most featured elements when promoting e-government policies to streamline information delivery and citizen-government interactions (OCDE 2005a). In accordance to the approach of stages of development (Layne and Lee 2001; UN & APSA 2002), many countries have carried out efforts going from the web presence to fully executable, online service delivery (West 2002, 2005, 2007; UN 2003, 2008). Similarly, the focus on customer orientation and user satisfaction, strongly promoted by the NPM, has driven many e-government initiatives aiming at rationalising government services delivery and public sector organisation streamlining (Schedler, Summermatter, and Schmidt 2004).

Many countries have also made efforts to enable transparency and promote citizen engagement. Making key, relevant and reliable information to citizens has been recognized as one of the core elements in many e-government strategies (Eppler 2007). At a more advanced level, ICT has been implemented to enhance participation and democracy by opening new and innovative channels of participation (Jaeger 2005). That is the case of emailing, public deliberation on the Internet and e-voting systems.

There are a number of illustrative examples on how the vision of NPM and *Reinventing Government* reforms has in fact informed many e-government initiatives around the world. Looking at policy documents from the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Australia and Canada, Bekkers and Homburg (2007) found there is a strong belief that ICT will enable or even cause a whole transformation of public sector agencies, reaffirming the presence of the

NPM core values. Moreover, the NPM has become the dominant paradigm not only in the industrialized world but also in many developing countries around the world. The e-government initiatives carried out in Mexico, for instance, are indeed congruently framed within the NPM's spirit of reforms. In 2002, the Mexican Administration set out the *Good Government Agenda*, whose main goal was to develop a more receptive, closer and efficient government. E-government became the fourth out of six strategies that comprised the Agenda, making it a high priority into the government's reform efforts. Under this vision, e-government was considered a tool not only to facilitate access to information and services for citizens but, more importantly, as a supporter for all of the other strategies outlined as essential in achieving Good Government: efficiency, quality, transparency and honesty (OECD 2005b; President's Office 2002). The Good Government Agenda became the main driver for e-government initiatives carried out in many agencies across the federal government in Mexico (OECD 2005b).

In sum and as noted before, NPM drivers have been the major initiators of ICT use in government. Yet, democratic values, citizen participation and trust have been marginalized as a result of e-government policies (Chadwick and May 2003). ICT intervention in the public sector is not neutral but political, social and controversial (Fountain 2001; Bekkers and Homburg 2007). It has therefore to be considered within the public political context within which it is deployed. We suggest that the effects of these e-government policies, either positive or negative, have to look at the impact on the national public value rather than on the efficiency gains ICT can have on the service delivery channels. However, works addressing the notion of public value within the e-government research field (Grimsley and Meehan 2007; Cresswell, Burke, and Pardo 2006) are the exception. We argue here that the conception of e-government embedded in the NPM domain neglects the political implications of e-government on the nature of the service delivered, and hence on its public value.

IV. AN EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATION FROM THE FIELD

Let us present a case to empirically illustrate our arguments. The case presented here is the e-government initiative carried out in Mexico under the direction of the Ministry of the Economy

(ME). The case is studied retrospectively, using diverse research tools. Data regarding the governmental agency was generated using document analysis, quantitative methods, interviews and direct observation. The main sources of documentation were legal documents together with other regulations relevant to the ME (e.g. laws, manual of organisational proceedings, etc), and budget information of the ME. Ten semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were also conducted with the ME staff. Quantitative data was obtained from a database generated by the Ministry of the Economy System of Foreign Trade (SICEX). Data upon the end users of the system (business sector) was also collected. This entailed two focus groups with legal representatives of foreign trade associations and a web questionnaire. The focus was put on perceptions regarding ease of use, intention to use the Internet and how the Internet could contribute to the reduction of the businesses' economic and financial compliance costs.

Background of the project: The Mexican Ministry of the Economy and “Towards a Paperless Administration” project

The Ministry of the Economy is a federal governmental agency, which is responsible for the competitiveness and economic growth of Mexican companies. Thus, in its official web page the ME states as a mission:

- To create the necessary conditions to enhance competitiveness; both in the domestic and in the international market for all companies in Mexico;
- To enable a new entrepreneurial development policy which will promote the design and establishment of productive projects resulting in constant economic growth together with the generation of better welfare for every Mexican.

With the intention to achieve these goals, the ME has recognized that the promotion of the efficiency through a more simple provision of governmental services and administrative simplicity constitutes a key strategy to improve businesses climate and to increase the confidence of the investors (Ministry of the Economy of Mexico (ME) 2006a). In this context the project

“Towards a Paperless Administration” (TPA) took action. TPA’s was designed to simplify services to international traders through the use of ICT.

TPA was a second step into the process of reform and administrative modernization of the international trade transactions, initiated in the previous administration (1995-2000). In 1995, the ME launched the Integral System of Foreign Trade (SICEX) with the objective of modernizing the administration of foreign trade transaction. From 1995, all procedures related to foreign trade transactions (e.g. rules of origin certificate approvals, authorization and management of import quotes, licenses and permits for traded goods) became integrated, registered and standardised into one information system. From 2000 to 2006, SICEX processed more than 1.1 million applications from 45 thousands of users (foreign trade companies).

Once SICEX was implemented, the new and distinctive feature of the TPA initiative was the incorporation of Internet use and magnetic discs not only to reduce the use of paper in the foreign trade formalities and administration but also as a way to increase efficiency, hassle and certainty of formalities administration. Thus, the strategy of TPA project was twofold:

1. The progressive elimination of the use of paper in foreign trade formalities through the use of magnetic discs and Internet, whilst taking current law regulations into account.
2. To establish and to extend the collaboration with the Treasury Ministry (Customs), and other governmental agencies and international trade business organizations, through the use of electronic means of data validation.

The ME identified a series of benefits as outcomes of the project, not only for business users but also for the public administration itself. The following table summarizes the expected benefits as depicted in the official government documents of the project.

BENEFITS FOR BUSINESS USERS	BENEFITS FOR THE GOVERNMENT
Simplicity of compliance	Transparency of procedures
Speed	Control and monitoring of procedures' decisions
Material resource savings (e.g. paper)	Reduction of discretionary power
Extension of office hours	Customs speed
Reduction of compliance costs	Certainty of decisions (reduce the errors)

Table 1: Expected Benefits of the TPA project

Source: (Ministry of the Economy of Mexico (ME) 2006b).

The table 1 is illustrative of how the NPM spirit is present as the rational driver for the e-government project under study. The main pillars discussed in the previous sections occur across all of the expected benefits: efficiency, streamline and accountability. The focus upon customer orientation is also highlighted, not only in all of the expected benefits for business users but also in the general goal of the project.

Actions taken

In order to implement the project, the ME identified two immediate actions: to update the already existent SICEX system, and to modernise the IT infrastructure. Both actions were considered crucial, not only to reduce the use of paper and increase progressively the availability of web-based services, but also to incorporate the use of electronic data validation with other agencies.

Thus, from 2001 to 2003, two new servers were acquired and new security means were consolidated. In 2002, an external company carried out the diagnosis of the system and from 2003 the technological update of SICEX took place. Several updates were done, some of them developed by the ME itself and others outsourced. By the year 2000 it was possible to submit some formalities using the Internet, but they were mainly restricted to those procedures that were informative (e.g. annual reports on special export programs). After 2003, the submission using

the Internet began growing at a bigger pace. In part, this was due to the modernisation of the existent IT infrastructure, its security, and the connectivity available with the ME's federal agencies in the country.

The ME also worked towards the implementation of the electronic signature, as a mean to increase the availability of electronic service delivery. Actions taken in this line entailed several technological updates and political meetings, which were formally initiated by 2000. By the end of 2005, the ME took part in two pilot projects towards the implementation of the electronic signature. At the same time, the Mexican Federal Government approved two general agreements (September 2005 and August 2006) on the use and implementation of the electronic signature, which constituted another step forward in the process. By the end of 2006, however, Mexico had not approved the electronic signature yet.

Regarding the connectivity with other agencies, the ME extended the already existent (but primitive) link between them and Customs Administration. The actions taken towards connectivity also entailed the modernisation of IT infrastructure, the implementation of digital security methods, and some coordination agreements between both agencies. From 2003, there was possible to electronically validate a growing number of formalities. The connectivity was also extended to other non-governmental agencies that were taking part of the project. For example, in 2004 the ME established a new electronic connection with the Mexican Federation of Customs Agents, to share information and "double check" the data declared by the agents in certain international trade procedures.

Towards a Paperless Administration: Main Results

By the end of 2006, the amount of international trade formalities that could be submitted by electronic means (Internet or magnetic discs) grew considerably from 2000. In 2000 only 6.2% were submitted using electronic means (Internet and magnetic discs), of which the Internet represented 1.3%. In 2006, the percentage reached 30% of the total volume of formalities processed by the ME.

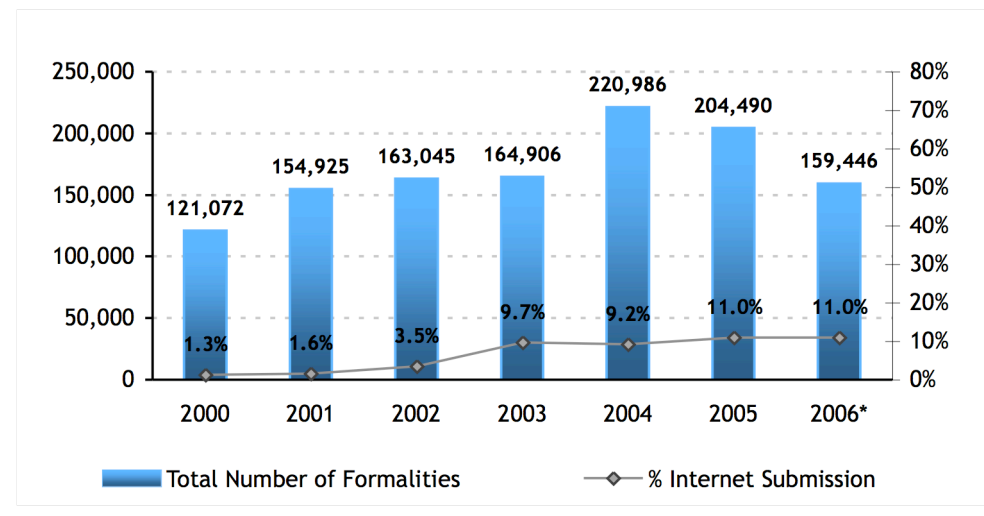


Figure 1: % of Internet Submission out of total number of formalities

* Data by end of September 2006.

One of the most appealing features of the TPA project was the reduction of processing time in the delivery of foreign trade formalities. Overall, there were significant gains in time reduction and precision as a result of the implementation of SICEX (Ministry of the Economy of Mexico (ME) 2006b). Considering a group of three formalities, the reduction of response time was 50% on average. There were also administrative costs savings of about 30% as a result of moving from paper-based to electronic-based documents.¹

However, when comparing a set of specific formalities, the average process time was higher when using the Internet than the ‘traditional’ form of submission (that is, face to face, using paper submission). The next figure present a summary of the average process times for a sample of international trade formalities.

¹ This figure corresponds only to those formalities that could be processed by both means (electronically and traditionally).

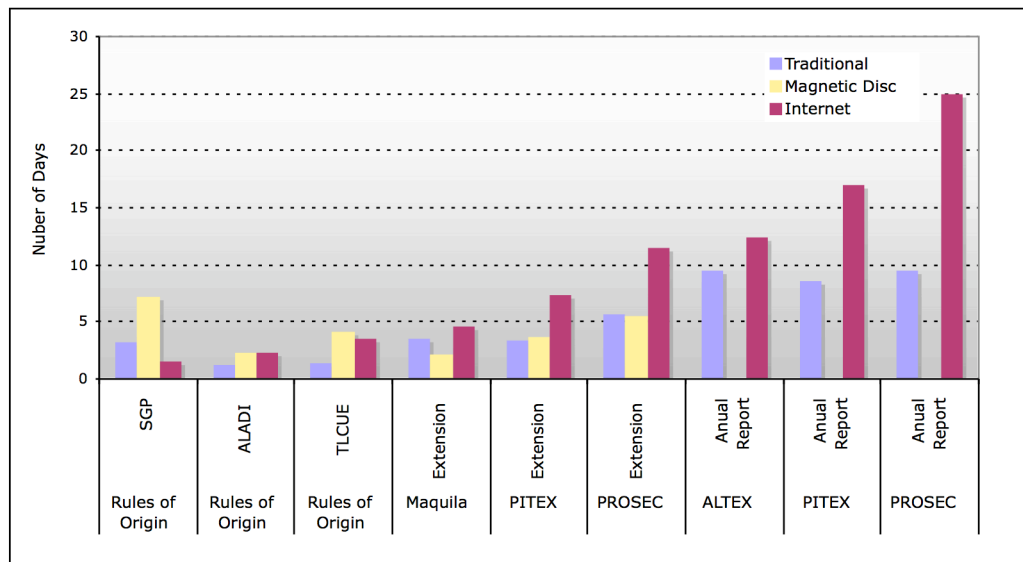


Figure 2: Average number of days of process time - 2006

Note: number of days is reported according to the database's day and time of entry and output of procedures. An algorithm was developed in order to take holidays and weekend days into account when processing the information (Telecom-CIDE 2007). The formalities analyzed here count to approximately 55% of the total. Only those able to do by electronic means were considered in the sample.

From the data analysis we found that, in some cases, using the Internet to submit a formality results in users waiting longer for their service delivery. While no intermediate data could be used at this moment, it is worth noting that the system only registers the day and time of entry once it is already completed on the web. In addition, business users admitted that the use of the Internet and online services could bring a gain in terms of resource savings (e.g. paper, transport, 'productive time-rebate'). But when deciding which type of submission was more convenient in terms of speed and better results for their business, they generally agreed that they preferred the traditional and face-to-face submission method.

When it came to private sector perceptions upon the TPA initiative, in general terms business users agreed they found the Internet very useful when looking for information. Examples of this include searching the ME website to find business related news, information about how to comply with new formalities, downloadable forms, and other general information about how to

comply with taxes, certificates and international trade formalities. Notwithstanding, when using the Internet for compliance rather than information searching, opinions were less optimistic. As noted above, in 2006 the percentage of formalities submitted using the Internet was not significant. The business users explained that the low rate of the Internet for compliance was due to the following factors: (i) the number of formalities that can be submitted using the Internet is still small; (ii) when looking for speed, traditional paper based submission is preferable; (iii) some users were not aware of the availability of certain formalities on the Internet; (iv) compliance using the Internet was not easy, (and some avoided trying again); (v) there were security concerns and lack of certainty.

In the next section we discuss the implications of the case described here in terms the notion of public value.

V. DISCUSSION: E-GOVERNMENT AND THE NOTION OF PUBLIC VALUE

Let us reinforce the point that the dominant approaches to estimating the impact of e-government policies are mainly based on evaluation frameworks developed to assess ICT impacts in the private sector. These approaches mainly look at efficiency driven performance measures, such as cost reduction and return on investment, and NPM goal achievements, such as transparency and accountability, once again closely related to private sector economic standards (Moore 1995). From the case depicted in the previous section, the initiative carried out by the Ministry of Mexico was portrayed as a powerful tool to enhance and foster customer orientation. Both goals and expected benefits of TPA project were highly congruent with the NPM's general spirit. Indeed, the project followed the same view and over optimistic perspective of other developed countries (see for example Bekkers and Homburg 2007).

These approaches, however, neglect the fact that public sector strategies differ from private sector strategies because the former are driven by the overriding goal of creating public value while the latter should aim at creating private value (Moore 1995). Private value can be estimated through financial measurements of profits, while public value is much more difficult to define, despite the all too many government-inspired documents already issued on Value For Money. Public value is related to the achievements of objectives set by government programs

and the delivery of public service to the citizenry. Public value is thus not related to efficiency of the action of the public administration, but rather to the effectiveness in the achievements of government programs.

Moore (1995) points out that political power determines the action of public administration to so represent collective aspiration: "The collective aspiration, in turn, establishes a presumption of public value as strong as the presumption of private value created by market mechanisms - at least if they can be achieved within the term of the mandate" (p.31). In democratic States, above all, the fundamental values of collective aspiration are the values of fairness, equity and equality that cannot be evaluated in terms of: "the economic market place of individual consumers, but (only) in the political market place of citizens and the collective decisions of representative democratic institutions" (pg.31).

Moore (1995) argues for techniques of program evaluation and cost-effectiveness, distinguishing these from cost-benefit analysis on the basis that they presuppose the "compelling collective purpose" of the outcome rather than optimizing individual benefit across a range of competing alternative outcomes. Kelly et al. (2002) observe that the 'new public management' of the 1980s and 1990s was "premised on the applicability of management techniques across both public and private sectors", and that government value would be created "by mimicking organizational and financial systems used by business" (p9). The result, they assert, was an emphasis on narrow concepts of cost-efficiency and a downplaying of non-functional objectives that were difficult to measure. We would suggest that this tendency has become ingrained into how many e-government initiatives were designed in the last years.

In the particular case of e-government initiatives, the notion of public value stands in the same line: "the value of a government's investment in IT should be assessed from the point of view of the public it serves" (Cresswell, Burke, and Pardo 2006 p.37). Based on the empirical case we presented in the previous section, we want now to bring three points that seem relevant for this discussion.

First, the project goals and objectives seemed to be not clear and sometimes confused in the government documents analyzed. When looking into the agency documents, it was common to

find the goals and objectives of the project also referred as its lines of action within the same text. It was also difficult to build an accurate and explicit understanding of the problem that the TPA project was trying to solve. During one of the first meetings with the project leaders of TPA initiative, one Director mentioned: “We launched ‘Towards a Paperless Administration’ to help international traders to work more efficiently by simplifying their compliances costs with us. We are confident that we are helping them to be more competitive; but we need the numbers to show the Minister that this is already true”. It was only after some meetings, though, that it became clear that the ‘ultimate goal’ of the program was to promote competitiveness by using ICT in reducing ‘red tape’ and the cost of regulatory compliance for businesses. From the managerial perspective these findings highlight the ambiguity public managers confront when trying to make sense of the value their agency produce. As Moore notes, ‘Public managers create public value. The problem is that they cannot know for sure what that is’ (pg. 57).

Second, business users reinforced the previous point by revealing their expectations. During the workshops conducted, business users raised that more transparency and certainty on the decisions needed to be prioritized when complying with their governmental transactions. It then became clear that both transparency and certainty were not necessarily associated to better response time. Therefore, public managers seem to need not only a better account of the goals they were pursuing but also a better understanding of the public they serve. We are not suggesting, however, that gains in efficiency are not important, but to recognize that there are other goals as important as efficiency that should be taken into consideration within e-government projects.

Third, the fact that the users still generally prefer complying with the formalities in person, face to face rather than submitting them using electronic means highlights a tension. An illustrative example follows: if effectiveness is preferred (e.g. to have the export certificate on time), business users admitted that the traditional paper-based submission method was more convenient in terms of speed and better results for their business. Business users were indeed seeking for more speed in the service, but also for trust and certainty. Thus, the public value of the public service provided would not be accurate if only measured in terms of efficiency.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

New public management and the efficiency paradigm have been the main drivers for the development of government ICT policies and their evaluation, including its e-government initiatives. As Lane (2000) pointed out, “NPM is basically about focusing upon efficiency” (p.14); he suggests NPM does not describe what changes are happening inside public sector reform, but it recommends a new approach if government seeks to increase efficiency in service delivery (2000 p.8). This transformation in the logic underpinning the design and evaluation of public sector organizations has considerable implications for the nature of the services delivered by public administration, and also, we would suggest, serious consequences for the public value associated with the services delivered.

As discussed above, the attempted transformation of the public administration along the line of NPM, and private sector evaluation techniques based on efficiency, has largely ignored the political and social dimension associated to the adoption of e-government policies. While there has been efforts to develop more integral evaluative frameworks addressing the notion of public value in e-government projects (Grimsley and Meehan 2007; Cresswell, Burke, and Pardo 2006), there is still very few said on this matter. We have proposed here an initial attempt to address the need for a deeper discussion on the effects of e-government policies on creating public value.

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