E-Government & Public Policy for Poverty Eradication and Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

It seems that the years of mankind struggle against poverty have ended to a symbolic belief: "We must empower people to stand up against poverty". Empowering people depends on the equal access to cultural, economical, and political opportunities. Equal accessibility to information and knowledge sources, has a key role in developing and maintaining those equal situations. Information can create money, power, and knowledge, and increase human capability. So, any inequality in information distribution is one of the worst kinds of discrimination, which leads to ever-lasting poverty. The central premise of this research is that E-Government can act as a facilitator for equal access to information, empower people in all aspects of social arenas, and as a result, strengthen the poverty eradication process. To explain this hypothesis, a model was introduced, which showed how discrimination leads to poverty and inactive participation in social life. In another model, empowerment, equal access to opportunities, and their impacts on poverty eradication were developed. Finally, a comprehensive model emphasizing on the unique affect of e-government on reforming the public involvement level was suggested. The model shows how e-government results in proactive participation of people in social arenas and public policy processes.

1. Introduction

Poverty is one of the worst features of social life. It has affected the process of social development and excellence. The concept of poverty is divergent in terms of its dynamics, intricacies, and definitions; the inability to attain a minimal standard of living, refers to forms of economic, social and psychological deprivation occurring among people lacking sufficient ownership, control over or access to resources to maintain or provide individual or collective minimum levels of living. Therefore, varied indicators are required to deal effectively with different dimensions of poverty (Ullah and Routray, 2007; Hye, 1996).

For years, it was thought that charity was the main solution to the poverty crisis, but not only the problem remained, but also increasingly expanded. Now, in the beginning of the third millennium, more than 800 million people, which are 19 percent of the developing world's population, live in absolute poverty, with an income of less than one dollar a day (The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2006). These statistics

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only imply the income poverty, whereas if we consider the capability poverty (Mahmoudi, 2006; McKinley, 2006), "Human poverty, Human Capability", International Business and Economic Research Conference, Florance, Italy.), the number of poor people will tremendously increase. Based on another report, while 900 million people in developing countries were income poor, 1.6 billion were capability poor (HDR, 1996). This trend may continue and become more complicated. So there is a need to revise the traditional strategies and tactics against poverty. Many scholars and researchers have already reminded that the best way to alleviate poverty is to empower citizens. This insight has even been emphasized in many proverbs and traditional approaches to poverty eradication, such as "Teach a hungry man how to do fishing, rather than giving him only a fish!". Major policy implications have been that solution to poverty is about changing the poor to be different and better in some ways (Hong and Pandey, 2007, pp.19). There has also been a special consideration in the Millennium Development Goals, on Empowerment instead of alms (Satterthwaite, p.8).

Although individual explanations of poverty see poverty as the consequence of individual characteristics and failings (Burton, 1992; Rank, 1994), there is a strong belief that poverty is not an individual choice. People do not create poverty; institutions and policies, which surround them, create poverty (Elahi, 2004). Many institutions force their policies to people. As a result, creating accountable organizations and NGOs which can empower people to raise their voice and demand their right, can be very helpful in creating a just city (Pourezzat, 2004) and a democratic just world.

2. Poverty and discrimination in the beginning of the third millennium

There is a kind of relationship between poverty and discrimination. So that, increase in poverty adds to inequality in access public institutions, and social opportunities; the societal discrimination is the multitude of social influences that cause a certain group to be adversely affected in the labor market (Blau et al., 1998, p. 142), and be economically exploited. Poor people cannot make use of public facilities as much as the rich people; they are not capable enough to identify the progress opportunities, and cannot use public rules, policies, and structures in order to develop and enjoy a normal life, whereas rich people can employ many public resources, and can affect public rules and policy making processes. This discrimination can increase in all aspects of social life, especially in an interaction with different dimensions of social system, such as cultural, political, and economical arenas (Figure 1).
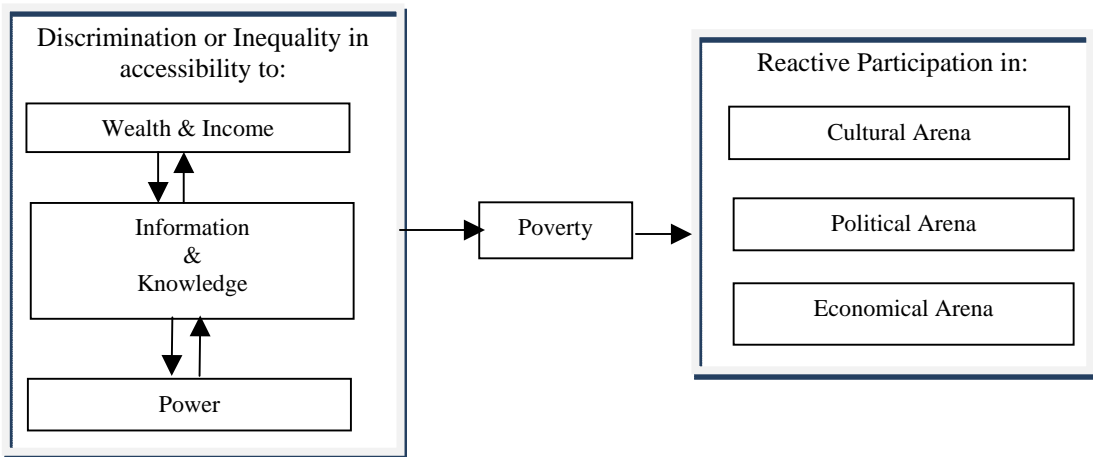

Figure 1: Various affects of discrimination in social system

Considering Fig. 1, we can distinguish different areas of discrimination and inequality in social life which have an increasing interaction with each other, and make a more complicated situation. Therefore, poverty will increase in all dimensions of social life; which means efforts to eradicate poverty in one area, may be neutralized with other aspects of poverty. So, any plan to tackle poverty is only effective when it considers the necessity to empower people and enable them to develop their skills, create and improve opportunities, and have a higher life expectancy. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

3. Empowerment

Empowerment is a process through which people gain a momentum to actively participate in different social life arenas, demand their own rights, use the opportunities to make progress, and develop their capabilities. Hong and Padney (2007, p. 27) research show that level of education, Job training, and health conditions affect the likelihood of being poor. Empowerment means having the right and opportunity to select from among various options. That is, people can decide how to live. Every decision making needs information, and e-government can facilitate access to information.

4. E-government and its dual features

E-government is not simply about putting forms and services online. It can provide the opportunity to rethink how the government offer services and how it links them in a way that is tailored to the users' needs (Burn and Robins, 2003). E-government is one of the novel and most appealing applications of information and communication technologies (ICTs). It is defined as "the use of ICT in public administrations combined with organizational change and new skills in order to improve public services and democratic processes, and strengthen support to public policies" (European Commission, 2003). It has been reported as an enabler to realize better and more efficient public administration.
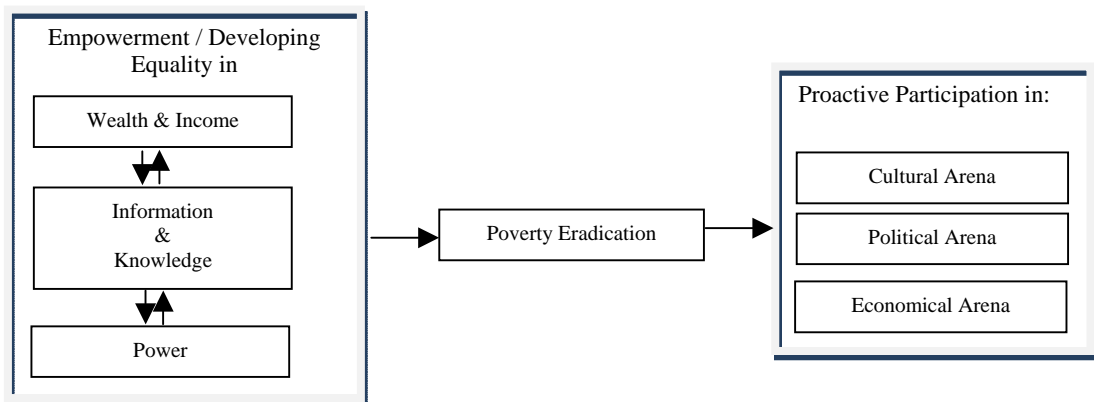

Figure 2: Poverty eradication through empowerment and ensuring social equality

E-government can act as a facilitator for equal access to information and empower people in all aspects of social arenas. Therefore, it can strengthen the poverty eradication process. In the absence of free flow of information, there could be a tendency for some government officials to simply lie or be selective about the truth when caught in a situation in which they are expected to be accountable (Mutula, 2006, p. 447). Of course, e-government is a sword with two opposite functions; it can be used for both negative and positive purposes. If the public organizations tend to equality, accountability, and transparency in their decision makings, e-government leads to good governance. However, if public officials tend to force their decisions and deceive people, e-government may act as a dominating instrument (Morgan, 2006), which can make the situation more complex for ordinary people, and create new opportunities for a limited interest group to

have control on all aspects of public life (Table 1).

Table 1: Functional and Dysfunctional impacts of e-government in social life

Functional outcomes	Dysfunctional outcomes
- E-Government can help to easier and better distribution of information to the public; - So, E-Government can increase transparency, answerability and accountability to the public; - So, it can lead to public participation; - So, it can lead to public maturity, voice and empowerment; So, it can lead to autonomous poverty eradication in a holographic perspective.	- E-Government is a powerful instrument; so it can be an instrument for more intensive domination of the policy maker, and some interest groups; - So, it can increase the gap between different groups within the society in case of wealth, power, and consciousness; - So, it can increase the opportunity for rant and discrimination.

So, e-government may lead to many functional and dysfunctional outcomes and impacts.

In fact, e-government can:
- Eliminate or reduce human intervention in policy making process;
- Facilitate the interaction between nation and state;
- Act as an effective instrument for implementing public policy.

It also can:
- Become a powerful instrument for controlling the information to the benefit of a limited interest group;
- Increase discrimination and differences in the society, if it is not properly managed.

5. Approaches to create a good e-governance:

The government to e-government transition process offers governments a unique opportunity to enhance not only their operational transparency, clarity of purpose and responsiveness to citizens (Marche and McNiven, 2003), but also their own internal efficiency and effectiveness, important concerns in times of economic downturn and increasing public pressure for internal accountability (Davison, Wagner, and Ma, 2005). The functional and dysfunctional outcomes of e-government are inevitable. However, by taking effective approaches, we can strengthen the functional outcomes of e-government. Therefore, we will need a model for defining good   e-governance.

Good governance depends on the appropriate balance of power such that no one group holds a disproportionate share (Smith-Hillman, 2006). The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has described governance as the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority in the management of the affairs of a country at all levels. Good governance, in general terms, means a broad array of practices that maximize the common good. According to UNDP, some of the attributes of good governance are (Arko-cobbah, 2006):
- participation, expecting all citizens to have a say in decision-making, either directly or through the legitimate intermediate institutions representing their interests;
- rule of law, which is taken to be the extent to which legal frameworks are fair and impartially enforced, especially the laws on human rights;
- transparency, with free flow of information in public; and
- accountability, the quest for decision-makers in government, the private sector and civil society organizations (CSOs) to be broadly accountable to the general public, as well as institutional stakeholders.

Good governance aims to give people the right to participate in decision makings. However, as any decision making without enough information can be vague and wrong, there is a necessity to empower people, and increase their capabilities. In addition, we must develop infrastructure and IT facilities to create e-government. Although technology itself would not guarantee a successful e-government, but it is necessary that any e-government initiative must ensure that it has sufficient resources, adequate infrastructure, management support, capable IT staff, and effective IT training and support (Ebrahim and Irani, 2005).

So, good e-governance must be based on:
- Informed participation of public in the governance processes;
- Transparency;
- Accountability;
- Free speech;
- Capability Development; and
- IT and infra-structure Development.

Based on what has been discussed, we can develop a comprehensive model to show the real interaction among e-government, capability building and empowerment, and public participation level, which can develop approaches to effective policy formation, and facilitate policy implementation for poverty eradication.
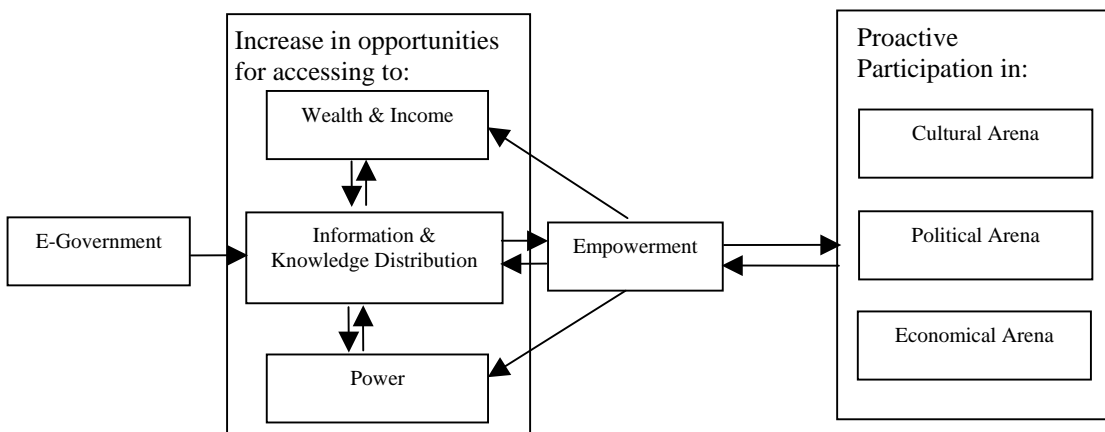

Figure 3: E-government impacts on public empowerment

6. Concluding Remarks

Poverty is a social problem which has affected human life, and social development. Despite many different programs and initiatives to alleviate this problem, little success has been achieved, and there exists complex barriers to solve this problem. New approaches focus on public empowerment as a key alternative to uproot poverty. Empowerment provides people with self-confidence to use situations rationally and have equal chances to access progress opportunities. So, it's necessary to gain information skills for developing public capabilities. E-government can be a good instrument to increase public options for development through providing equal access to resources, and enabling people for proactive participation in social arenas. Specially, considering that the young generation has an increasing enthusiasm toward e-things, e-government can be more effective in the future; the future that will be formed and built by youth. In this article, different functions of e-government have been discussed, and a comprehensive model to "good e-

governance" has been suggested, which explains how e-government provides equality in access to valuable information, and increases public participation level in cultural, economical, and political arenas of social systems.

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