

REFLECTIONS ON POLICIES FOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF IS IMPLEMENTATIONS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

[based on the Albanian experience]

Neki Frasheri

There is a question without a clear answer - "Rapid IS development will contribute to narrow or extend the gap between developed and developing countries?". One thing is quite clear, the lack of IS will contribute to extend the gap between developed and developing. In this context the effectiveness of IS implementations in developing countries is the key to get the right answer. Especially in the case of Albania, a country which after 45 years of self isolation, it is diving in a liberalized transition situation. The reflections presented here are based in these two factors - being a country in development and in transition [from one political-social system to another]. The implementation of IS requires financial investments and human resources. Different sources for investments in developing countries are such as:

- Local economy. For many countries this economy is so little developed that it has no interest and possibilities to make important investments in IS. Moreover, in Albania even the banks do little use of IS.
- Foreign governments and international organizations. There are a lot of problems lied with the effectiveness of their investments as it will be described hereunder.
- Local governments. Local resources are limited, and the effectiveness of their usage is a keen problem. Moreover, the policy of government may be in reality a killing one despite its formal aspects.
- Human resources may be scare, perhaps concentrated in a small number of [academic] organizations. In cases as Albania and other ex-socialist countries, there were a great number of specialists, but during recent years many of them have left the country and R&D institutions once flourishing now try to survive.

Which are problems related with investments of foreign organizations - there are two main problems: the lack of knowledge on the local reality, and the possibility to be under the control of local governments. In the first case foreign people may be not able to find the right local people, they may spend a lot of means to do things that for local people may be quite easy, they may direct their investments in fields of interest from their point of view which may be wrong from the local point of view. In the second case foreign investments, being under the control of local governments, may be trapped in the bureaucracy and becomes a prey of political and economic interests of certain circles. Which may be the solutions for these problems - it is an opened question. My personal opinion is that it is necessary to act as the old expression says "you may ask a hundred of people, then decide by yourself what to do [but ask before]".

Local problems are related with the government policy and the situation of national infrastructure. The government policy has big impact for the implementation of IS itself, as well as for the recreation of the infrastructure. In this. Context, a very important question arises - which is the real (!) policy of the government, to push forward the development of the country or just to spent the money. A key point to understand the rightness of the government policy is its attitude towards local public R&D institutions.

Do developing countries need to have public academic and R&D institutions? This question arises for a specific country if a policy of privatization and liberalization is followed by the government. May happen that the government is more attracted to give different IS related projects to private firms of new [temporary] organizations, abandoning public institutions and their experience. In this context we may repeat the question: "do we need public institutions?". There are some positive arguments why we need such institutions:

- public institutions in a society in transition are relatively more stable compared with private firms,
- it may be impossible to follow a successful policy on development of IS without knowledge.
- it may be difficult to keep IS in public administration without support from non-commercial R&D people.

Public institutions may serve to collect the knowledge the society needs for its development, when in the same time private firms will collect the knowledge mainly for their immediate profit (a characteristics of countries in transition). Having a small support from the state, public institutions may survive better in transition conditions. In this way public institutions may contribute in keeping running and developing IS-s in the public administration (as databases of population, insurance, real estates, GIS etc.), in a time when private companies [in countries in transition] may flourish and disappear quickly.

It is possible to find the right position of public institutions, without damaging the IS market, by charging them with the management of principal projects of the government. That does not mean that everything “big” and “scientific” will be done by public R&D institutions. First of all inside the government there is a very important field of research - to understand what people in government really need, and what are the real possibilities of success taking into account the financial means and human resources with their psychology and interests, taking into account that sometimes official policies are not quite compatible with what people really needs (and they may even not know exactly what they really need). Secondly, the division of big projects in relatively small and independent tasks may be one way to increase the number of people and organizations involved and to assure the right opponent within the project itself, making the results more stable. This concept for the management of big projects leaves place for everybody to have its share of work and profit.

It is necessary to understand that the success of IS is not the immediate result, but it is its longliveness. It is quite different with, let say building constructions, where the results of the project appear immediately after its termination and after it there is no more place for constructors (is they did the job well). It is necessary to understand IS as “living creatures” which grows up in time, may have “healthy” problems, may enter in relations with other IS-s. All this means that IS-s need a permanent support from specialized teams, having the necessary knowledge accumulated during the implementation of IS and its development. Depending on the depth of interventions in a running IS, it can be done by local staff but it may need help from more technical teams. If the local staff, being part of public administrate, may be charged with the routine maintenance of IS, it seems not quite economic to keep this local staff big enough to be able to undertake periodical “radical” development - a task which may be charged to always in place public R&D institutions to take care about.

Which may be the right relations between government, public institutions and private firms? Even if supported by the state budget, public institutions must have clear independence from the government both in administrative and technical matters. In this way public R&D institutions may have the necessary degree of freedom to make the opponent of policy and to avoid the phenomena when political decisions may lead to technical catastrophes. It is necessary to try to privatize public R&D institutions? In such case they will lost their advantage - the relative stability in turbulent times of transition and, even if they will keep their profile, they will be more interested to be competitive in a free market leaving out of attention what may be very important for the society as a whole. Instead of real privatization, elements of management used by private firms may be applied to public institutions to make them really interested in the results of their work.

It is important that government, public R&D institutions and private firms may be in a positive and constructive opponent with each other, keeping the development and transition of the country in a reasonable equilibrium. To achieve this equilibrium it is important to have the right legislation, and the good will of the government to think a little for the fate of the country. If this equilibrium will be missing, the future of IS will be very doubtful. There will be a lot of money and human resources spent for things that may flourish for a couple of months but which may be forgotten in six months. Such phenomena will have grave and negative impact not only because there will not be IS functional and useful, but the whole social, political and economic structures of the country will be compromised making questionable the possibility for the country to overcome the transition phase and undergo a real and deep development. We have here the same question as in the beginning of this paper: “will be the gap between developed and developing countries narrowed or extended?”

Every developing country has its specifics and differences from other countries. In this context it would be catastrophic to try to transfer models and solutions from one country to the other - it is something as in ecology when a quite new specie is introduced in a certain region and which may provoke a chain of unpredicted ecological phenomena. It is necessary to understand the country, and at the same time to know the experiences of other countries, and based on these combined knowledge to find specific local solutions which must be compatible with the local reality and at the same time not to repeat similar errors made in other realities. In this context a public debate on arguments raised in this paper may be extremely useful both for technicians and politicians in developing countries and it may give a strong positive impact to improve the effectiveness of IS implementations in developing countries.