
Governments in the Asia-Pacific can enhance human development by improving governance through investment in digital information and communication technology. Nevertheless, it is a challenge to build e-governance in a way that benefits citizens. In a recent book, Amita Singh takes up this issue and argues that investment in e-governance is a critical impulse for reaching the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals. Consequently, e-governance is seen as a means to eradicate poverty; it is not merely a tool to increase efficiency in government, or provide better services to those who already have. There is a ‘need for a citizen-driven technology, the alternative of which is an economic or a technology disaster in public services’ (31). The increased involvement of citizens in e-governance, the institutional reforms needed to undergird it, and the global dimension of internet mediated governance are the main concerns of the book (8). These topics are examined both on a theoretical level, and substantiated by illustrative empirical case studies.

Government maintains a central role in ensuring equality through e-governance. As a background to this point, the reader is taken through a brief history of the internet and introduced to the inequalities that go hand in hand with globalization. It is clear that digital divides are not bridged through technology in itself. Quite the opposite: when powerful groups and transnational commerce hijack government reforms to reinforce their power, technology likely creates yet more divides. To counter this challenge, governments must ‘emerge as leaders to supervise the drift of governance towards digitisation and direct the e-route towards development, equity and sustainability’ (2). In the face of poverty, population explosion, ageing populations, and increasing expectations of citizens, e-governance ‘has arrived as some form of a resuscitation measure to failing institutions or a design to fix immunodeficiency
of governance’ (21). Through internet-mediated government reform, public services – including medical care, driver’s licences, school admissions, financial support, and employment – can all be made more accessible (87). Even so, the benefits run a risk of being systematically skewered and institutional constraints are to blame.

The core institutional constraint is the tendency towards what Singh calls technological determinism, ‘a condition when governments start treating technology as a one-stop solution to all governance problems’ (1). The source of the problem is that e-governance is run by ‘administrators who are engineers’ (6). Additionally, it is a highly male-dominated sphere. Throughout, the book gives special attention to the role of women in e-governance. It is thus pointed out that Pakistan is the only country in South Asia where the e-governance division is headed by a woman (92). The technical and gender biases lead to e-governance projects that fail to innovate and do not include citizens. Paradoxically, these projects become the new ‘best-practices’ because they are assessed by technical personnel. Consequently, it is difficult to turn e-governance in a citizen-centric direction, as ‘organisational reform cannot be achieved by introducing technology alone’ (123). Another institutional factor is the heavy reliance on benchmarking for evaluation of the quality of e-governance. By comparing Sri Lanka and India, Singh exposes how benchmarking indicators fail to capture the importance of institutional reform in underpinning potential for future development. In this light, Sri Lanka has made a laudable effort, whereas it is envisaged that India will run into problems in the long run, because reforms have not addressed institutional deficiencies in the bureaucracy (81–83). The analysis makes clear that to be successful, e-governance must embody an effective interplay between institutions and technology. Accordingly, it is crucial to understand how institutions can be shaped and this leads to the role of ideas, the next theme in the book.

The book illustrates convincingly that ideas matter for e-governance. Most clearly, this theme is unfolded in an in-depth case study, authored by Carol Johnson. The chapter provides a discourse-analytical perspective on the role of information and communication technology in Australian politics (chapter 5). Complementing the previous institutional analysis, the discourse-analytical approach is used to great effect to expose the failure of benchmarking to capture the ideological content of reform in terms of democracy and participation (147). As Singh continues the analysis in the subsequent chapter, the elusiveness of another important idea is examined, namely that of information openness. Asia-Pacific is diverse when it comes to government information openness, and many countries struggle to formulate laws that can pass through their respective legislatures (88-90). The idea that access to information enables