ONLINE GOVERNMENT OPENED THE DOORS

The use which public agencies make of Information and Communications Technologies facilitates the inclusion and participation of the citizenry in the State. How has public administration in Colombia moved from hermeticism or secrecy to the democratization of information and what still has to be done to reach the ideal state depicted in the norms? This is the question which interests Diana Carolina Valencia Tello, researcher at the Faculty of Jurisprudence of the Universidad del Rosario.

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Photos: Alberto Sierra, 123RF

Is there more corruption now? Perhaps. But the spreading of news of scandals also has to do with the fact that citizens now have more possibilities for controlling their rulers, new game rules have been established and, in the end, there is more visibility.

In other words, Colombian society has changed from having a hermetic public administration to one whose doors are more wide open, which must render accounts, so that the idea that the institutions and officials of the State are superior to the rest of society has tended to weaken. And, by the same token, the technologies of information and communications and their use as a tool which enables citizens to participate in the affairs of the State have grown.

That is how the current situation is seen by Diana Carolina Valencia Tello, professor of Administrative Law at the Universidad del Rosario, who, since she was an undergraduate, has studied public administration. Her analyses are found in the study, *Electronic government as a tool for inclusion and participation in the Colombian State*, which discusses the evolution of this field from 2000 to 2014.

Valencia believes that since the publication in 1995 of a report by the National Council of Economic and Social Policy (CONPES), entitled *Public administration oriented towards results, Colombia* has been developing a structured policy to transform the State and its institutions in order to provide better services and guarantee transparency.

And although there is still a long way to go before this ideal world fully becomes a reality, "it has been a successful policy, because it has had continuity from one administration to the next." She singles out both the improvements which have been made and the willingness of new administrations to conserve and take advantage of what their predecessors have achieved in this field. "In terms of the standards we have in the country, that may be regarded as a success," she insists.
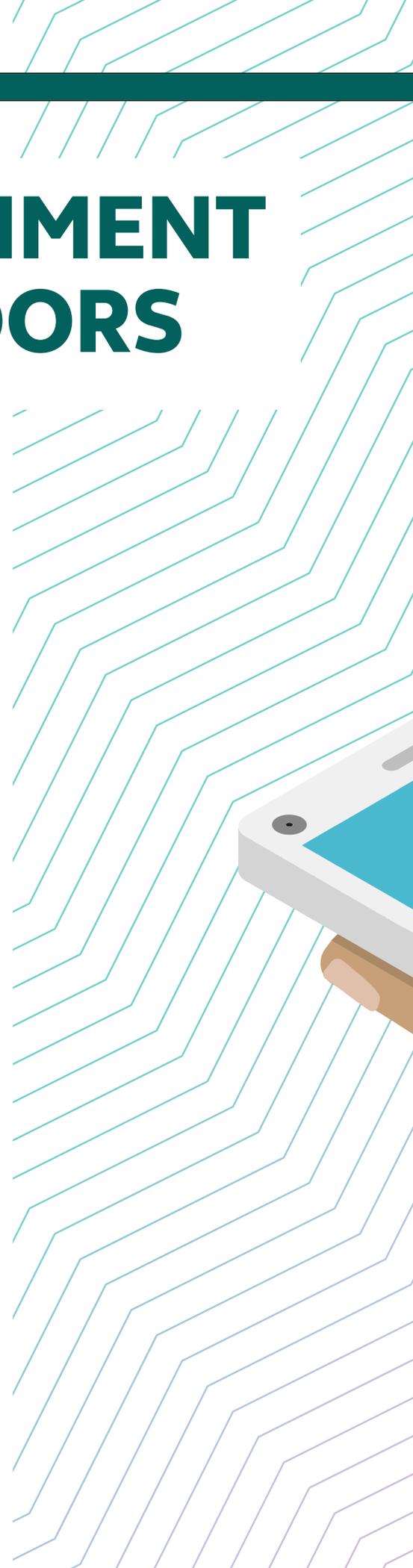
ADVANTAGES OF ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT

-Reduces corruption
-Increases transparency
-Reduces the costs of
 administrative procedures
-Brings the institutions closer
 to citizens
-Citizens´ participation

So exactly what has happened? When the new Colombian Constitution came in force into 1991, the way of exerting control over the public administration in Colombia changed. First, the country began to oversee the use of public spending, since it was thought that to do it before the money was spent, as had happened in the past, would lead to illegal alliances between those who authorized the disbursement of the resources and those who controlled them. In addition, the obligation to exercise a strict internal control of public agencies on all levels was included.

"It is a strategy based on self-control and self-management and it is also a way of organizing teamwork and grouping the information together so it can be audited and there is a rendering of accounts," explains professor Valencia Tello, whose undergraduate thesis was precisely about preventing corruption through the use of systems of internal control.

But the culture of the country cannot be changed just like that, and while the Constitution is our maximum norm, to do what it says should be done is not easy and much less when the changes have an impact on the more than 3,000 public agencies which now make up the State.

Thus it was not until we were well into the 21st century, with the creation of the Agenda on Connectivity, that the changes based on the need to universalize access to information and aim at the construction of a more modern and efficient State began to take place.

In 2002, with the passing of the Law for the Renewal of the Public Administration, the country fully entered into the era of electron-

ic government, an enterprise which was strengthened by the creation of the Program for the Renewal of the Public Administration, whose purpose was to bring the State closer to ordinary citizens.

From within to without

According to the definition of the World Bank, "electronic government is the use which public entities make of the Technologies of Information and Communications, such as computers, networks, the Internet and mobile technology, which are able to transform their relations with citizens, companies and other government agencies." In the opinion of Diana Valencia, electronic government is a basic tool to construct sustainable strategies of development, inclusion and participation.

That is why systems of internal control turn out to be so important for the implementation of a sound electronic government, since for organized, coherent, truthful and opportune information to be available to citizens, the institutions must be very well organized on an internal level.

To regulate its use, the first norms on internal control and the guarantee of high quality were issued in 2004 (Decree 4110) and 2005 (Decree 1599). "They helped to structure the public administration and were based on processes aimed at the delivery of high quality products and services to citizens," Diana Valencia notes.

But she has not been the only analyst of these reforms, since she was part of a team at the Administrative Department of Public Service *(Departamento Administrativo de la Función Pública)* which drafted those norms and was responsible for training State officials, so that they would understand and apply them.

In addition, as the administrative director of the Ministry of Agriculture, she was personally responsible for ensuring that the entity fully complied with the requirements which online government entailed, and now, as a professor of Administrative Law, she endeavors to ensure that her students acquire a

"The State has the obligation to transform itself, along with society, and it must have the capacity to relate to a new citizen, who is more demanding, better informed, more individualistic and more self-sufficient."

"The effective implementation of an electronic government implies reassessing the old administrative structures and trying to create new mechanisms whose central axis is the satisfaction of the needs of the citizen."

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"Just as the technologies of information and communications can help to strengthen social cohesion, they may also create new forms of inequality between those who are connected to the network and those who are not, or between those who are familiar with the use of the new technologies and those who are not," remarks the researcher Carolina Valencia

critical vision as citizens and understand their social role of oversight.

Because that is precisely one of the requisites for the functioning of the mechanism: If the State lays out its cards, citizens must know how to read and play with them. "Training is required so that people understand that this information is within their reach and they have to sit down and analyze it, and have a critical and purposeful thought based on what they may find there."

The communications media have played an important role in that regard, while the citizenry in general has benefitted from it all, especially, by using online technologies to comply with bureaucratic requisites. At the end of the period which was analyzed, 64% of such requisites and applications for services with a social impact were able to be processed on the Internet, even though only 34% of all citizens undertook such transactions online.

OBJECTIVES OF ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT

- Provide better services to citizens
- Strengthen the capacities of citizens through access to information
- Make government administration more efficient
- Improve relations with companies and industries

What still has to be done

The digital gap is one of the biggest barriers to attaining a full effectiveness for online government, according to Valencia´s study, since "just as the technologies of information and communications can help to strengthen social cohesion, they may also create new forms of inequality between those who are connected to the network and those who are not, or between those who are familiar with the use of the new technologies and those who are not," she points out.

Another barrier has to do with the institutions, where factors like mistrust, the high turnover of public officials and the proliferation of contractors make it difficult to successfully apply internal controls. People tend to see these requirements as too bureaucratic, because not even the same State officials understand their importance for the sound functioning of online government. There is thus a need for a leadership which is committed and able to instill values which improve the organizational climate and teamwork. These factors are crucial for achieving the decentralization of information and decision-making.

Valencia Tello´s study acknowledges the effort which the Colombian government has made to promote the mass use of these technologies in the country, from different angles: The transformation of public institutions, the training of officials and citizens, the building of a public infrastructure and the promotion of access to new technologies, among others, but she warns that "the results will only be seen in the long term, depending on whether the country and its citizens can massively use the technologies of information and communications in diverse activities and in a continuous and productive way." That´s what we are trying to do. ◙