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Mobile Technology and Governance: PART I

By **Samia Melhem, Senior Operations Officer, World Bank Group**
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Samia Melhem from the World Bank in the first part of her two part series explores the proliferation of mobile technologies and how Governments around the globe can and should harness the technology to deliver better public services.

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The incredible growth in mobile phones has started a new debate and reflection: Why can't we use the ubiquitous mobile phone device as a delivery platform for all sorts of governmental or public information services and hence help foster much needed interaction between government and citizens? With 3.3 Billion mobile users around today, and a growing users base, the prospects and possibilities in using the mobile phones as a two-way service delivery platform are incredible. Mobile phones are more ubiquitous in developing countries than the older media of choice for one way communications : TV sets, or radio. However, just like TV and radio, mobile phones can carry various sources of content, coming from both the private or the public sphere. This article will discuss the latter.

Mobile phones also can help foster an innovative method for citizens to interact with Government. Government can provide needed and sometimes life-saving information to citizens via phone or SMS based alerts. In order to get there, a cultural and organizational change is needed : Governments need to change their attitude towards provision of services and transform their models of providing public information to citizens.

Governments need to create a culture of written and oral accountability and follow-through in order to achieve and maintain such a transformation. With Information services available on devices that can record caller identity , gone is the faceless bureaucracy. In this brave new world of information on the go, the public sector would make available contact names, appointment times, and employees' calendars and make their public servants accountable in providing on time professional and reliable service, transaction or plain reliable information provision. Information provided to citizens would need to be accurate, acceptable across the board and most of all irrefutable by the different parts of government that would be processing the related transaction (registration, payment , renewal, etc). Citizens interested, or concerned in a specific service can and should be able to directly contact the government, by SMS, or Voice, and get their question answered within a specific time frame (varying on the urgency of the request). This changes the paradigm of the amorphous bureaucracy by appointing clear contact points and jurisdictions for specific services and information provided by the government. The benefits are clear: Half the planet of the 3.3 Billion users of mobile telephony could lead safer and better lives with factual information services at their fingertips helping them make educated choices and better decisions, from what crops to plant, to what roads not take during a natural disaster, to how prevent specific diseases, to whom to go to in your district to protect yourself in cases of domestic

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For many committed administrations in developing countries a mobile services-based strategy is an innovative way to showcase to citizens and elected bodies how responsive and serious they are about good governance, and empowering citizens. For many others the change of mindset, the level of efforts needed, and / or the leadership required is simply not there to help achieve the transformation from an information-poor to an information-rich environment. For some governments who perhaps have the financial and organizational skills to operate such a change, the political will is missing, and there is no burning desire to serve, assist, or empower the citizens. These governments are not yet seeing the possibilities that mobile phones offer them to get closer to their citizens by providing a two way communication, information exchange and feedback process; or are in fact concerned or wary of this potential.

On the positive side, we are seeing a lot of changes from governments who are serious about improving the livelihood's of their citizens as these are making a concerted effort to talk to citizens and operators and see what can be offered in a specific platform. The latest ereadiness ranking we have seem from INSEAD and the World Economic Forum Executive Opinion Survey in the latest annual Networked Readiness Index report (http://www.insead.edu/v1/gitr/wef/main/home.cfm) ranks Estonia, Singapore, Canada, Australia, USA etc. amongst top 10 performers in ereadiness and availability of services to their communities, businesses and citizens. These are the same top 25 countries in provision of mobile government services to citizens. The new entrants include Dubai and Qatar who have been achieving remarkable progress in the eGovernment space.

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