

# E-Government Practices in South American Countries: Echoing a Global Trend or Really Improving Governance? The Experiences of Colombia, Chile, and Brazil

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E-government understood as the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) by public agencies to elicit transparency and accessibility has appeared as a fast-spreading policy choice in governments across the world (Foley and Alfonso 2009; Meijer and Thaens 2009) that are looking for instruments to reinforce open government actions.<sup>1</sup> Developing countries have not been apart from this trend and have started to adopt different technology-based actions attempting to increase transparency and public access to government information and public data (Nawafleh et al. 2012). This process has taken place certainly in response to global technological changes and spillovers, but also in response to a sort of isomorphism trends. Yet, since these practices originated in developed countries (McDermott 2010), their implementation still faces important challenges in countries with weaker institutional frameworks and governance structures (Janssen 2012; Meijer and Thaens 2009).

Thus, considering that this policy transfer is taking place rapidly, it is necessary to explore the process through which e-government has become so important in the public agenda of countries such as those in Latin America. Like many others,

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<sup>1</sup> We adopt the OECD definition of open government, cited by Gavelin et al. (2009, p. 8), as “the transparency of government actions, the accessibility to government services and information and the responsiveness of government to new ideas, demands, and needs.”

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this is a policy choice that is conducted, oftentimes, without significant evidence of its potential effects, as well as in response to idealistic views or symbolic imagery about its benefits. In fact, considering that the countries in this region have shown an unimpressive performance in the matter of citizen participation and government disclosure (Scartascini et al. 2010), it makes sense to make a review of the process of adoption and adaptation of e-government policies in Latin America. In order to do so, we focus on three South American countries with different economies, populations, and institutions which have recently undertook a particular set of open government practices with the common goal of augmenting transparency, citizen participation, and eventually, government legitimacy.

The main research questions of this work are: What is the focus and the strategy in the main e-government practices that central governments have adopted in these three countries? What are the differences, similarities, and particularities of each country's approach? Is it possible to claim that there has been an isomorphism process from the experiences of developed countries models? Finally, how does the degree of evolution in practices in each country relate to the e-government maturity model presented by Layne and Lee (2001)?

To answer those questions, in the first section we present a literature review of the elements that have characterized the adoption of technology-based open-government policies in developing countries. Then, in the second section, we offer a brief description of the methodology we followed to collect data regarding policies in the three analyzed countries. In the third section, we explore policies at the national level and in the fourth section we explore in more detail the adoption of such policies in two particular cases of public organizations in each country. We finish by providing some comparative elements for discussion in the final section.

## 1 Literature Review

E-government practices, as the use of ICT in government, have been said to increase transparency and accountability (Bass and Multon 2010; Janssen et al. 2012; Chun et al. 2010), encourage citizen participation and collaboration (Harrison et al. 2012; Robinson et al. 2010), improve effectiveness and efficiency (Feller et al. 2011; Foley and Alfonso 2009; Welch and Pandey 2006), and advance the relationship between governments and the population (Janssen et al. 2012), among other effects. Other authors have aimed to explore the factors that explain their adoption (Meijer and Thaens 2009), as well as their impact (Harrison et al. 2012), which has not necessarily always been found positive (Coglianese 2009; Feller et al. 2011).

However, there is even less evidence as to how this process is occurring in developing countries or whether the claimed positive effects identified in other cases are also taking place here. Thus, it appears relevant to analyze the traits of this process in developing countries, according to the global emulation of policies that has propelled the adoption of those practices worldwide. This is a process that might

be taking place either without an evidence-based decision process, or without an analysis of their adaptability and impact (Janssen et al. 2012; Nawafleh et al. 2012). Latin American countries are not the exception to this trend of policy learning/isomorphism and have started rapidly in recent years to implement practices to increase transparency through new technologies (Criado 2012).

This process of widespread adoption of such practices has become a matter of analysis in the empirical literature showing, so far, mixed results. A group of authors has illustrated the manifold benefits that arise from improving citizen access to government procedures and official data through technologies and other open access actions. Scholars from different countries have concluded that it brings greater legitimacy and recognition for the actions of governments (Macadar et al. 2012), has a strong potential to change the nature of government itself (Feller et al. 2011) and increases inclusion (Peres and Suarez 2012). It seems that e-government policies help to serve purposes beyond the traditional goals of increase organizational effectiveness or citizen access to the government. In this way, such practices can be desirable for developing countries that usually require creative responses to wicked problems and face stringent trade-offs between what should be done and what can be really enforced or implemented.

On the other hand, another bunch of authors has cautioned about the effects of excessive openness on government actions (Coglianese 2009), and the limitations that the actual implementation can bring in terms of institutional capacity (Rose 2005), human competencies, and skills (Krumova 2012; Prieto et al. 2012) or simply the resistance to the adoption of a whole new strategy of adoption of online civil services by public officials (Savoldelli et al. 2012). Yet, most of these studies are not necessarily empirical. An assessment of the actual effects of e-government practices is still pending. This shows that most countries embark in these processes of policy adoption without being completely aware of the potential negative effects or limitations that they will face down the road.

In spite of the absence of abundant literature regarding this topic in the region, some studies have focused on the adoption of such practices in Latin American countries, showing different results. Tapia and Maldonado (2009) explored the policy approach of the Venezuelan government remarking that it has been mainly state centered, as opposed to other comparable countries where the private sector has had a more visible participation. Prieto et al. (2012) analyze the Colombian case, describing the path of its development and portraying some of the limitations it has shown so far. One interesting element of this article is that they describe how they undertook an ample benchmark process in which they reviewed the policies of several countries in order to identify best practices, which might illustrate a classic case of policy transfer. Gomez et al. (2012) analyzed the adoption of online services by the Mexican government. In their review they argued that international visibility was an important factor for this country to undertake some open government practices. Macadar et al. (2012) developed a case study at the subnational level in Brazil, showing how the process of regional adoption follows the national one and how collaboration plays a primary goal on ensuring appropriate implementation.

In conclusion, the literature review indicates that further literature illustrating the empirical effects of the adoption of e-government tactics through the use of technologies and digital tools is still missing. Like Criado (2012) illustrated, it is evident that a rapid process of policy transfer is taking place in this policy domain. It appears that governments all around the world are more exposed to highly visible international rankings and comparisons, and thus feel more urged or are pushed to make hasty adoptions of policies by copying other countries' processes. In this way, analyzing the similarities of three countries in a similar geographic region, but with particular cultural traits and development processes, can illustrate whether there exist elements that evidence similar adoption paths in governments in neighboring areas.

## 2 Method

In this work, we focused our analysis on actual e-government strategies intended to enhance transparency and citizen participation in central-government processes through new technologies in South America. We aim to explore actions at the national level in order to understand what kind of strategies are followed in such countries in order to increase citizen access through ICTs. In order to do so, we accessed the official websites of national agencies or open-government programs in Colombia, Brazil, and Chile. We rely on official documents and Internet descriptions in order to gather information about the practices of those national administrations. Such revision and the review of some normative information regarding open government allowed us to describe the actual policies that each government is currently pursuing.

In the second section, we aimed to identify similar key organizations (mission, size, activities) in the national governments of Colombia, Brazil, and Chile that have designed policies oriented towards increasing transparency and broader access to public information, as well as citizen participation in government activities and processes through new technologies. To do so, we have chosen two different public organizations in each country. In order to ensure that we have a pair of agencies suitable for cross-country comparison, we aimed to identify two cases that are characterized by strong citizen interaction and high levels of visibility due to their role. Thus, in accordance with such criteria, we decided to focus on one entity involved with tax revenue, and a second one related to private sector regulation.

We recognize that such an approach can produce some limitations in terms of the kind of conclusions that we achieve through the review of practices; however, we think that the cross-country comparison will allow us to understand better particular patterns and trends that have been followed by similar nations with different traits. The fact that this is a recent trend among the governments of developing countries can help us to detect particular events that might have enhanced or hindered such processes in less-developed countries. Identifying such elements is useful to improve the design and implementation of such policies as well as the policy learning across countries.

### **3 Open-Government Policies, Citizen Involvement and New Technologies at the National/Federal Level**

In this section we aim to answer the questions: What is the focus and the strategy in the main open-government practices that central governments have adopted in these three countries? Is there a national agency or department in charge of open-government activities? In general we see that this bunch of South American countries have initiated already comprehensive policies to increase citizen access and disclosure through technology. We will review the experiences, at the national/federal level, of Colombia, Brazil, and Chile before moving to two case studies that we have chosen in order to analyze the adoption of such policies at the organizational level.

#### ***Colombia's National Policy***

The last two governments of Colombia have pursued a more direct strategy toward expanding the use of ICT to increase citizen participation and accountability. It has been very active at the *de jure* level; it has already regulated in manifold ways the use of digital tools for mass information. Recently, it has become more active in following a strategy to increase the utilization of such technologies at different levels. In this regard, one might identify two main stages in the implementation of e-government policy. In a first stage, the initial actions included the issue of two laws and two policy documents by the early 2000s. One of those policy documents, the CONPES 3072/2000, established the fundamentals of a “Connectivity Agenda,” through which the government started a path to expand the use of ICT in government procedures. Then, as Prieto et al. (2012) show, the government issued the Presidential Directive No. 02, which set the ground for a succeeding wave of actions that have defined a more concrete strategy during the last years. Those two documents appear more specific in the government actions towards increasing transparency and accessibility through e-government.

Another policy document in 2010 (Documento CONPES 3650/201) structured more clearly an online government plan, highlighting the characteristics of the two portals that now constitute the main e-government platform: [www.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co](http://www.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co) and [www.contratos.gov.co](http://www.contratos.gov.co). More recently, the Decree 2693 of 2012 established the broad outlines of the government online strategy, defining as head of the strategy the recently reformed Ministry of ICT. Since then, it is evident that this ministry has encouraged other public organizations to introduce open-government actions.

In this way, this ministry designed the “Gobierno En Linea” program, which, according to its website, is aimed to promote citizen participation, transparency, cooperation of state agencies, and increase the country's competitiveness. The strategy was also to be implemented by all public organizations at the national level, but it also started as a new program with in-house capacity. It has a staff of 60 employees divided into five different units, each of them in charge of a different

side of the open government strategy. The program showed an important increase in its budget allocation in 2012, showing the government support for the adoption of such strategies.

Furthermore, this approach has already shown some advancement towards increasing the use of technologies for citizen interaction. One clear benefit is that the [gobiernoenlinea.gov.co](http://gobiernoenlinea.gov.co) portal unified, for the first time in the country, the access to information procedures and services from several agencies. As a result, now users can access a single platform to perform a wide array of procedures, including services for citizens (e.g., permits and licenses, ID, public utilities), for businesses (exports and imports permits, enterprise register), and public servants (reference letters, public employment, contracting, and public procurement etc.) among others. Another interesting project is the educational website [vive.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co](http://vive.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co) which emphasizes a series of procedures that can help Colombians to save time in public paperwork through educational strategies.

On the other hand, in terms of open data policies, the government developed the portal [www.datos.gov.co](http://www.datos.gov.co) with the purpose of gathering in one single place all the data and statistical information published by Colombian public agencies. Similarly, it has developed a complementary portal [www.aplicaciones.gov.co](http://www.aplicaciones.gov.co) which concentrates 64 third-party applications that are useful for use of public information. Although both portals are in beta (not definitive) version they have already become a source of greater government disclosure.

Finally, there is one interesting case of a website intended to increase the participation in government. The website [www.urnadecristal.gov.co](http://www.urnadecristal.gov.co) is the portal for the state to increase and enhance accountability through allowing citizens to complain, have a say about government policies and/or make suggestions regarding particular services. In the website, citizens can easily publish comments and interact with the organizations and their public officials. It also allows contact between citizens through different social networks and encourages their participation in government procedures. Although so far there are no measures of how effective is such strategy in generating more effective participation, it seems evident that Colombian nationals now have more ample tools to participate or at least be heard by government organizations thanks to the greater use of information technologies and digital tools.

How is this strategy working at the organizational level of Colombia's central government? The analysis of the websites of 16 ministries and other six main agencies at the central level of Colombia's government reveals that still there is a lot of heterogeneity in the adoption of e-government strategies. Although some of these agencies show their information in a friendly and accessible manner to users, most of them have evident deficiencies that still hinder citizens' access and transparency. It is very frequent to notice in those pages outdated information, inactive links, and/or old-fashioned platforms and services. Similarly, it is noticeable that most pages do not portray clearly the platforms for user participation, something that could hamper access and user participation on the site.

Likewise, there is no uniformity regarding the official names and labels of similar public services in different organizations. This makes it evident that a more comprehensive approach is still needed. Just to mention one of the flaws, in most

organizations' pages some links were disabled, outdated, or connected to other websites whose content is damaged or outdated. Nonetheless, one remarkable fact is that almost all the websites of those central level organizations have direct links with the portal [gobiernoenlinea.gov.co](http://gobiernoenlinea.gov.co).

### ***Brazil's National Policy***

E-government in Brazil is a federal government program. The executive committee of e-government (created by Decreto de 18 de Outubro de 2000) regulates actions towards making government more open to citizens through ICT. The whole process started in the 2000s with the creation of a so-called Interministerial Working Group aiming to examine and to propose policies, and guidelines to allow new forms of electronic interaction with the citizen. Nowadays, the executive committee is under the supervision of the ministry of planning and has several participants from other ministries. According to the executive committee website (<http://www.governoeletronico.gov.br/o-gov.br/principios>), the main aims of the committee are: to promote citizenship and digital inclusion, to encourage the use of free software, to employ knowledge management as a means to articulate e-government and public policies, to optimize resources, and to integrate actions with other levels of government (regional and local). The Brazilian e-government structure has the executive committee, which is a technical committee in charge of conducting and controlling open-government projects, along with the Secretariat of Logistic and Information Technology.

As of this moment, the Brazilian government has several projects for improving citizens' access and transparency:

- Accessibility: The citizens have access to software and documents that help them to build websites in order to interact with government web portals
- Broadband/Info via: A program intended to expand high-speed Internet coverage in order to facilitate the access to government websites and services.
- Open data: Publication of easy-to-use government procedures aiming to make them more available and understandable to the citizens. This aims to improve transparency, participation, and the possibility of generating knowledge through collaborative scientific investigations.
- Electronic purchases system: A series of systems developed for fulfilling and monitoring electronic purchases. It includes a suppliers' database and information about bidding, procurement, and information about goods, services, transportation tickets, and allowances.
- Interinstitutional agreements: In order to improve transparency and social control of the resources transferred to states and municipalities, the Brazilian government created the federal government inter-institutional portal.
- Domain management: The executive committee regulates the creation of ".gov" domains in order to keep it safe of fraud and bad use
- Government to government: It is an attempt to make the whole network of government systems interconnected and functional



- Digital inclusion: It is an ambitious public policy aiming to take digital inclusion to every citizen in the country. It encompasses initiatives such as broadband to schools, computer to everyone (aiming to reduce the price of laptops), and so on.
- Free software: It is a strategy for generating knowledge and intelligence in this domain in order to reduce costs by expanding the competition among software producers.

This indicates that the Brazilian government has started the whole process of adoption of advanced open-government practices through technology, although most of them apparently are still developing and increasing access to citizens.

### *Chile's National Policy*

Chile is a highly centralized state. This trait can also be found in the manner in which the general e-government agenda has unfolded. Starting in 2008, the Chilean government enacted the Law 20.285, and since then a group of regulations has been put in place to implement the ability of citizens to access public information.<sup>2</sup> Public agencies have to abide by these regulations, making access to public data easier for all citizens. Similar to Brazil's and Colombia's, in the Chilean approach to e-government initiatives are linked to two main concepts: open access to public information and ICT to increase public participation in government activities. In the first domain, the milestone is the enactment of the Freedom of Access to Public Information Law (20.285) in 2008. This law opened public agencies to public scrutiny, allowing citizens to access information regarding topics such as salaries and contractors. It also defined fines for public managers who were unwilling to provide information considered as public. The FOI (freedom of access) law made a significant change in defining standards for public officials in terms of what has to be available on line, and how citizens could acquire public data. The 20.285 law was conceived under the idea of "active transparency." The government has to make information available regardless of the intention by citizens to require it.

The second legal initiative aligned with open government initiatives is the associations and participation in public management law (20.500) in 2010. This initiative is aimed at creating the conditions for public participation in public management and "fostering a culture of co-responsibility, promoting and providing orientation in the involvement of citizens in improving efficiency and effectiveness of public policies" ([www.gobiernoabierto.cl](http://www.gobiernoabierto.cl)). In 2011, the Chilean government became part of the open-government partnership (OGP). Since then, it has been working on several projects to meet the OGP standards in five areas: improving public services, increasing public integrity, improving the efficiency of public expenditure, creating

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<sup>2</sup> Several regulations have been in place by the Ministry of Finance, the Transparency Council, among others, to improve the system in terms of standards, procedures and applicability. The web site <http://www.gobiernotransparente.cl/asistente/documentos.php> provides a list of these regulations.



safer communities, and increasing the institutional responsibility.<sup>3</sup> In 2013, the Chilean government issued a report presenting improvements for each aforementioned area. Most of the information regarding this participation is available on the website <http://www.gobiernoabierto.cl/>, where citizens can have the chance to access public data, share ideas to improve public agencies, and make queries, among other tools.

In spite of these legal and governmental initiatives, the real impact among citizens is still limited. For instance, the Transparency Council created by the Law 20.285, presented a study where only 12% of the sample knows that a specific institution exists to allow freedom of access to public data.<sup>4</sup> In normative terms, citizens are interested in these issues, but the real and potential impact in terms of accountability is still limited. So far, Chile appears to be in a similar stage than the Brazilian counterpart, most programs are still in a preliminary phase.

#### **4 Country Cases of Electronic Government Practices at the Agency Level**

In order to explore the organizational adoption of such national guidelines we decided to analyze the cases of two specific organizations in each of the three countries. To do so, we have chosen two different public organizations in each country. Thus, in order to ensure that we have a duo of agencies suitable for cross-country comparison, we aimed to identify two cases that are characterized by strong citizen interaction and high levels of visibility due to their role. Thus, according to such criteria, we decided to focus on one entity involved with tax revenue, and a second one related to private sector regulation.

Accordingly, the first case that we have chosen for comparison is the tax collection agency of each country. We selected such agencies as good cases for analysis considering the frequent and strong interactions they perform with citizens. By analyzing their e-government strategies, we aimed to identify how such organizations have improved control, collection, and transparency by making easier the participation of citizens and taxpayers into their processes through digital tools. On the other hand, we have chosen the aviation regulation authorities/agencies, which are now in the spotlight for their role in passenger safety and the performance of airline companies and are subject to strong demands of disclosure and transparency by the private actors they regulate. Thus, in the following section we explore the Colombian, Brazilian, and Chilean cases of e-government adoption at the tax revenue and the civil authority agencies.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/countries/chile>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.consejotransparencia.cl/chile-es-mejor-pais-de-lo-que-los-chilenos-creen/consejo/2013-03-14/113208.html>.

## ***Colombian Cases***

### **Tax and Customs Office (DIAN)**

The website of the Tax and Customs Office of Colombia (DIAN—Spanish acronym) allows 35 procedures and services regarding to taxes, 40 procedures related to customs clearance, three for users abroad, and five regarding exchange controls. In terms of information systems for the user, the citizen can access five different microsities to make direct queries regarding tax issues. Each of these links is properly designed and guides the user through specific steps to achieve the desired result. However, despite the importance of these “microsites,” these are not in a visible location on the main page of the entity, which makes access to these services is very challenging.

With respect to direct citizen services, there are 36 different procedures that can be queried and placed online (classified by the type of procedure: tax, customs, and exchange control). They may also perform procedures regarding imports and exports. Similarly, the users can download forms and obtain information regarding sales and auctions. The website also provides access to the main taxes software, the MUISCA system, which provides a user platform for citizens to make comments and get timely response by the body. The website of this organization states that users can consult the DIAN through ten different channels including telephone, electronic mail, chat, and virtual forums.

It can be generally argued that this organization has a developing platform to increase citizen participation and transparency. The portal hosts on its homepage the most important services and consultation that can be reached by citizens. The DIAN has strong involvement in social networks. Accessed on 27 March 2013, the social network accounts show that the DIAN has 7,529 followers on Facebook, 17,372 followers on Twitter (2,911 tweets), and 65,090 video views on its YouTube channel. Finally, we note that most links are updated (with some exceptions), it is possible to view basic information in English (mission, vision, etc.) and there is information that guides the user in terms of accessories and browsers required for proper operation of the site.

### **Civil Aviation Authority of Colombia (Aerocivil)**

The website of the Civil Aviation Authority of Colombia shows complete information about airlines and passenger procedures that can be downloaded in PDF files, Word, Excel, etc. Similarly, within the online information services, there are information about airfares, itineraries, airport information, special permits, and information related to passengers, pilots, and airlines. The website also portrays information for suppliers, entities state officials, and airmen, but the links appear to be disabled (accessed March 2013). With respect to aviation authority, it is remarkable that it provides information regarding the licensing process of aeronautical personnel, key

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