
From tribal lore to the printing press, to the present era of fast and cheap electronic communication, the ability of both rulers and ruled to access information has had profound governance ramifications. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are the latest in the evolution of mass communication, and offer vast potential to transform governance and the dialogue between citizens and governments. Rowena Cullen and Graham Hassall’s book Achieving sustainable e-government in Pacific island states provides a timely examination of the advent of e-government in Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs).

The scope of the book encompasses 22 PICTs, which differ vastly in their political, cultural, socio-economic and geographic terms. The first section examines these conditions. Chapter One by Cullen and Hassall introduces the phenomena of ICT in PICTs. The authors provide an overview of the realities that PICTs face in the context of governance and communication structures, as well as the opportunities and challenges that PICTs face in the implementation of e-government.

Attaining e-government through greater connectivity in PICTs is a task involving multiple stakeholders at the international, regional and national level. The next few chapters (Chapters 2-4) probe into how such stakeholders seek to improve connectivity through international and regional frameworks, as well as regulation at the national level.

In Chapter 2, Purcell and Hassall delve into initiatives by international and regional organisations to foster greater connectivity within the Pacific region through improved ICT capability; and the ramifications of such initiatives on PICTs. The chapter also examines the potential contributions that ICTs can make towards development in the region. Chapter 3 by Hassall then reviews how regional and national bodies in PICTs have worked towards realising the potential of e-government through regional and national policy frameworks. The chapter then delves into e-government initiatives that have been financed by international agencies. In Chapter 4, Louey-Gung provides an overview of the preconditions necessary to facilitate e-government in the context of regulatory frameworks and institutions, as well as ICT connectivity and access in PICTs. The chapter positions itself in the context of how regulatory frameworks and institutions need to work towards a reliable and affordable telecommunications market.

The second section of the book provides a trove of fascinating case studies about the specific use of ICTs in government sectors. In Chapter 5, Watson and her co-authors review the use of mobile phones in the island Pacific for effective government service delivery. In Chapter 6, Cullen makes a strong case for the benefits that ICTs offer for good governance, effective financial management and overall national development. Cullen highlights the importance of negotiating power relations in a developmental context. This is particularly relevant in the case of PICTs, where the often critiqued, ‘one size fits all’ approach of international developmental agencies can clash with the individual realities and needs of PICTs, some of which may be driven by the idiosyncratic consequences of small size and islandness or archipelagicity.

Strengthening democratic institutions is crucial for attaining e-government. To many Pacific Islanders, the nuances and machinations of Western democracy can be quite abstract notions. For most PICTs, the national governance mechanisms in place were imposed upon them by their colonisers, and lingered on post independence. In Chapter 7, Cullen explores how ICTs can act to support the institutions of democracy in PICTs. Such support can take many forms: from increasing transparency by having information available on parliamentary websites, to
improving accountability by enhancing government record keeping. Cullen concludes by admitting that, while ICTs offer vast potential in bolstering democratic institutions, the Pacific is still far short of achieving ICT-enabled democracy.

In planning and realising developmental goals, PICTs require a robust system for collecting, managing and disseminating official statistics. In Chapter 8, Cook and Cullen argue that ICTs have the potential to increase the quantity and quality of data gathered. For instance, in areas with 3G/4G coverage, the uses of mobile and tablet devices enable a wider variety of data to be collected, within shorter timeframes.

For many PICTs, farming and fishing remain the mainstay of national economies and individual livelihoods. Chapter 9, by Aqorau, Cullen, Mangal and Walton, provides an insight into e-government initiatives in such primary industries. The Chapter examines the potential of ICT to improve the quality of primary industry data and statistics.

Climate change and its impacts will have far-reaching ramifications on PICTs at a socio-cultural, economic and environmental level. The terms of climate adaptation and disaster risk management have thus become common parlance in the developmental discourse of PICTs. The role of e-government in implementing the above terms is discussed in Chapter 10 by Pelesikoti and Suwamaru. Here, they reflect on lessons learnt from multiple PICTs with regard to government initiatives on integrated water management, food security, coastal development, renewable energy, mobile weather reporting and seasonal climate prediction software.

A key aspect of human development is the health of a country’s citizens. For PICTs, the health sector is often challenged by a sparsity of funding, personnel, infrastructure and equipment. Cullen provides an outline of the health challenges PICTs face, and a description of current uses of ICT in Chapter 11. Cullen examines the role that ICT-based Health Information Systems play in improving medical services, and the challenges that PICTs face in implementing such systems. Cullen further delves into other potential ICT uses, such as telehealth initiatives and the use of mobile services. Cullen concludes by noting that, given the scarce resources in PICTs, any technological ‘intervention’ must add considerable value in order to justify the allocation of limited resources.

Attaining higher education standards has been an ongoing global developmental agenda. For PICTs, this agenda remains an important regional priority. In Chapter 12, Mow, Kruse Vaai, Thomson and Taloka make a case for how e-government can be facilitated in PICTs by the use of ICTs in education. The chapter examines regional and national initiatives aimed at improving the use of ICT in education; including a case study of the diverse means by which ICTs are being used in education at the University of the South Pacific. The chapter argues that Open Education Resources, ICT-enabled distance and flexi learning and the rapid decrease in device costs show great promise for Pacific education.

As PICTs work towards attaining ‘good governance’, civil society plays a crucial role in acting as an intermediate between citizens and institutions. Chapter 13 by Hassall explores how the growth of ICT platforms in the Pacific has led to increased attempts by governments and civil society to harness ICT platforms for enhanced engagement between governments and citizens. The first section of the book commendably outlines the realities faced in PICTs as well as the current international, regional and national frameworks in place that impact connectivity and thus e-government. The section also provides pithy recommendations on the way forward for PICTs in creating a more enabling environment for e-government. The second section of the book provides a fascinating insight into the workings of different government sectors in PICTs, and how they are striving to implement ICTs. Overall, the collection provides a timely, useful
and comprehensive insight into the advent of e-government in PICTs. It is a useful tool for students and academics who may also be unfamiliar with the Pacific context.

With these commendations in mind, there are a few caveats to be made. Firstly, while the book recognises the existence of a digital divide in the Pacific, there is inadequate unpacking of the full extent and ramifications that this divide has for e-government. For PICTs, the digital divide has several aspects. Firstly, is the level of internet penetration. Countries such as Fiji and Tonga have internet penetration rates exceeding 50 percent, while other PICTs such as Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Solomon Islands have penetration rates of 8 percent and 11 percent respectively. In addition, there is still a large disparity across PICTs in terms of the costs of broadband and mobile internet packages. For instance, on the Digicel network in PNG, 1 gigabyte of data costs 30 Kina (€7.80c); while in Fiji, Digicel offers packages of 7 gigabytes for 7 FJ$ (€2.90c).

Secondly, while there are references to gender in various chapters, there could have been a more nuanced discussion on how governments are attempting to use ICTs to address gender issues and gaps. The mobile helplines by the Fiji Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation outline the potential that ICTs have in helping governments address such issues.

A third aspect is the use of ICT platforms by individual politicians or citizens to highlight government ineptitudes. In PNG, politicians such as Bryan Kramer and Gary Juffa have resorted to social media to disseminate information to citizens on the machinations of government, in an attempt to make fellow government officials pay more than lip service to good practice.

All in all, the book deserves much praise. Given the constantly evolving nature of the digital sphere, and the rise of social media- fuelled populism around the world, this book is welcomed and one looks forward to a subsequent edition.

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