

ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN THE MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS THROUGH E-GOVERNMENT

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ABSTRACT

Modern society, often called knowledge society is highly dependent on information, with the potential to share knowledge in a more uniform manner and provide employment opportunities that go beyond the traditional barriers of distance or physical presence. Free access of citizens to information of public interest and their participation in decision-making are considered to be two of the most important premises of a democratic and responsible government. The information enables citizens to make an informed assessment of the actions of administration and to take part in the debates and in the decisions that concern them. Effective collaboration between public authorities at all levels of governance and cooperation between the latter and non-governmental actors are essential to ensure good governance and sustainable economic development. The public sector must provide, in a fair and efficient way, essential services that meet citizens' needs, economic growth opportunities, and facilitate citizen involvement and participation in public policy development to promote the participation and welfare of all people. E-governance and innovation can provide significant opportunities to turn public administration into a sustainable development tool.

The aim of this article is to study the benefits of eGovernment in the process of innovation and transformation into the economy and governance of public institutions. The methodology of this paper is focused on literature review and analysis of the main international studies and surveys in the field. Furthermore, it was performed a comparative analysis on the world e-government leaders from the past five years, emphasizing the number of countries grouped by E-Government Development index (EGDI) level and geographical regions.

KEYWORDS: *e-government, public institutions, governance, digital inclusion, ICT*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *M38, H83*

1. INTRODUCTION

From the perspective of taxpayers, citizens have the right to be informed or consulted, as well as to participate in the decisions taken by the local and central public administration authorities, which they support financially through the taxes and fees they pay. Transparency of local public administration is the rule in all steps and procedures of the administrative decision, confidentiality being the exception limited to the information established by law, due to the need to protect specific interests.

Lack of transparency leads to low confidence of society in the power and importance of laws. The real implementation of the principle of transparency, covering procedures and safeguards regarding both access to information and participation in the decision-making process, would lead to greater trust in laws and regulations, since they were adopted in consultation with those interested. Transparency has the role of preventing actions that threaten public integrity and assess the performance of public administration. Openness to citizens and promoting transparency in public

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administrations fosters public confidence in public policy and can become an important basis for providing responsive and responsible public services (Shah, 2007).

In addition to informational transparency in relation to the general public, in the case of public institutions it is essential to ensure the transparency of the gross information, the clarity of the accounting information for the users in the decision making process of general interest of the community. In this regard, to ensure the high quality of accounting information, they must have the following characteristics: understandability, relevance, reliability, comparability, veracity.

The principle of informational transparency is essential, unquestionable in the public sector, in order to ensure the compliance and adaptation of local public services to the needs of both the general public and the private sector, to prevent and eliminate the risk of accounting fraud. In this respect, an essential requirement for transparency is to increase the level of information both to decision-makers and public opinion on the nature of the information provided, as well as on their financial implications.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The increasing use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), in particular for the possibilities for interoperability and the development of digital inclusion policies, has enabled public administrations to engage in transformation processes aimed at achieving to provide more efficient, effective and friendly public services and, last but not least, services that are centered on the citizen and business. This approach, also known as transformational governance, has become a driving force for innovation and reducing administrative burdens in public administration, taking full advantage of the possibilities offered by the latest technological developments (Archmann & Castillo, 2010). While the anticipated opportunities are enormous, there are also challenges that need to be addressed with the implementation of such transformation processes, more precisely ensuring digital access for all citizens, and considering the multidimensionality of interoperability aspects, facilitating exchange of information.

The United Nations defines e-government as "the use of ICTs and their application by the government / public administration for the provision of public information and services to citizens" (United Nations, 2004). In a broad sense, eGovernment can be defined as the use and application of information technologies in public administration, for streamlining and integrating workflows and processes, for efficient data and information management, for the quantitative and qualitative increase in public service provision, as well as for extending communication channels to involve the public and citizens (United Nations, 2014).

In a similar register, the concept of e-government is addressed by the European Commission as representing the use of tools and systems made available by information and communication technology to provide better public services for citizens and businesses. These tools are already widely used by government bodies and also by businesses, but e-governance involves much more than the use of tools. An effective eGovernment also requires rethinking organization and processes, and changing behavior so that public services can be provided more effectively to the people who need them. Well-implemented eGovernment allows all citizens, businesses and organizations to carry out their activities or develop their businesses by interacting with authorities in a lighter, faster, and less costly manner (European Commission).

Through innovation and e-government, public administrations around the world can be more effective, can provide better services and respond to demands for transparency and accountability. EGovernment can help governments implement environmentally friendly policies and programs, managing effectively the natural resources, stimulating economic growth and promoting social inclusion, especially for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

3. INNOVATION AND TRANSFORMATION INTO THE ECONOMY AND GOVERNANCE OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS. E-GOVERNMENT

Government institutions have recognized the importance of investment efforts and prioritization of e-government development solutions, given the central role of these new technologies in supporting current efficiency increase in both the public and private sectors. Therefore, public administration has had to take the lead in innovation, promoting working methods that are more dynamic and efficient, while providing high quality services. Public administration is also charged with a new, market-oriented approach to provide public services that minimize bureaucracy and reduce the administrative burden on citizens and the business environment.

The way in which the world's states have understood the need for widespread development of e-government is suggestively surprised by the surveys and studies contained in the UN Global Governance Reports on e-Governance. Within these reports, the E-Government Development Index (EGDI) is based on three important dimensions: on-line service availability, telecommunication infrastructure, and human capacity, each with an equal share of 33.33%.

This approach, with an obvious holistic, integrating profile, has allowed reflection on the evolution and success of e-government strategies since 2003, pioneering practices and innovative solutions to tackling shared challenges of sustainable development. Thus, according to the latest available report United Nations E-Government for Sustainable Development (2016), the world leaders of e-government are United Kingdom, Australia, Republic of Korea, Singapore and Finland (Table 1).

Table 1. World e-government leaders with very high E-Government Development Index (EGDI) levels, period 2012 - 2016

Country	Region	EGDI	2016 Rank	2014 Rank	2012 Rank
United Kingdom	Europe	0.9193	1	8	3
Australia	Oceania	0.9143	2	2	12
Republic of Korea	Asia	0.8915	3	1	1
Singapore	Asia	0.8828	4	3	10
Finland	Europe	0.8817	5	10	9
Sweden	Europe	0.8704	6	14	7
Netherlands	Europe	0.8659	7	5	2
New Zealand	Oceania	0.8653	8	9	13
Denmark	Europe	0.8510	9	16	4
France	Europe	0.8456	10	4	6

Source: Data compiled by author from United Nations E-Government Surveys, 2016, 2014, 2012

As can be seen from the previous table, there is a degree of variability in ranking countries. However, with few exceptions (Sweden, New Zealand, Denmark), all other countries were among the top 10 world e-government leaders with very high EGDI levels in the analyzed five-year period, namely 2012-2016. It can also be noticed that, at the level of 2016, out of the top 10 countries in the ranking, six of them are from Europe (United Kingdom, Finland, Sweden, Netherlands, Denmark, France), two are from Asia (Republic of Korea, Singapore) and two are from Oceania (Australia, New Zealand). It is worth noting, therefore, the continuous efforts of the European states to improve the information and communication systems existing at the level of the public institutions and to prioritize the needs of their citizens.

The E-Government Development Index (EGDI) represents a weighted average of normalised scores including the three most important factors of e-government: scope and quality of online services - Online Service Index: OSI, status of the development of telecommunication infrastructure -

Telecommunication Infrastructure Index: TII, and inherent human capital - Human Capital Index, HCI (United Nations E-Government Survey, 2016). The mathematical formula of EGDI computation takes into account the three factors in equal weight (see Equation 1).

$$EGDI = \frac{1}{3} (OSI_{normalized} + TII_{normalized} + HCI_{normalized}) \quad (1)$$

Table 2 reflects the differences that exist in e-government development among the fifth regions of the world in 2016, taking into account the level of each component that is included in the calculation of EGDI. The highest figures for EGDI, OSI, TII and HCI are recorded for Europe, signifying that this represents the highest developed region from the point of view of e-government, availability of online services, telecommunication infrastructure and human capital. The second most developed region according to the value of EGDI is represented by the Americas region with 0.5245, followed at a short distance by Asia that recorded the value 0.5132. The lowest values of EGDI are recorded for Oceania and Africa regions: 0.4154 and 0.2882 respectively.

Table 2. Regional classification of EGDI values and its three most important components in 2016

Region	E-Government Development Index (EGDI)	Online Service Index (OSI)	Telecommunication Infrastructure Index (TII)	Human Capital Index (HCI)
Africa	0.2882	0.2567	0.1724	0.4355
Americas	0.5245	0.4959	0.3844	0.6933
Asia	0.5132	0.5120	0.3730	0.6545
Europe	0.7241	0.6926	0.6438	0.8360
Oceania	0.4154	0.2966	0.2599	0.6897
World	0.4922	0.4623	0.3711	0.6433

Source: United Nations E-Government Survey, 2016

It is important to mention that the worldwide average value for E-Government Development Index is 0.4922, close to the one in Asia. Also, the difference between the most developed region: Europe, and the least developed one: Africa, is significant, the indicator for the first is more than 2.5 times higher than the one for the second.

Also, Figure 2 illustrates the gaps existing in e-government development among regions in the period 2014-2016. According to the United Nations E-Government Surveys (2014, 2016), the highest number of states that are in the very high and high EGDI categories are part of the European continent: 19 states in the very high EGDI category in 2016 (representing 66%), and 24 states in the high EGDI category in 2014. At the other extreme of the ranking are the low-EGDI countries, mainly part of the African continent: 26 countries from Africa (81.2%). It is worth mentioning that the United States of America are placed on the 12th position in 2016 in the very high EGDI level. However, there are no significant differences between the number of states included in each level of EGDI development between the two periods of time taken into consideration. It can be seen that their number remains relatively constant in 2014 and 2016. The conclusion that emerges from the analysis of these data is that no significant improvements can be made to the e-government development index over short periods of time and that states need significant resources and active involvement to increase this indicator.

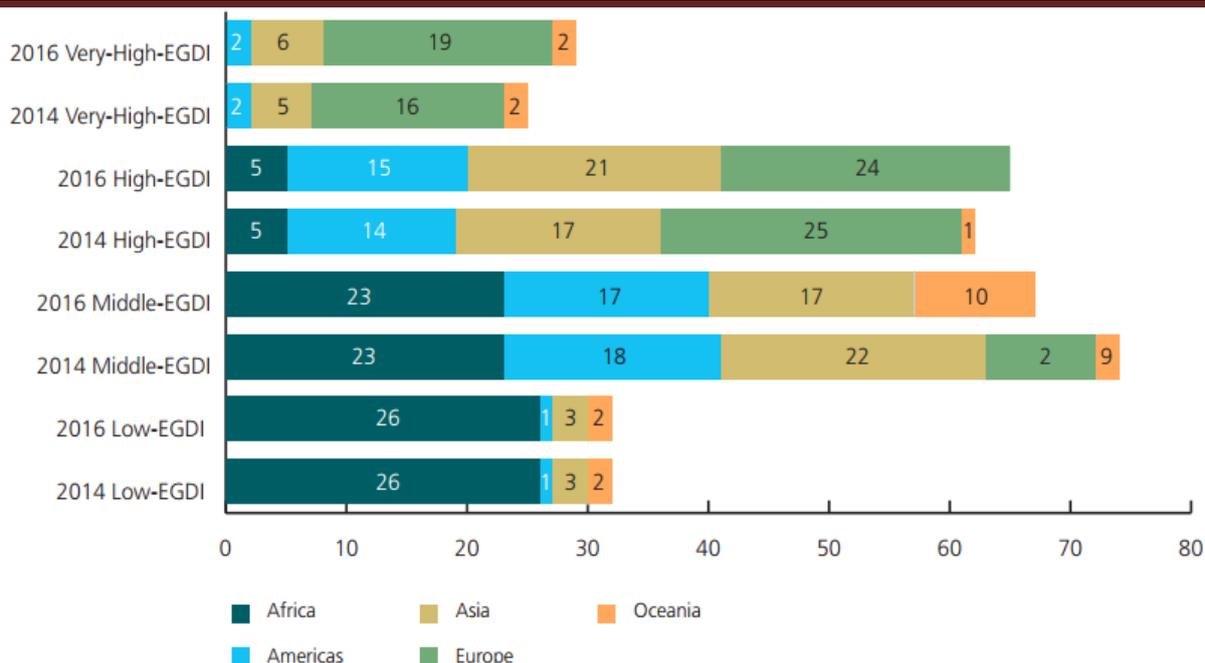


Figure 1. Number of countries grouped by E-Government Development index (EGDI) level and geographical regions

Source: United Nations E-Government Survey, 2016

For a more detailed analysis of e-government development index and of the three components included in its calculation method, we considered relevant to add to the current research a classification of the values of OSI, HCI and TII for the first 10 countries in the EGDI ranking, in 2016 (Table 3). As it can be remarked, United Kingdom obtained the highest possible value for the scope and quality of online services and Australia has recorded the highest value for human capital. In the case of the development of telecommunication infrastructure, none of the countries had the maximum score, namely 1.

Table 3. World e-government leaders with very high E-Government Development Index (EGDI) levels in 2016

2016 Rank	Country	Region	OSI	HCI	TII	EGDI
1	United Kingdom	Europe	1.0000	0.9402	0.8177	0.9193
2	Australia	Oceania	0.9783	1.0000	0.7646	0.9143
3	Republic of Korea	Asia	0.9420	0.8795	0.8530	0.8915
4	Singapore	Asia	0.9710	0.8360	0.8414	0.8828
5	Finland	Europe	0.9420	0.9440	0.7590	0.8817
6	Sweden	Europe	0.8768	0.9210	0.8134	0.8704
7	Netherlands	Europe	0.9275	0.9183	0.7517	0.8659
8	New Zealand	Oceania	0.9420	0.9402	0.7136	0.8653
9	Denmark	Europe	0.7754	0.9530	0.8247	0.8510
10	France	Europe	0.9420	0.8445	0.7502	0.8456

Source: United Nations E-Government Survey, 2016

E-governance and providing online services are seen increasingly more as a means to reduce costs, while providing better service for citizens, but also as part of government efforts to protect the environment. There is a renewed emphasis on the impact and cost-effectiveness of eGovernment in

Europe: countries such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Denmark have implemented ambitious plans to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of eGovernment services and to reduce direct eGovernment spending, while increasing its impact. The Netherlands has already achieved its ambitious objective in 2014, namely cut the country's total administrative costs by 25% and the government considers there is room for a new economy in government spending of about \$ 1.8 billion by 2018, through a broad process of e-government expanding.

An important element of the e-government program in the Netherlands is the Digital by Default Strategy, designed to move online as many services as possible for citizens and businesses. A similar strategy to address implicit digitization was adopted by the UK in Government Digital Strategy 2012, guided by the principle of redesigning online services to make them more direct and convenient for all the citizens (*Government Digital Strategy*, 2012).

At the regional level, Europe focuses its e-government efforts on tackling the economic and financial difficulties through the European Commission Digital Agenda for Europe (<http://ec.europa.eu/digitalagenda/>) and the eGovernment Action Plan 2016-2020. E-government strategies in the 28 Member States of the European Union and, to a certain extent, those of non-member states in the region are influenced by the digital single market pillars: interoperability and standards, trust and security, fast and ultra-fast access to the Internet, research and innovation, digital empowerment, skills and inclusion, boosting benefits for the whole of society. The success of the DAE and the Action Plan can be attributed to the long-term approach to e-government development, its incorporation into broader socio-economic development, and the avoidance of understanding e-government as a stand-alone technical activity. Also important is the voluntary commitment of EU countries to work together in a competitive form of mutual support and cooperation in achieving common goals.

A typical feature of European e-government strategies is to provide distinct portals for government information and on-line services for citizens, respectively. Countries in the region are increasingly involved in providing open government and e-participation portals as well as government online business services. This increases the number of "basic" e-government websites in a country, going beyond the idea of "one-stop-shop". This approach helps to provide more targeted, user-friendly and interconnected services for different users, increasing the amount of information and services made available by public authorities.

Europe's concerted plans are to continue their efforts to design services that are as user-friendly as possible, while ensuring that those who cannot use online services are not excluded from the benefits of e-government and digitized society, and to make full use of e-participation opportunities. The experience of the best performing countries in the region, as well as those countries that have significantly improved their position in the ranking, show that in the long run, holistic strategic planning in eGovernment yields tangible results and the integration of eGovernment into the wider socio-economic development is crucial to the success of eGovernment.

As in other sectors, new information technologies have allowed governments and the public administration to carry out daily tasks faster and more efficiently. In recent years, processes of change and redesign of public administration have been initiated in many European countries, and the introduction of ICT became the reason and the factor of innovation and change in public administration. The opportunities offered by digital development in recent years, whether through online services, data packages, social media, mobile applications or cloud computing (Dobrin & Girneata, 2015), are gradually expanding in the way we perceive and use e-government tools. While e-government still includes electronic interactions of three types, namely government-to-government (G2G); government-to-business (G2B); and government to-consumer (G2C), a more inclusive and engaging approach is about to remodel public administration and how to provide public services.

First of all, ICT allows a more systematic management of an organization's information, eliminating the need for traditional paper-based systems or less efficient internal communication systems, while allowing for improved performance and efficiency, but also for substantial savings in terms of

monetary and time costs. ICT also enables the implementation of new channels of public service delivery, more convenient and comprehensive engagement with citizens and the business environment. Resources can therefore be allocated to the areas where they are really needed and, from the user's point of view, it improves its task of complying with the rules of the administration. Moreover, as government support and back office services are gradually becoming more and more integrated and capable of exchanging data and resources, they continue to increase opportunities to provide better front-office services.

For managers and employees of the public administration, the introduction of ICT required the acquisition of new specific skills to use the new tools at their maximum potential. According to EIPA's Leadership and Skills for eGovernment in 2005, the importance of a different approach to human resource development is highlighted so that organizations can make full use of ICT potential benefits (European Institute of Public Administration, 2005). Such an approach defines the use of ICT as an indispensable qualification for all employees within public administration. This area of competence, known as e-skills, includes a wide variety of capabilities that relate to the operation and application of ICT systems by public administration employees, starting from basic skills: the use of a word processor, to more advanced skills, where necessary.

Finally, technologies and computer equipment have increased the need for public administrations to adjust their internal organization, systems and the modality to manage information for enabling interoperability, interaction and exchange of information. The significance of interoperability has known a substantial increase with the European integration process in order to achieve a common market without electronic barriers. Creating interoperable systems opens the possibility of developing services both in various administrative bodies at different levels, as well as between different Member States or even at pan-European level.

4. FINDINGS

Through innovation and the widest possible use of ICT, effective platforms can be created to facilitate knowledge sharing, skills development, the transfer of innovative eGovernment solutions and capacity building for sustainable development across countries, generating tangible benefits such as new jobs or better and more efficient health and education services.

New technologies and greater transparency incorporated to enhance the business environment (Girneata, 2014, Trifu et al., 2016), as well as the activity of public institutions. Today's public administration must be able to respond to the challenges and requirements of the 21st century in an effective and efficient way. Services must be rethought in such a way that the value given to the needs of citizens and businesses is first and not the needs of the administration. Efforts to increase efficiency and effectiveness in public administration, enhanced by eGovernment and the intensive use of ICT, should have the benefit and goal of reducing the administrative burden for citizens and businesses. Public administration now moves to what is known as transformational governance, which can be understood by the requirements presented in Figure 2.

Reorganizing public administration by integrating ICT and adopting a citizen-centered approach to service delivery and people-to-business relationships enable governments to develop useful tools that help to reduce administrative burden for citizens as well as for businesses. This means minimizing or eliminating the costs of complying with the information and reporting requirements requested by the public administration (European Commission, 2009). These include providing information, completing forms, which traditionally require the physical presence of the citizen or the company's representative at the offices of the administration for signing certain documents. The European Commission and the Member States have gradually become aware that reducing administrative burdens is a key element in strengthening overall economic performance and increasing the competitiveness of Europe as a whole and of member countries in particular. Better

regulation, namely a simpler public administration and a reduction in the obligations of citizens and businesses in providing information, continues to play a major role in this. ICT represents a crucial element also in the process of adopting the relevant measures, including simplified questionnaires, authenticated portals, pre-filled online forms and direct online reporting methods that no longer require the physical presence of the person at the offices of the public administration. As a consequence, ICT becomes a beneficial factor, helping the administration to become more "light", more flexible, less time consuming and more cost-effective for businesses and citizens. The existing procedures through the use of ICT have helped to encourage entrepreneurship in Europe. Reducing administrative burdens is intrinsically linked to the existence of dilemmas, and ICT plays a crucial role in solving them. These dilemmas regard the need of providing services that are better, more efficient and effective, with better care towards the needs of the client, while the available resources are limited.

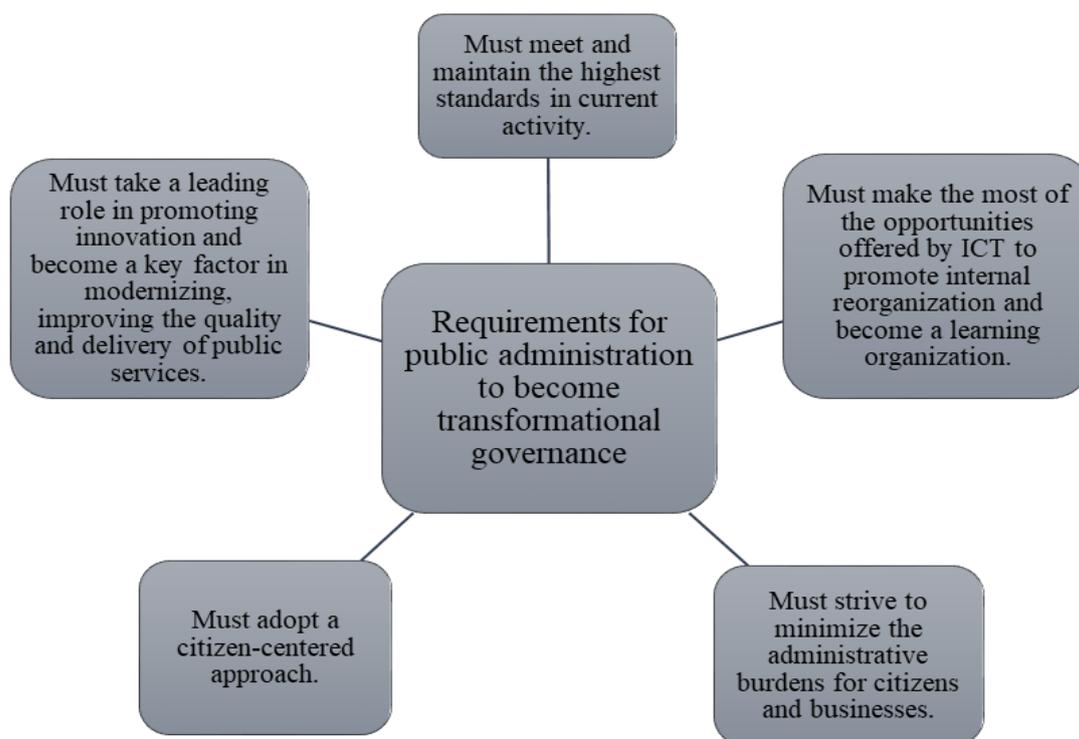


Figure 2. Requirements for public administration to become transformational governance

Source: Developed by the author based on the literature research

In contradistinction to the private companies, public administration cannot choose customers, which means that all businesses and citizens need to be included in their development and modernization plans. Public administration must provide better and more inclusive services, so methods should be found to provide the best value: more/better services at a lower cost or even at the same cost. Moreover, it must be taken into account that the difficulty of obtaining additional resources also accentuates the need to increase efficiency and effectiveness in public administration. Thereby, the provision of ICT-based services and adaptation to customer requirements is a solution that allows the allocation of limited resources even in areas where they are really required.

4.1. Increasing citizens' involvement, digital inclusion and skills: opportunities and challenges

While ICT opportunities in public administration and public service delivery are numerous, the success of eGovernment and its implementation also depend on external factors such as digital inclusion, an infrastructure that allows access to and use of knowledge in the field, and, obviously,

the existence of digital competences among citizens. However, the potential benefits outweigh the mere provision of public services through electronic channels. Increasing citizen involvement through the use of ICT is recognized by European governments as a proper manner that helps enriching democratic processes and opening up more channels for social participation, offering the possibility of achieving a more transparent public administration, which is able to make decisions by taking into account the citizens' needs (European Commission, 2009).

E-inclusion, is a pre-requisite for e-government. In addition, associated with e-participation, it gains greater importance compared to other aspects of eGovernment, often of a different nature. To be successful or at least to be profitable for the relevant authority, the provision of public internet services must be based on high penetration rates of ICT. From the point of view of e-participation, digital inclusion is a matter that needs to be taken into account more seriously, as participation is related to the consolidation of democracy and the possibility to provide citizens with direct and easy ways to interact with the government and the public administration, the basic principle of democracy being the inclusion of all citizens in participatory processes. Therefore, in terms of participation, the adoption of e-Inclusion becomes a crucial matter in the process of ensuring that no citizen is ignored as to the new channels of participation and democracy.

ICT has virtually penetrated every aspect of everyday life, but these technologies are not available to all citizens, and governments have not fully embedded the potential of the technology in public services or decision-making processes. The challenges for the future of e-government and e-participation in Europe are dependent on the success of inclusion policies, the disappearance of current digital gaps. In particular, the disappearance of the digital gaps can provide better opportunities for both individuals and companies, thus contributing to the stimulation of the knowledge-based economy. Moreover, high rates of inclusion can improve lifelong learning processes and can popularize learning programs supported by internet platforms. Secondly, for public administration, higher rates of inclusion are in fact a way to reduce the cost of delivering public services. Cost savings come from the gradual replacement of traditional services with their electronic equivalent, making interactions with citizens more personalized, lighter, and more efficient. Digital inclusion can turn into a significant element of social cohesion, not only through the activation of e-participation, by exploiting the potential internet-enhanced communication improvement in community-building projects aimed at integrating marginalized groups in society (FreshMinds, 2005).

On the other hand, e-inclusion poses some important challenges which European governments must be prepared to face. Such challenges are directly related to the benefits of ICT that must be made accessible to the maximum possible number of citizens through:

- improving accessibility;
- promoting the new available channels of participation as a modality of determining citizens to be more active;
- improving social cohesion and removing inequalities of ICT access.

Responding to these challenges requires awareness, active policies and pro-active planning. As regards the first of the challenges mentioned above, governments have reacted by implementing active policies to improve the current penetration rates of ICTs by promoting ICT centers, broadband access funding, and through friendly, accessible official websites. The second challenge is to promote the achievements achieved either at local, national or even European level. This is about increasing citizens' interest in using and participating in these new channels, namely increasing the visibility of the services available and strengthening citizens' confidence in the privacy and security regarding electronic transactions with public administration institutions. Thirdly, the full benefits of the knowledge society, including e-participation, are only achieved if citizens have the necessary skills and policies aimed at promoting digital literacy and digital literacy must remain a priority for governments and public administrations (EIPA et al., 2005).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Governments and public authorities play a leading role in triggering innovation through more active use and integration of ICT. The public sector is forced to innovate because it cannot select the customers, it has the responsibility to drive innovation and transformation processes, but also to generate models of good practice that can, in a subsequent stage, to be adopted by other countries in the European Union or by the companies in the private sector. Governments and the public administration have the privilege, but also the responsibility, to foresee in the legislation the development and promotion of new standards, such as using electronic signatures, certificates that have full legal validity, digital identity cards, etc. Once developed, such standards are factors for innovation in the public and private sectors, providing a safer Internet and new channels that can help reduce the administrative burden for citizens and businesses. There are numerous examples in this regard; there are cases of banks in Europe that incorporate e-ID authentication technology, replacing their own authentication methods developed previously.

Moreover, ICTs can have positive effects in areas with which they are not normally associated, such as, for example, environmental protection. Creating standards for electronic signatures, certificates, etc., with legal validity, it made it possible to reduce the volume of printed material. However, we should not overlook the fact that greater use of eGovernment and ICT in public administration also leads to new risks and challenges, a greater incidence of errors, abuses, frauds or uses inappropriate. Thus, issues concerning ICT security and the development of a safety standard become important in the implementation of e-government solutions in regional, national and European strategies. Promoting this policy, which involves reducing unnecessary costs of time and money, and increasing citizen satisfaction with the administration, is a key point in achieving the objectives of increasing efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability, in line with the Lisbon Strategy.

Nevertheless, the success of these policies depend on the expansion of digital competences and the accessibility to the entire population, as well as the encouragement of the use of existing online solutions. Greater inclusion means better opportunities to communicate with citizens, using the means, channels and language they prefer, which must be taken into account in all aspects of the implementation of eGovernment solutions. The "No Citizen Left Behind" principle is not a challenge to be addressed only technically (European Commission, 2009).

Currently, insufficient use of on-line services in many European countries reveals that governments need to promote them more actively. Public administration has the potential but also the obligation to take the lead in the implementation and full use of ICT and promoting standards that can be later extended, both in the public and private sectors, developing its potential for services and increasing citizens' satisfaction and innovation.

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