Call Centres and Their Role in E-governance:  
A Developing Country Perspective

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Abstract

Poor governance has been undermining the service delivery and development initiatives undertaken by the majority of developing countries. Many of these governments have now started using e-governance as a mechanism to engender change in their governance systems by achieving development goals and ensure better service delivery to citizens and other stakeholders. Arguably, it also ensures improved public sector efficiency, accountability and responsiveness. Call centres have been used in recent years by a host of developing countries including India, Korea and Malaysia, as an e-governance tool to achieve the above-mentioned objectives. The paper argues that a successful adoption of call centres by governments has the potential to provide better service delivery at reduced costs, increase the public sector efficiency, minimise corruption and improve accountability, transparency and responsiveness of the public sector. It is, however, acknowledged that such initiatives in developing countries are fraught with numerous challenges that include the lack of infrastructure, low teledensity, lack of political commitment and vision, bureaucratic inefficiency and administrative corruption. Based on the extant literature and available evidence from a range of developing countries, a tentative framework is proposed to encapsulate the nature and operation of call centres as an e-governance tool. The framework also identifies the challenges call centres may face, the external environment they are influenced by, and the role they play in achieving better governance.

Key Words:
information and communication technology (ICT); e-governance; call centre; developing country; good governance.
Introduction

The use of call centres by the business community has already become a common phenomenon in both developed and developing countries. In recent years, call centre industry has experienced a phenomenal growth worldwide (As-Saber, et al., 2004). Call centres provide fast, efficient and relatively cheaper business solutions to business enterprises in managing their day-to-day activities. Similar to business entities, governments all around the world need to provide various services to their citizens and other stakeholders. In this connection, there appears to be a reasonable prospect of implementing business-type call centres as an e-governance tool in delivering better services including the dissemination of important information to citizens and other stakeholders. From this perspective, ‘e-governance could be defined as the application of information and communication technology (ICT) in establishing interaction between the different levels of government, business, and the citizenry’ (ADBI, 2007:1).

Bhatnagar (2004:19) acknowledges that ‘any kind of use of information and communication technology’ in delivering service to, and communicating with, citizens and other stakeholders could fall within the realm of e-governance. ICT, however, encompasses a wide range of technological applications such as computing systems; digital broadcasting networks; telecommunications technologies including telephony; and electronic information resources including the internet and CD-ROMs (Selwyn, 2002; University of Oxford, 2007). ICT being the nucleus of e-governance, is also the key resource and driver of setting up call centres. Call centres carefully utilise some of these ICT components. In a call centre, employees receive inbound and make outbound calls using automatic call distributors (ACDs) or predictive dialing system (Taylor and Bain, 1999). Call centres are increasingly using the VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) network to combine both the voice network (traditional telephone network) and data network into one integrated network for all communication needs (The Contact, 2005).

As call centre activities range from mere response to a simple query or information dissemination to the delivery of a complex business solution, the operators may also need to rely on live portals of the organisation including intranet with specialised access to classified information on key service areas of the organisation. It often complements email communication, web portals and various web-based service provisions. From a citizen’s perspective, it adds some human involvement that reassures citizens of the authenticity and effectiveness of the web-based service provisions. Considering such potentials, governments in many countries have already started using call centres as an e-governance tool (UK National Audit Office, 2002; Yong & Tan, 2003; Contact News Asia, 2008; i4donline, 2008; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008) Customer Service delivery by local government is seen to become a major growth area for the call centre industry in the 21st century (UK Improvement and Development Agency, 2008)

Discussion of this paper begins with an overview of call centres from both public and private sector perspectives. It will be followed by a discussion on the role and necessity of e-governance and its extent of adoption in various developing countries. From a developing country perspective, it will then examine if any pattern is emerging with respect to the use of call centres in e-governance activities. In light of
this deliberation, a tentative framework will be proposed. A discussion of associated limitations of the proposed framework will follow together with some of its implications for business and government in developing countries.

Call Centre, Its Evolution and Prospects: An Overview

In its research report on call centres, the Union Research Centre on Organization and Technology (URCOT) of Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (2000:1) adopted the definition of call centre as ‘an operation that uses telephone and computer technology to deliver services to customers’. The report primarily emphasized on inbound or outbound telephone traffic handled by call centre employees. However, Taylor and Bain (1999) described the customer service oriented functions of call centre employees through the concurrent use of telephones and computers.

Starting with the minimum requirement of using telephones, call centre activities may extend to include the use of Internet in the era of technological advancement primarily through the use of e-mail and VoIP. Call centres, as communication networking hubs of business, covers functions ranging from telemarketing in an outbound context to acting as help desk in an inbound context (Kinder, 2001). Butler (2004:xviii) kept the notion of call centre ‘as customer contact centres, customer support centres, helpdesks, and derogatorily, as cost centres’, without distinguishing between the inbound and outbound contexts of call centres. From a government’s perspective, it could be considered as a device to create awareness about, or surveying, the households in terms of their opinions about specific government policy measures and service provisions on the one hand; and respond to specific queries and provide limited service offerings to its citizens on the other. In a survey conducted by Noetica in 2002, call centres were predicted to be integral part of e-government (Noetica, 2002).

In terms of business administration, management and marketing, call centre is a relatively new phenomenon (As-Saber et al., 2004). However, since its emergence in 1980s, the call centre industry has expanded rapidly across North America, Europe, Australia and Asia (Taylor and Bain, 2004). Almost two-third of worldwide customer contacts are now carried out by call centres (Day, 2000). Successful call centres are focused on efficient operation, with the endeavour of customers’ and shareholders’ value creation and optimisation. The efficiency, in this regard, lies not only on effective and prompt responses to customer calls, but also on originality, high skills and precision in setting up and implementation of organisational goals and strategies (As-Saber et al., 2004; Brown & Maxwell, 2002; Deery & Kinnie, 2002; Holman, 2003).

Burgess and Connell (2004) argue that one of the main forces behind the wide adoption of call centres is the flexible nature of their operation. Its use has evolved from internal business re-organization which is adaptable to both public and private sector operations, in both market and non-market activities (Burgess & Connell, 2004). ICT could be seen as an enabler to create such flexibility and significantly improve the public sector performance with better citizen access to public services and improved quality of service delivery (Yong and Koon, 2003). Stahl (2005) opined that government might be the largest user of ICT and has the major power in regulating the technology. From this perspective, it could be assumed that the use of
ICT in call centres by the government would be relatively less complex in terms of regulation and convenience. Moreover, customer-centric use of call centres by private businesses could be considered analogous to citizen-centric approach of any government’s e-governance project. Call centres increase the efficiency and profitability of business. With a similar use of such centres in an e-governance project, government also has the opportunity to increase efficiency in its overall governance process and make its commercial activities more viable.

While discussing the location of call centres, As-Saber et al. (2004) mentioned that to serve the need of local companies, the location might either be within the firm’s domestic jurisdiction or companies based in one country could use the services of call centres based in another country. Businesses, however, could choose locations of their call centres depending on their business advantages and strategic directions. The question might arise whether government departments and enterprises have similar focus on call centres. The locational advantage factor of call centre outsourcing might not be observed as an important factor for government call centres as the related theories of international business that are prevailing at this moment are focused on call centre operations of private businesses (As-Saber et al., 2004). For that reason, it may be argued that a line should be drawn between public and private call centres.

In a report, the National Office for the Information Economy of Australia argued that despite some of the comparable activities, government call centres are different from private sector call centres in terms of the knowledge base and the skills sets (NOIE, 2003). The report opined that call centres of Commonwealth of Australia are more knowledge and skill intensive compared to the private sector call centres. Australian government organizations such as Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), Austrade and AusIndustry could respond to more than three-fourth of the inbound calls they receive from citizens within 20 seconds. Australian Taxation service and Australian Customs service also operate call centres fulfilling the requirements of both G2B and G2C linkages (NOIE, 2003). In a separate study, American Management Systems and Purdue University Center for Customer-Driven Quality reported that public sector call centres in the United States perform better than private sector call centres’ B2C and B2B operations.

However, in another survey, Kinder (2001) found that the intensity of the use of call centres by public sector is less than that of private sector. He argued that the technology used in earlier models of call centres were less appropriate for the public sector operations than the private sector. Nevertheless, the adoption of newer model like service solutions integrated call centre (SSICC) model has shown an increment of call centre application by public sector (Kinder, 2001). The reports on public sector call centres’ performance and the study of Kinder (2001) show that future prospect of call centre use by governments would be positive. These findings emphasise the aspects of ‘e-commerce’ and ‘e-service’ delivery within the public sector enterprises through the use of call centres.

E-governance and Call Centres

Although e-governance and e-government are used interchangeably in most of the literatures, Saxena (2005:499) argues that an important distinction exists between e-governance and e-government as ‘government is the institution itself, whereas
governance is a broader concept describing forms of governing which are not necessarily in the hands of the formal government’. This paper deliberates on the role of call centres within the scope of governance, with a primary focus on e-governance. Holmes (2001) argues that a special and improved public service delivery that assists the economic development of a country might require a movement for e-governance. E-governance of a government focuses on services covering the term ‘e-business’ or ‘e-commerce’, which is broader than the usual ‘e-commerce’ as it not only comprises business to citizen (B2C) link but also government to citizen (G2C), government to business (G2B), government to government (G2G) and business to business (B2B) links.

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA, 2003) has put emphasis on creating public value through e-governance, which is focused on providing services, passing laws and regulations and taking necessary actions as per citizen’s preferences. Creation of public value does not depend entirely on measuring performance of policies and public institutions or making decisions related to resource allocation. Selecting the proper method of delivery is one of the decisive factors in successful creation of public value (UNDESA, 2003). Call centres together with other service delivery channels could consequently be considered as important e-governance tool which could complement widespread dependence on Internet-based operations. In this connection, Bhatnagar (2004:19) acknowledged that e-governance could be ‘used in a loose manner to describe the legacy of any kind of use of information and communication technology’. Telephony and associated technologies used in call centres, therefore, form parts of e-governance.

As call centres have the potential to facilitate better service provisions, government departments and enterprises are increasingly becoming interested in using call centres as an e-governance tool. It could provide them with opportunities to provide better services to citizens as well as engage them in policy making and implementation dialogues. There are, however, many factors that play a role in both governance and technology-readiness of a country where a suggestion for call centre as an e-governance tool might be viewed as ambitious and ambiguous. Nonetheless, evidence from both developed and developing countries suggest otherwise.

For example, in countries where governments own service operations in areas such as telecommunication, power supply or transportation, service provisions are treated as commercial and customer-oriented and constitute a part of governments’ service obligations to their citizens, e-governance has already started playing an important role. Other essential government functions such as tax collection and infrastructure developments, maintenance of law and order and providing social security, are not falling behind. When these entities provide service to citizens as well as collect revenue, both B2C and G2C links are established simultaneously. In this way G2G, G2B and B2B links could be established through e-governance with a focus on revenue-based and customer-oriented service delivery.

The use and benefit of call centre as an e-governance component can justify the framework mentioned by Ho (2002) that shows the shifting of bureaucratic paradigm to e-government paradigm. Call centres can assist the shifting process as the bureaucratic red tape could be minimized through open and flexible call centre operations. In this connection, based on a systematic content analysis of 270
municipal web sites in California, Musso et al (2000) provide a theoretical framework that makes distinction between business reform model and civic reform model in governance mechanism where technology is used. Based on this distinction, Musso et al (2000) further argue that technology driven reform processes could be based on entrepreneurial (good management) or participatory (good democracy) model of governance structure.

The role of call centres within the governance structure is different to the role of web sites as call centres provide direct telephone contacts between citizens and the public service providers. Although, the use of call centres within the public sector is still in its embryonic stage and fraught with significant challenges, call centres have the potential to provide a better, more democratic option compared to web-based information sharing and service delivery system. As call centre activities within the e-governance network are likely to ensure better service delivery, improved access to information, enhanced two-way communication and encourage e-democracy through citizen’s participation in the decision making process, it could be argued that the model of using call centre for e-governance neither follows a complete business reform model nor a civil reform model, rather it follows a hybrid model comprising of ingredients from both models.

Heeks (2008) does not agree that e-government should only have the involvement of Internet related applications, which some argue as prerequisites of e-governance. E-governance consists of three different domains namely (a) e-administration, (b) e-society, and (c) e-citizens and e-services (Ntiro, 2000; Heeks, 2008). According to Heeks (2008), it is important that all of these domains are taken into consideration while charting for improving in government processes, building external interactions and connecting citizens. He further argues that both talking and listening to citizens remain as important segments of the process with respect to informing citizens of public sector activities and incorporating valuable inputs from them while preparing policies of public interest. While Internet does not entirely provide this opportunity, call centres can play a significant e-governance role in this regard.

Singapore presents a good example. While discussing the case of e-governance in Singapore, Siew and Leng (2003) argued that only the addition of the letter ‘e’ with governance, which aims to link technology use with governance, is not the fundamental goal of the term ‘e-governance’. They consider that the basic goal of e-government should be to ‘rethink all aspects of governance and service delivery to see how it can take advantage of technology and new business models to improve the efficiency of internal processes, as well as change the nature of government interactions with both individuals and businesses’, which facilitates the vision of achieving “Many agencies, One Government” (Siew & Leng, 2003:20-21). Singapore Government owns and operates a significant number of business enterprises including SingTel, an Asia-Pacific telecom giant. Call centres are used by the Singaporean government as an important e-governance tool.

**E-governance and Call Centres in Developing Countries**

During the first decade of call centre emergence, most call centres were operated within the rich industrialised countries. The relocation of call centres to countries with relatively cheap but skilled labour force has become a trend since the mid-1990s
(Burgess and Connell, 2004). Together with the relocations, new call centres mushroomed in certain parts of the developing world to cater the increasing demand of call centre services from major multinational corporations (MNCs). MNCs worldwide had found it easier and cheaper to outsource call centre services to developing countries. However, only a handful of developing countries were able to benefit from this demand as countries required to have a large pool of educated people with necessary technical, social and language skills. Advancement of ICT is one of the main features of the developing countries where call centres were mainly outsourced. Social and language skills and personality of call centre employees are also treated as valued and important requirements by employers. As a result, among all developing countries, India has become the most popular destination for call centre outsourcing by MNCs because of the availability of cheap and qualified people with knowledge of ICT and proficiency in English (As-Saber et al., 2004; Bean, 2003; Thompson et al., 2001). Other than India, countries such as the Philippines, Malaysia, South Korea and China are other major call centre hubs in Asia (Voice & Data, 2003). It is argued by Kinder (2001) that even if Internet-based transactions are cheaper, consumers have higher access to telephone than Internet as Internet usage is criticized for its role to intensify social exclusion. This is an important fact for developing countries where social exclusion exists to a large extent. Telephone usage could therefore be argued as more viable option than Internet, hence justifying the use of call centres by public sector other than adopting online mode of e-governance.

Based on the level of ICT infrastructure, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) (2008) has come up with an e-governance readiness index (See Table 1). It suggests that most developing countries are lagging behind their developed counterparts in e-governance readiness. However, a few developing countries such as Korea and Malaysia are doing reasonably well in this regard.

### Table 1
E-Governance Readiness and Infrastructure Data 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Internet Per 100 Users</th>
<th>PC Per 100 Users</th>
<th>Cellular Subscribers Per 100 Users</th>
<th>Main Telephone Lines Per 100 Users</th>
<th>Broadband Per 100 Users</th>
<th>E-Governance Readiness Index (2008 Rank)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>76.97</td>
<td>83.49</td>
<td>105.92</td>
<td>59.52</td>
<td>25.87</td>
<td>0.9157 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>58.23</td>
<td>69.46</td>
<td>107.25</td>
<td>56.89</td>
<td>31.73</td>
<td>0.9134 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>69.10</td>
<td>76.22</td>
<td>77.40</td>
<td>57.15</td>
<td>19.31</td>
<td>0.8664 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>67.89</td>
<td>87.31</td>
<td>52.51</td>
<td>64.12</td>
<td>23.57</td>
<td>0.8172 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>75.12</td>
<td>76.61</td>
<td>97.02</td>
<td>48.81</td>
<td>19.15</td>
<td>0.8108 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>56.03</td>
<td>76.52</td>
<td>116.39</td>
<td>56.15</td>
<td>21.71</td>
<td>0.7872 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>68.27</td>
<td>67.45</td>
<td>79.32</td>
<td>43.02</td>
<td>20.09</td>
<td>0.7703 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>39.21</td>
<td>68.02</td>
<td>109.34</td>
<td>42.32</td>
<td>18.19</td>
<td>0.7009 (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>71.11</td>
<td>53.18</td>
<td>83.77</td>
<td>55.99</td>
<td>29.27</td>
<td>0.8317 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>43.77</td>
<td>21.54</td>
<td>75.45</td>
<td>16.83</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>0.6063 (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>22.55</td>
<td>16.09</td>
<td>52.90</td>
<td>20.54</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>0.5679 (45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>10.35</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>34.83</td>
<td>27.79</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>0.5017 (65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>50.75</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.5001 (66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>7.18</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>28.30</td>
<td>6.57</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.4107 (106)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>5.44</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>14.83</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.3814 (113)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>13.25</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.2916 (142)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>8.11</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.2048 (167)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.1857 (172)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.1047 (182)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNDESA (2008)
The index reveals an interesting trend - over the last few years a significant move has taken place towards cellular phone ownership. Table 1 suggests that in both developed and developing countries, mobile phone ownership is currently much higher than the ownership of fixed (main) telephone lines. In developing countries, in particular, where fixed line phones and internet (including broadband) connections are not so common, the cellular phone networks could be used to deliver call centre services.

For example, in India, in mid-2002, the teledensity was 4.4 that represented 44,000 telephone lines per one million populations (Yong, 2003b; Yong & Phureesitr, 2003). Teledensity in India, however, was reduced to 3.64 in 2008 in terms of fixed lines. Interestingly, the cellular subscriptions skyrocketed during this period, from 4 it jumped to 14.83 per 100 users (UNDESA, 2008). That means, the number of cellular phone connections jumped from about 40,000 in 2005 to more than 148,000 in 2008 per one million people. Access to Internet and broadband are significantly low in India. In 2008, the density levels in these two categories were 5.44 and 0.21 per 100 users (UNDESA). Therefore, communication through fixed line telephone and cellular phone is still more feasible option than the Internet. Similar situation exists in countries such as China and South Korea. Although the level of internet access is much higher in Singapore and Malaysia, the combined access to fixed lines and cellular phones outweighs the internet access levels (Yong, 2003b; Yong & Phureesitr, 2003; Yong & Tan, 2003; Tan & Yong, 2003, UNDESDA, 2008).

As government could not argue against creating a technology-driven better government, the adoption of call centres as an elementary means of e-governance, cannot be ruled out. From a developing country context, ICT-driven initiatives such as call centres are important development measures. Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr Muhammad Yunus (2000), who founded the Grameen (village) Bank and empowered millions of rural women through successful implementation of micro-credit program in many developing countries including Bangladesh, acknowledged the importance of such initiatives in developing poor economies.

In this regard, Alauddin (2004) presents an evidence involving Grameen Telecom (A subsidiary of Grameen Bank) in promoting telecommunication facilities in rural Bangladesh through Village Phone (VP) program. Number of subscribers under VP program, which was 28 in 1997, increased drastically within 7 years to a staggering 100,000 by the end of 2004. This not only justifies the opinion of Dr Yunus but also rationalizes the opportunity to implement call centre in a poor developing country like Bangladesh in spite of very low score in e-government readiness index. Yet again, the initiative from a private company like Grameen Telecom has established the fact that government could achieve bigger success in its e-governance process through using simple telecommunication technologies through call centres.

Butler (2004:126) argues that ‘call centre’s main focus is about the people working there and the people being served, not the technology’. The focus of e-governance is also to serve citizens through efficient public services. Referring to the experience of South Africa, Theunissen (2001) argued that cellular telephone technologies should be adopted as viable and crucial means of e-governance initiatives that might be linked to public sector call centres. Hence the teledensity and Internet penetration
scenario in various developing countries with varying levels of development rationalizes the call centre use in e-governance programs. Countries with reasonably high Internet penetration could utilize both telephony and Internet in their call centres and countries with low Internet penetration could rely primarily on call centres through the simple features of telephone technology and limited use of internet.

Kinder (2001) mentioned the labour-intensive nature of call centre as a point to argue for its adoption by public administrations in developing countries that could generate significant employment opportunities. Sharp (2003) argued for quantification and increment of the value of workforce in call centres through training and other incentives, as he found out that 70% to 80% of total operational expenses in call centres were due to personnel-related costs. While discussing the variable market conditions for any industry, Hill (2005) opined that the industry development and cost structures are affected by local labour costs and availability. Labour-intensive industries are easily adaptable in developing countries due to the availability of cheap labour. Considering the labour costs associated with call centre operation and developing countries’ accessibility to cheap labour, it could be argued that using call centre as a means of e-governance in developing countries would not engross huge costs for the government. It would rather increase efficiency and save costs by reducing the need for face-to-face service provisions. Government could deflect the savings for technological advancement of call centres that are involved in e-governance projects. Call centres’ performance could be enhanced through training, employment security, electronic performance monitoring and a good pay level (Batt & Moynihan, 2004:37). The relative ease of implementation and cost savings generated through the use of call centres in developing countries are likely to contribute positively to the performance of e-governance.

Adria and Chowdhury (2004) argue that in the design, implementation and maintenance process of call centres, centralization should be an important consideration to ensure service quality and support operation. Some of the conclusions of the analysis of Adria and Chowdhury (2004) are based on case studies they conducted on the use of call centres by several government organizations in North America. From the experiences of e-governance projects in a number of developed and developing countries, it is also observed that e-governance often comprises the feature of providing centralized services to citizens through ‘one stop’ service of call centres. In a study on successful e-government solutions in the United States, Chircu and Lee (2005) have found that ‘offering one-stop e-government solution’ is one of the key success factors of e-governance. As-Saber, et al. (2007) and Tambouris and Wimmer (2005) also argue one-stop government as a dominant driving vision for global e-governance initiatives. In this regard, Tambouris & Wimmer (2005) have emphasised the use of call centre as a single point communication access for customers requesting any public service.

Corruption is a major concern across the world. The situation in developing countries is, however, much worse compared to their developed counterparts. The recent survey of the Transparency International (2005) has revealed that the top 25 corrupt countries are from developing world. The question is - can call centres become a catalyst in reducing corruption? A rural citizen through a single phone call from a mobile phone to a public sector call centre could seek the information of government’s recent agricultural policies. When the call centre provides him the information, government
is able to increase transparency through dissemination of government rules and the rural citizen is empowered by reducing the brokerage power of intermediaries through accessing the information directly. Reduced face-to-face interaction between the citizen and businesspeople with public servants due to the use of call centres could reduce administrative corruption and limit discretionary powers of public officials. Through the elimination of redundant staff and reduction of costs associated with travel for citizens to interact with government, call centres could assist in achieving e-governance goals of improved civil service performance and more efficient service delivery (As-Saber et al., 2004, 2007). One-stop service through call centres could improve government finances as associated transaction costs for government processes between different agencies are reduced due to the deployment of call centres (Bhatnagar, 2004).

So far, the realistic and optimistic survey reports regarding successful use of call centres by government are limited to developed countries. As the discussion is still whirling around the extent of call centre adoption by public sectors in technologically-advanced developed countries, it might seem an ambitious choice for governments of developing countries to use call centres as an e-governance tool where teledensity and the rate of internet use are very low. Nevertheless, there are examples of government initiatives in developing countries to set up public sector call centres in order to augment government’s move to ensure good governance.

Malaysia has successfully adopted e-governance initiatives as a part of former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohammad’s Vision 2020 program (Karim & Khalid, 2003). The overall e-governance project in Malaysia aims to cover G2C linkage through e-services, G2B linkage through e-procurement and G2G linkage through other pilot projects. The electronic channels that are used in e-services range from home or office computers and public kiosks to wireless devices and interactive voice response (IVR) systems (Yong, 2003a). IVR systems facilitate clients’ (in this case citizens and other stakeholders) communication with a call centre network (Robertson, 2002). Call centres, therefore, are an integral part of the e-governance process in Malaysia.

Call centres are increasingly using short messaging service (SMS) to receive queries and feedback and also to provide basic information to the clients. In many developing countries including India, SMS is considered as a legal document (Srivathsan, 2004). The G2B linkage in Malaysia through the e-procurement project allowed SMS and fax. Inter-agency and intra-agency communications within the government are also featured by messaging system (Yong, 2003a). Numerous steps taken by Malaysian government in its e-government project do not necessarily involve Internet-based applications, though those are prominent ones, signifying the broad arena of delivery channels of e-governance other than websites. It also indicates that e-governance in its advanced stage in a country would attempt for finding out better delivery channels. As a consequence, wider use of call centres plays a greater role within the e-governance process and improves the public value dimension of e-governance.

India provides a good example of promoting call centres as an e-governance tool. In association with local bodies and government agencies, the Department of Information Technology of India has established integrated service centres named as FRIENDS (Fast Reliable Instant Efficient Network for Disbursement of Services)
(Yong & Sachdeva, 2003). Call centres constitute essential segment of the FRIENDS network. For example, as a part of FRIENDS centres, a citizen call centre is established at Kerala’s capital Thiruvananthapuram to provide information related to general citizens transaction over telephone. This call centre provides information on different government services and also informs the procedures to avail those services quickly and easily. This call centre establishes a strong G2G linkage across different departments like civil supplies, motor vehicles, revenue, state electricity board, state water authority and universities. This citizen call centre, which is equipped with manpower conversant with rules and regulations, could be accessed from anywhere within the state of Kerala between 9 am to 7 pm on each working day (Kerala State IT Mission, 2005). In a different move to provide enhanced services to citizen, Indian Railways has taken steps to set up a call centre which would ‘provide exact position of the train, arrival-departure information, fares, concessions, cancellation rules, break journey, lost ticket rules and journey planning’ to its customers (Public Sector Technology & Management, 2005).

Andhra Pradesh is another state of India that highlights the role of call centre in improving its governance system and structure. With its 2,75,068 square kilometre area and more than 70 million people, this state is larger than many other developing countries in terms of both area and population (Compare Infobase Private Limited, 2005). The following comments made by the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh emphasises the importance of call centres in his state: the:

This call centre initiative is part of our vision to offer citizens the benefits of technology and bring down Government-public interface. The role of Government has undergone changes over the years. As Governments are getting gradually flat, we are keen to provide simple interface for people and offer all services to them by reducing interface...The effort is to provide a corruption-free administration. This can be best addressed with fewer interfaces of Government functionaries with the citizens. Therefore, we have embarked upon this IT project and plan to link them up to all departments in the State as we go along (The Hindu Business Line, 2003).

The Government of Thailand, in a similar fashion, has implemented a project worth US$2.8 million to set up a one-stop call centre linking 20 ministries. After its implementation, calls to the call centre increased by more than 65% in the first quarter of the year (Public Sector Technology & Management, 2004). The public sector call centre in Thailand has successfully established G2G, G2C and G2B linkages.

Above examples indicates the potential contributions of call centres to the e-governance practices and processes within the developing world. They also signify the possible benefits of using call centres for governments, businesses and individuals from a developing country context. It could be argued, therefore, that call centres have the ability to streamline and enhance the e-governance process and aid to achieve better governance in developing countries.
Call Centres as an E-governance Tool: Some Constraints

Using call centres as an e-governance tool may not be considered as an easy one. There are several constraints that are widely considered to impede the operation and outcome of public sector call centres.

**Corruption and Trust:** The public sector in developing countries is marred with numerous problems including widespread corruption, lack of resources and inefficiency. As a consequence little improvement could be done through the operation of call centres within an e-government framework. Dean (2001:8) observes that ‘both service quality and perceived customer orientation of call centres affect customer loyalty to the providing organisation’. As the integrity and quality of public sector service provisions in developing countries are often viewed with concerns and scepticism, citizens and stakeholders may not become interested, and put their trust, in utilising call centre facilities operated by government employees.

**E-Governance Readiness, Digital Divide and Teledensity:** Most of the literatures discussing the prospects of e-governance also mention the challenge of overcoming ‘digital divide’. More educated and technology-affluent segments of any society get greater access to any ICT-related initiatives while the underprivileged segment of the population does not enjoy similar access. The overall difference between developed and developing countries with respect to access to ICT resources could also be seen from similar perspective. The concept of digital divide has been elaborated by Panagopoulos (2004:121) in the following manner:

> Access issues remain paramount in any discussion about the potential of digital government. Even as the total global online population increased 20 percent between 2000 and 2001 (to 514 million users), only about nine percent of the world’s population enjoys regular Internet access.

However, the Internet access is not the only issue in digital divide. Access to other ICT related resources should also be taken into consideration. Developing countries also have mixed scenario of Internet access among their populations. Teledensity is an important segment within the digital divide. As broadband connections are not universally available, the simple internet connections also need to rely primarily on fixed (main) telephone connections. Teledensity is an important precondition for both call centre operations and Internet connections. Table 1 shows that many developing countries don’t have broadband access and need to rely on dial-up networks for their Internet service provisions. They also lack necessary level of teledensity including cellular phone connections to run viable call centre operations. It is, nonetheless, a positive sign to see some developing countries such as Korea, Malaysia, Brazil amnd China are doing better than other developing countries in this regard. According to the e-governance readiness index published by UDESA (2008), these countries have significantly higher scores compared to other developing nations. Korea scored higher than a number of leading developed countries such as Canada, Australia, the UK and Japan (UNDESA, 2008). It ranks sixth among 182 nations. While Sweden topped the list, China, India, and Afghanistan rank the 65th, 113th and 167th respectively with Chad being the last (128th) (UNDESA, 2008).
Cost: Kinder (2001) opines that transactions in call centres are five times cheaper than paper-based transactions while the cost is ten times higher than that in Internet-based transactions. Costs in call centres are contributed by equipment and telecommunication charges, property-related charges and salary of staffs. In selected European cities, 58% cost of call centres is on staffing, 7.5% on property and rest of the cost is for the use of technology.

Political Commitment and Development Priority: Political commitment is a major precondition of successful implementation of any e-government initiatives (As-Saber, et al., 2007). However, Karim and Khalid (2003) argue that some governments in developing countries do not have the commitments to implement e-governance and these governments are also poorly equipped to develop and propose successful policies. Therefore, the issue is not the suitability of call centre as a tool to offer e-governance in developing countries; rather the administrative cultures and government policies of those countries prohibit to commit themselves to implement e-governance as a good governance tool. According to UNDESA (2003), the ability of the government for successful e-governance depends on availability of funding, skills and culture of the civil service, co-ordination, legal framework, ICT infrastructure, political leadership and long-term political commitment, public engagement, plans for development of human capital and technical infrastructure, monitoring and evaluation and partnerships. Regrettably most of the developing countries have very poor record of the majority of these parameters required for successful e-governance. The United Nations survey on e-governance readiness reflects these deficiencies (UNDESA, 2008). Another important consideration for governments in developing countries is to set up the right priority portfolio. Given the ongoing need for food and basic infrastructure including transport, health and education, call centres and e-government may not be considered as an immediate priority area of development.

Awareness: Broad-based public awareness campaign is required to inform the public of any e-governance activities (Metamorphosis, 2008). Citizens and other stakeholders should understand the goals and objectives of public sector call centres, their links to e-governance and the extent of benefit they can achieve from such operations. Call centres or any other e-governance initiatives will fail to perform and people will remain sceptical if they are not well-informed about any such operations. Public briefings, community consultations and promotions through the various media outlets could help overcome this problem.

Legal Barriers: There could also be legal barriers that may not allow call centres and other ICT-based systems to operate. For example, in many developing countries, SMS is not considered as a legal communication. Telecommunication deregulation and legislating appropriate acts and policies are essential pre-conditions for a viable and smooth operation of call centres within an e-government framework. Unfortunately, it remains as a major problem in many developing countries (As-Saber, et al., 2006).

Call Centre and E-governance in Developing Countries: A Possible Framework

In a study on the use of call centres by local public administrations of selected European cities, Kinder (2001) took the stand that public administration could utilise call centres as a key driver of its technology function in order to strengthen public governance. Despite the fact that Kinder’s view is based on his analysis of public
sector call centres in developed countries, its ramifications are not limited to the
developed world. It is widely acceptable that e-governance is no longer an alien idea
for developing countries as well. Governments in developing countries are
increasingly willing to accept the use of call centres as an important segment of their
e-governance programs. As mentioned above, India, Malaysia and Thailand provide
striking examples to substantiate this statement. Although the above discussion
warrants the necessity to formulate or adopt an integrated theoretical framework of
call centre and e-governance from a developing country perspective, no such
framework has been attempted to date incorporating call centres as an e-governance
tool. A tentative framework, therefore, is proposed (see Figure 1) with an aim to show
possible links between call centres and relevant governance issues including e-
governance in a developing country context.

**Figure 1**
Call Centres and E-governance in Developing Countries: A Proposed Framework

The framework shows four key variables of the call centre operation from an e-
governance perspective. These include:

(i) Linkages in terms of G2G, G2C and G2B;
(ii) Focus on customer service and cost-cutting through trouble-free
service delivery in a timely manner. It emphasises the need to
eliminate or minimise bureaucratic red tape as call centres do not
require any face-to-face encounter between the customer and the
service-provider;
(iii) It is characterised by simple technology applications including
telephone and VoIP to maintain a two-way communication network

![Figure 1: Call Centres and E-governance in Developing Countries: A Proposed Framework](image-url)
(inbound and outbound). It provides centralised form of e-services using an efficient workforce

(iv) It aims to reduce administrative corruption, empower citizens, increase efficiency in service delivery and improve in areas such as transparency, responsiveness, government finance and civil service performance.

The framework also demonstrates the dyadic role of Internet as an instrument of call centre operation and as one of the primary e-governance implementation tools. In addition, the framework emphasises that call centre operations are not without problems. As mentioned in the earlier section call centre may face with a number of challenges, viz., cost-pressure; lack of long-term vision and political commitment together with the indecisiveness in priority-setting; teledensity and deficient infrastructure including digital divide; lack of public awareness about the use and benefit of public sector call centres; legal requirements; and bureaucratic red-tape and corruption.

A systematic interplay of these issues, together with the socio-economic, political and cultural environment may influence the policy making and implementation of public sector call centres within the e-governance architecture in developing countries As a cost-saving and waste-saving mechanism (through reduced use of paper documents and saving transportation and other related costs of face-to-face service delivery), call centres have the potential to contribute to sustainable development as well. A well thought-out call centre operation may help building a better government for a better future.

The above framework provides some guidance to policymakers and public sector call centre managers with respect to the nature and prospect of such operations. As the relevant issues are identified and discussed, it will provide them with a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities of operating call centres from an e-governance perspective. It also offers researchers and academics with prospect of conducting empirical research to validate or further enrich the framework.

**Conclusions**

Achieving good governance is one of the primary objectives of every government. Various means have long been used to achieve this objective. The new-found ICT-based governance system, popularly known as e-governance, has now attracted significant attention as a mechanism to offer improved service delivery and attain better governance. In recent years, call centres have emerged as an important e-governance tool. From a consumer and service-providers’ perspective, call centres are widely recognized as an effective e-governance instrument capable of delivering better services including the dissemination of important information to citizens and other stakeholders. Given the flexible nature of the call centre operation and its potential benefits, governments in developing countries are increasingly conspiring to adopt call centres as a means to implement e-government. Although some developing countries, such as India, Malaysia and Korea, have already achieved considerable success in implementing public sector call centre activities, it is not always an easy ride. Such initiatives often face significant challenges that may include the lack of infrastructure, low teledensity, lack of political commitment and vision, bureaucratic
inefficiency and administrative corruption. Strong political commitments with a well-planned and systematic use of call centres within the e-government framework could help overcome these challenges.

Nonetheless, given the nature and complexity of the issue and to better-understand the important albeit intricate relationships across all factors relevant to public sector call centre activities, it could be considered helpful to draw a systematic conceptual framework focusing on call centre operation and performance from an e-governance perspective. Accordingly, the framework proposed in this paper attempts to integrate call centres into a broader schematic architecture highlighting the connections across call centres, e-governance and good governance. It also shows the various types of linkages across government, citizens, businesses and other stakeholders. In addition, the framework underscores the importance of the various environmental variables and their impact on call centres and e-governance. The proposed framework has implications for policymakers, public service managers and call centre employees. It is likely to provide recipe for future research on public sector call centres.

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