

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2012

THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION
Transparency and accountability online



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COLOMBIA

THE USE OF ICTS TO INCREASE TRANSPARENCY IN COLOMBIA



Colnodo

Ariel Barbosa
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- **Democracy phase:** In this phase citizens are invited to participate actively in decision making and in designing and evaluating public policies.

Introduction

Colombia has made significant progress in the implementation of its e-government strategy in the last years. In fact, in the United Nations E-Government Survey for 2012,¹ Colombia came second in Latin America and the Caribbean and 43rd in the world. This progress was in part due to the e-government strategy implemented by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies, which aims to contribute to a more efficient, transparent and participatory state, providing better services to its citizens and businesses by making the most of ICTs.² This strategy is one of the programmes of the ICT National Plan and a guiding principle for Law 1341 of 2009, also known as the ICT Law.

Policy and legislative background

Decree 1151 of 2008 and the Manual for the Implementation of the E-Government Strategy³ established the procedures that national and regional governmental institutions should follow to complete the phases of the e-government roll-out:

- **Information phase:** In this phase institutions had to provide information on their main areas of activity.
- **Interaction phase:** In this phase institutions began to interact with the public and businesses by providing access to their databases and to civil servants.
- **Transaction phase:** In this phase products and services can be obtained through electronic transactions.
- **Transformation phase:** In this phase changes are made to provide services according to the needs of the population by offering a single virtual space for all official paperwork using the governmental intranet.

Internet for accountability project

Colnodo, as a civil society organisation, has been involved in the e-government strategy since 2002, starting with the Internet for Accountability Project. This project was a joint initiative with Transparency Colombia⁴ and with the support of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).⁵ Its main goal was to design, test and scale up different ways to strengthen the country's local government integration with the active involvement of mayors and civil society. The project had three central aspects: the transparent handling of public information on the internet; the social accountability of mayors; and the development of municipal plans for the publication of municipal information on the internet using free and open source software (FOSS).

The project started as a pilot project in the municipality of Paipa⁶ (26,000 citizens) with the development of a web page, designed with the participation of local civil servants and grassroots and social organisations working in the municipality and interested in being observers of the local government administration. The platform developed (which improved the information, interaction and transaction phases) was donated by Transparency Colombia and Colnodo to the national government through the Vice-Presidency of the Presidential Office. The tool was evaluated and improved by the Connectivity Agenda (now the E-Government Programme of Colombia) run by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies. By the end of 2005, the E-Government Programme decided to roll it out to all the Colombian municipalities which had been connected to the internet through the governmental programme Compartel.

Two initiatives were integrated into the project resulting in important improvements: Met@logo, which provides information to entrepreneurs, and the Millennium Development Goals module, which allows the tracking of progress in the municipalities.

1 www.unpan.org/e-government

2 www.programa.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co/componentes.shtml

3 programa.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co/apc-aa-files/Presentaciones/Manual_GEL_V3_o_VF.pdf

4 The Colombian chapter of Transparency International. www.transparenciacolombia.org.co

5 www.usaid.gov

6 www.paipa-boyaca.gov.co

This module was led by the United Nations. These initiatives had the support of the German technical cooperation agency GIZ in Colombia⁷ and the Federation of Colombian Municipalities.⁸ During this process contributions from donors for the development of the software were around USD 194,000⁹ and the investment by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies was around USD 42,000.

Presently, 1,130 municipalities have the system installed and are publishing information, representing more than 99% of the municipalities in Colombia; 628 are in the information and interaction phases. The system is also used by some departments and governmental agencies in the country. Since the roll-out of the municipalities' websites began (at the end of 2005) there has been a continuous growth of unique visits to the websites, with a total monthly average of 8,204,194 visits.¹⁰ This growth is expected to continue given the increased access to the internet in Colombia.¹¹

Website ownership

The development of the Internet Platform for Accountability involved the municipal administrations, public oversight committees and the citizens themselves. Because of this, there was broad support for the initiative. This acceptance played an important role when the platform was rolled out at a national level – in particular, because the municipalities found it a useful tool that met their expectations, making it easier for them to “own” it.

The participation of civil society organisations has also been facilitated by the use of FOSS. FOSS has made it possible to develop the platform and adapt the new sections and functionalities according to the needs of municipalities and citizens as well as to the phases of the e-government guidelines.

Follow-up consultations show that municipalities have reached a satisfactory level of acceptance

and ownership of the websites. Questions related to usage and participation by the community show overall percentages higher than 60% in areas such as training received on using the websites; knowledge of its tools that can be used for participation; and the follow-up of user requests. However, the actual *use* of the existing opportunities for participation is very low (29%). This percentage shows the importance of evaluating why the community is not using these opportunities offered on the municipalities' websites. Increasing this percentage of participation by the community will improve the e-government transparency indicator.

Spectrum in Colombia

Like many government agencies in Colombia, the National Spectrum Agency (ANE in Spanish) conducts regular exercises in accountability, presenting information on its budget, management, programmes and projects for the future. In the case of the ANE, it is notorious for the low participation of civil society organisations, in part because of the complexity of the spectrum issue, which is usually too technical for a general audience. Moreover, civil society organisations are not aware of the opportunities or of the risks of not participating actively in spectrum management and of leaving decisions and discussions in the hands of the state and the private sector.

In this regard, Colnodo participated in research led by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). This research exposed the lack of knowledge on the subject amongst the general public and the low participation of other sectors such as universities or engineering associations.

Because of this situation, in August 2012, Colnodo and APC developed an online course on the basics of radio spectrum, what its management means in Colombia, and what the opportunities for participation enabled by the government are. The course joins another initiative of the ANE called “Spectrum Experts”, which also seeks to sensitise the general public (journalists, students, civic associations, etc.) to the same issues, especially now that the auction of new spectrum ranges will permit high-speed access for mobile internet.

Given the wide coverage of the mobile network in Colombia and access to the internet through the data network, the state should encourage the use of the internet by reducing access costs. This was the case in the 1990s, when internet access providers provided their services through the packet-switched network, and had to lower their tariffs in order to encourage the use of the internet by the population. If Colombia continues implementing these policies

7 www.giz.de/en/worldwide/397.html

8 www.fcm.org.co

9 This amount only includes the investment in the development of the system. It does not include other investment such as training and follow-up of the updating of information, among others.

10 programa.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co/apc-aa-files/ProgramaenCifrasDiciembre2011/GEL_ProgramaEnCifras_Diciembre2011.htm

11 According to the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies quarterly report for first quarter of 2012, the number of subscribers to fixed and mobile internet service grew by 5,3% over the previous quarter, and by 27,9% in comparison with the first quarter of the previous year, from 5.05 million to 6.46 million internet subscriptions (www.mintic.gov.co/images/documentos/cifras_del_sector/boletin_banda_ancha_vive_digital_1t_2012.pdf). Municipalities are connected through the ministry's Compartel programme, which connects the smallest municipalities in the country as part of the e-government strategy.

and placing special emphasis on the delivery of ICT services to the rural population, there is no doubt that Colombia will continue to lead the region in e-government policies.

Web accessibility

Web accessibility refers to the design of information systems that facilitate internet access to as many people as possible, regardless of their physical condition (people with visual, hearing or cognitive disabilities), level of technological access (old computers, operating systems or programmes which are not the latest on the market) or internet access (lower connection speed, connection from mobile devices, and so on). For this reason, the concept of web accessibility becomes crucial to ensure that all Colombians have unrestricted access to the content and services offered by the Colombian state through its online government strategy.

Since 2010 several government agencies that work with people with disabilities, together with universities, individuals and Colnodo, have been working on the creation of the Web Accessibility Committee of Colombia. One of its first tasks was to adapt the W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines to create the Colombia Technical Standard on Web Accessibility,¹² which is part of the new online government strategy in Colombia.

Action steps

The e-government strategy in Colombia includes much broader concepts than the provision of information and services to citizens using ICTs, and is closer to the concept of governance as the organisation of collective action. This involves ideas that justify or legitimise political power, stable institutions that are open to the influence of citizens, and patterns of incentives and sanctions to ensure compliance with rules, regulations, standards and procedures. It also involves the use of ICTs by government, civil society and other socio-political actors to promote and implement the transparent, accountable and collaborative steering of society.

However, work still needs to be done in order to ensure the ongoing effectiveness of the e-government programme.

When it comes to spectrum, it is really important to involve citizens in the management of this vital resource. This could involve inviting journalists, high school students, civil society organisations and academics to increase their knowledge through online courses such as the one proposed by APC¹³ and also by joining the ANE strategy “Spectrum Experts”,¹⁴ whose purpose is to train people on spectrum issues.

When it comes to accessibility, it is important not only to train but to sensitise public employees about the issues involved, because many of them have to deal with it outside of their normal responsibilities, sometimes without a complete understanding of what accessibility means and what its purpose and benefits are (for example, there is a myth that accessibility in the public sector is just about people with disabilities).

Finally, an update of the web platforms so that they can be accessed using mobile devices is needed. ■

12 NTC 5854

13 autoformacion.colnodo.apc.org

14 www.ane.gov.co/index.php/expertos-en-espectro