Uruguay's Digital Development Policy

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Context

At the turn of the 21st century, only 30 percent of Latin American citizens had access to the Internet. In recent years, this number has doubled to 62 percent, but the gains are unevenly distributed (ITU 2015). The region still lags Europe and North America in network speeds and full mobile access. Digitally connecting the hemisphere remains one of the key challenges for Latin America to fully leverage the potential of information and communication technology (ICT) to boost productivity and enhance government efficiency. The nation of Uruguay is a notable outlier in these regional trends. In the early 2000s, the government recognized the economic and social gains from a web-connected citizenry and devised a far-reaching plan to improve the country's mobile and Internet infrastructure. At the time, only 10 percent of Uruguay's population had access to the web, and broadband speeds were much slower than in developed countries. As a small country, heavily dependent on exports of beef and agricultural goods, Uruguay saw digital connectivity as an opportunity to speed up its economic development and modernize its engagement with everyday citizens through e-government services (Bilbao-Osorio, Dutta, and Lanvin 2013).

Development Challenge

The challenge for Uruguay was increasing Internet connectivity and improving government services through ICT.

PROJECT DATA

SECTOR:
Technology

DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE:
Increasing Internet connectivity and improving government services through information and communication technology

DELIVERY CHALLENGES:
Complex intergovernmental and intragovernmental relations and lack of awareness and communication campaigns

COUNTRY:
Uruguay

PROJECT DURATION:
2007–present

REGION:
Latin America

This note was produced by Carlos Sabatino at the World Bank, from an original case study published by the Centre for Public Impact. The original case study is available here.

The Intervention

Uruguay took the first steps toward improving digital connectivity in 2000 with the launch of the National Committee for Information Society. That committee drafted the Digital Agenda for Uruguay (ADU), a multistakeholder vision with concrete goals for the country's digital development. In 2007, to achieve this program, the government of President Tabaré Vásquez created the Agency for Electronic Government and Information Society (AGESIC) as the institutional home of this agenda. With strong support from the president's office and in coordination with other national agencies—including the National Telecommunications Administration, the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the National Bureau of Civil Service—AGESIC launched numerous innovative programs that have improved citizen connectivity and government responsiveness (AGESIC 2011). As part of its Plan Ceibal, the agency improved ICT access in primary schools by training teachers in new digital pedagogies and distributing 1.1 million free laptops to school-age children in need (Radakovich et al. 2013). AGESIC has also greatly improved Internet access for low-income citizens through free Wi-Fi areas across the country and free low-bandwidth home Internet plans. Today, approximately 67 percent of Uruguayan households have a computer, and 64 percent of households can access the Internet (IDB 2015). Moreover, 77 percent of the country's residents have cellular phones.

In addition, AGESIC has helped simplify access to key government services through ICT. Initiatives such as the "Business in a Day" online portal have reduced the time it takes to create business from 65 days to 5 days. Likewise, an online platform for presenting complaints to the police has reduced waiting times from 4 hours to approximately 15

minutes (IDB 2015). The success of these programs has helped the country create momentum for widening the scope of ADU. Now in its fourth iteration (2016–20), the program seeks to offer more direct and concrete benefits to citizens through the digital improvement of government services.

Delivery Challenges

This delivery note analyzes the following key challenges the project faced during implementation, and it examines how they were overcome:

- **Complex intergovernmental and intragovernmental relations.** The biggest challenge for AGESIC was interagency coordination. As a producer of technical knowledge and policy, AGESIC relied on other ministries and agencies to implement e-governance programs. These departments were wary of costs of introducing new technologies and were particularly sensitive to the new work processes entailed. In addition, a lack of interoperable databases and platforms made it difficult for the ministries and agencies to collaborate and develop standardized e-government services. Furthermore, the initial mandate of the AGESIC was to set up the necessary infrastructure to achieve connectivity goals, but it did not provide clear administrative powers to monitor the implementation of e-government services.
- **Lack of awareness and communication campaigns.** Dozens of e-government initiatives have been developed in the past decade, yet citizen participation with these tools is still relatively low. Many citizens are unaware of alternative digital services meant to simplify routine government requests. Those include as the Single Collection System for Vehicle Registration, which allows for vehicle registration titling and fee payment online. Other citizens are aware of e-government services, but they lack confidence to complete the procedures. A survey conducted by AGESIC reported that 65 percent of Uruguayan adults thought they lacked the ability to complete administrative processes online and that only 26 percent had used such services in the past year (IDB 2015). The number is even smaller among citizens with only primary education. According to Uruguay's National Institute of Statistics, 70 percent of Internet users in Uruguay make online purchases. Hence, the government recognized that there was ample room to grow in adopting and using e-government tools.

Addressing the Delivery Challenges

The following steps were undertaken to resolve challenges of **intergovernmental and intragovernmental relations**:

- By recognizing the challenges of coordination and by aiming to reduce institutional fragmentation, the government has expanded the mandate of AGESIC to better coordinate implementing e-governance projects. In July 2015, it issued decree 184/015 which required "putting central government procedures and services, and those of other public entities, online." The decree entrusted AGESIC in the "directing, organizing, structuring, executing, and monitoring the initiative," thereby empowering it to "issue the relevant technical standards and regulations, of compulsory observance throughout central government."
- The high-profile political support for AGESIC and the digital agenda from the president's office through multiple administrations have also helped to clarify roles and leadership, thus improving collaboration. A sign of this support has been adequate funding for AGESIC, which grew from 30 employees in 2007 to more than 180 by 2015. This independent funding has allowed the agency to pilot and implement e-governance projects directly, which reduced cost concerns and provided greater flexibility in implementation.
- AGESIC has also introduced interoperability platforms that help create multiagency services by connecting information systems across government departments. This connection has reduced operating costs and standardized data storage for citizen activities, while it provides a platform to securely access and protect sensitive citizen data.

The following steps were undertaken to resolve challenges of **awareness and communication**:

- The government has launched more high-profile information campaigns to incentivize citizen use of online administrative services. These campaigns have included greater advertisement of services on social media platforms, printed materials, and in-person trainings in Citizen Service Points (called PACs) (OGP 2015). These PACs are small offices in urban areas that provide free wireless Internet and help citizens access and procure government services.
- By recognizing the greater challenges faced by low-income citizens when using online services, AGESIC has also launched several support alternatives to access e-governance services. Those alternatives include dedicated phone

lines, in-person trainings at PACs, and user-friendly websites with clear steps and procedures. These support channels seek to help citizens with lower incomes and less education strengthen their knowledge and self-confidence for completing procedures online.

References

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