

PROJECT *E-Local*: INTERNET FOR ALL MUNICIPALITIES

An Innovations in Technology and Governance Case Study

E-Local is promoting access to public information in a governmental system that historically has been closed to citizens. The purpose of this project is to improve communication among the different structures of government and between those structures and the citizenry at large. It is the first effort of a federal administration to encourage the use of IT in municipalities in order to strengthen democratic governance, improve municipal management tools, and promote the building, within the local sphere, of an “authentic federalism” in Mexico.

Introduction

The use of the Internet in government tasks has had an explosive growth. The dramatic push that IT use has given to governmental reform has renewed the conviction that it is possible to transform that hierarchical entity into a flexible one belonging to the community—that it is feasible to reinvent government. This case study involves an effort that is important not only for opening up the process of governmental reform to the citizens of Mexico but for promoting the modernization of a decentralized system within the context of local governments in transition. What is the relevance of IT when seeking to develop communication among local governments? What is its impact in the construction of RIG's? This case study shows the efforts of a task force to promote the use of IT and create an e-government culture in a system that historically has been closed to society, and where local governments still lack the necessary technical and administrative expertise to solve many of the problems on the public agenda.

***E-Local* and the transformation of Mexico's federal system**

In Mexico, as opposed to developed countries, until recently there has been no public administration fully specialized with sufficient technical capabilities. Rather, the bureaucracy has been far removed from the legislature, closed to society and formally centralized, creating for itself lax mechanisms of accountability and rules that enable it to act without transparency. This bureaucracy has developed in the shadow of a system that uses it as a political tool. For these reasons, the creation of mechanisms of information, communication, and even supervision and guidelines should constitute the next steps in the process of governmental reform.

Similar to the federal government, in local governments—even while they are changing little by little—the centralist tradition is deeply entrenched. The municipal transformation moves at a different pace, following multiple itineraries. Even though innovation is

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increasingly present, there is still no institutional change within the municipal space. The diversity of problems, technical capacity, and political practices within Mexican municipalities creates contrasting public agendas; on the one hand, an agenda of innovation and change, and on the other, one that is determined to maintain the status quo. For these reasons, municipalities require policies that encourage training, systematization of processes, and open public information. Nevertheless, the persistence of local political bosses, the limited professionalism of public officials, and the resistance to transparency in government activities remain obstacles to reform.

Since the beginning of the political rotation in Mexico's federal government, in December 2000, there has been an effort to consolidate the federal system, increase the managerial capacity of municipalities, encourage decentralization, initiate a culture of e-government and promote managerial reform. Part of this agenda was delegated to a task force headed by Carlos Gadsden. The task force was consolidated during the administration of Vicente Fox as governor of Guanajuato, when at the beginning of the 1990's he collaborated to design one of Mexico's most significant attempts at decentralization and regional development.

Early in President Fox's administration, the task force was assigned the job of assuring the successful transition from centralism to an authentic federalism through a deep political decentralization, the improvement of government relations, and the strengthening of local governments. After an evaluation of the state of local governments, in which local officials expressed their perspective of federalism in Mexico and its needs, the Project "*E-Local: Internet in All Municipalities*" was designed.

E-Local is one of the most ambitious e-government projects of the present administration, seeking to become a tool "of knowledge and transformation of the local environment through the design and construction of an interactive system of information and communication between the federation, the states, the municipalities and the citizens." To achieve its goal, it uses two components:

1. Two public portals, an institutional one (INAFED) and a portal for states and municipalities (www.e-local.gob.mx) giving access to all the relevant information about states and municipalities in Mexico, Latin America, and the world, as well as of the various actors that intervene in the municipal arena.
2. The Federalist Intercommunication Network (Red de Intercomunicación Federalista, RIFE) restricted to government officials of the three branches of government. The purpose of RIFE is to integrate the access services to forums, thematic virtual communities, a consulting system, and "knowledge management" for mayors (Virtual Mayor), which showcases success¹. The RIFE also has a "wizard" directing users to the public server to create a Web page for their municipalities hosted free of charge by INAFED servers.

In general terms, the goal of *E-Local* is to bring to the desks of government officials and citizens information about the three branches of government and to foster and disseminate investigations about the municipality. For that, the main node of the project in its first stage is to meet the information and management needs of local government officials. The project task force understands that to achieve a change in democratic governance it is imperative to build communication channels among the different levels

of government, and that those channels serve to train local government officials, achieve transparency in government, and standardize local competenceⁱⁱ.

This first stage of *E-Local* should not be seen as a limited application of IT in the consolidation of e-government and democratic governance, but rather as a long-term plan to consolidate the intergovernmental channels of communication and the promotion of a new federalist relationship, based on a two-way communication between different government branches (federation, states, and municipalities), the transfer of management tools to local government official, and the use of IT applications.

The project aims to do away with the idea that only central government has the knowledge and capacity to offer solutions to problems faced by local governments. *E-Local* assumes that local government officials have the capacity to contribute solutions to the problems in their communities and to promote cross training. That is why information, knowledge, and solutions contributed not only by the government but by key actors in the local sphere are organized by themes in the *E-Local* portal.

***E-Local* and the agenda of innovation of Mexico’s local governments**

An e-government agenda should be accompanied by reform of the governmental structure and a change in the decision-making process, otherwise citizens will lose interest in these channels of communication. When federal and local governments lack the capacity to make the changes required by an e-government agenda, the model loses legitimacy, and the windows that IT opens may close because of the constant disappointment of the citizenry.

Consequently, announcing the convenience of *E-Local* (opening up government to the citizens) from the perspective of administrative reform is not only risky but contradictory. Establishing a coherent model of electronic government requires at least two variables: an adequate technological infrastructure and strategic e-government planning in the municipalities. A proper evaluation of this project requires the understanding that it represents an opportunity to provide managerial tools where they do not exist, coordinate the information among different government areas, promote the training of local government officials, systematize processes and promote learning among local governments through the dissemination of best practices.

The *E-Local* project has enabled connectivity in 12 out of a total of 33 federative entities. To date there are 182 municipal Web sites (out of a possible 2431) managed directly or indirectly by local government officials in Mexico.

Table 1 Technological infrastructure

Indicator	Development of Municipal Institutions Survey INDESOL-INEGI 2000 ^{/1}	National System of Municipal Information, INAFED, 2003 ^{/2}
Number of municipalities with a telephone line	1954 (80.5%)	2313 (95.2 %)

Number of municipalities with Internet access	347 (14.3%)	800 (32.9 %) ⁴
Number of municipalities with websites.	108 (4.45 %) ⁵	442 (18.2 %)
Number of municipalities with direct or indirect Web management	N.D.	182 (7.5 %)
Number of municipalities with computation equipment	2013 (82.9%) /3	N.D.

1. As of the date of the survey, there were 2,427 municipalities.
2. As of June 1, 2003, there were 2,430 municipalities in the country.
3. In these 2,013 municipal presidencies, the average number of equipment is 18.13.
4. Municipal presidencies connected by the E-Mexico National System are included.
5. Data obtained by the count done by Cedemun.

Table 1 shows that only 33% of Mexico's municipal presidencies have an Internet connection, and of those only about half have a presence on the Web; in turn, only half of these are responsible for managing their sites directly or indirectly. We can conclude that most of the 182 local governments (7.5% of the national total) that manage their own Web site are urban municipalities with a large population.

In terms of the existence of e-government strategic planning, taking into account the 442 local governments that have a presence in the Web, most are in the early stages of evolution: Only 47 sites have gone beyond the first stage. It would be interesting to know how many (and who) of these local governments have e-government strategic plans in place in which they establish the stage they are aiming to reach and the means to achieve it. This information is crucial for determining whether the presence of the local government on the Web is not just a reaction to fashion or a temporary requirement, but instead is truly a consistent strategy of organizational reform.

Table 2 Levels of e-government in Mexico's municipalities

Promotion of personal image	355 sites (80.4%)
One-way information (<i>Level I</i>)	40 sites (9.0%)
Two-way interactivity (<i>Level II</i>)	40 sites (9.0%)
Citizen participation (<i>Level III</i>)	7 sites (1.6%)
Transactions	N/A
Integration	N/A
TOTAL	442 sites (100%) ⁷

6. Total numbers of municipalities as of September 1, 2003: 2,430.
7. Of this number, only 182 town halls manage their site directly or indirectly.
8. Information as of September 15, 2003.

Evidently, being able to persuade the majority of local governments to initiate a consistent process of e-government requires a profound change in Mexico's political habits: the change from an authoritarian and closed political culture to one that is open and oriented to the people. This change in culture is obstructed by the uncertainty that the adoption of IT represents to local political bosses. On the one hand, there are those who consider the model a threat to their dominance, and on the other, we are facing a great deal of computer illiteracy, not only among public officials but also in the population at large. Furthermore, the e-government agenda requires a profound change in the federal paradigm. According to Fernando Gutiérrez, the head of the project, two of the main difficulties in implementing the program are the lack of understanding in federal circles of the importance of having a Web site of government services that does not depend on an institutional outlook (of area or structure), and the meager resources allocated to projects such as *E-Local*.

Findings

Through the *E-Local* project, public access to information related to local government activity in the federal, state, and even municipal spheres is being promoted. Undoubtedly, this reduces significantly the costs of delivering information. Furthermore, one of the aims of the improvement of intergovernmental communication is to increase the speed and the ability of government structures to respond to the problems they might face, in order to provide high-quality public services. It is the first effort to initiate the process of connectivity of Mexican local governments and the virtual horizontal and vertical integration among them. According to the ruling project, it is contemplated that *E-Local* will enable the delivery of connection services to all local governments in the country in 2004. The main goal is to reach municipalities with a population of fewer than 50,000.

While the federal programs of electronic government (*E-Government*) and national connectivity (*E-México*) provide guidelines and a strategy for *E-Local*, it is necessary that local municipalities take responsibility for the progress of democratic governance and IT. A first step is to promote the consolidation of their own administrative structures and from then on the development of strategic plans that move forward the consolidation of e-government. *E-Local* represents an invitation and a channel for municipalities wishing to contribute to the building of a true federalism.

ⁱ If a mayor wants to know how to solve the problem of garbage, he can ask the tool of the virtual mayor: "What do I do about the garbage?" if he dislikes the answers given by the content, the answer is sent to a forum to be answered by experts. The answer is entered in the database.

ⁱⁱ The project acknowledges having two main users: municipal officials, who through the restricted network seek to get training, improve their managerial tools and find the services they need within the central government, and the experts in municipal studies that access the Web in search of information.