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## A Contextual Analysis and Critical Examination of e-Government as a Form of Public Accountability and Equitable Public Service Delivery

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to critically analyze and contextualize the implementation of e-government in Situbondo Regency. E-government is adopted by the government with the belief that it can strengthen public accountability and enhance the distribution of public services. However, a significant portion of citizens remains unable to access e-government services. The research uses a contextual analysis approach combined with in-depth interviews to explore key ideas relevant to the analysis. The bureaucratic reform in the public policy system lacks humanistic values, diminishes the spirit of public service, and does not reflect good governance. E-government, while seen as a technological revolution, faces the challenge of the digital divide, which silences citizens' rights due to a lack of digital literacy. As a result, public accountability is not effectively established through e-government.

Keywords: E-Government; Accountability; Digital Divide; Equitable Public Services.

### *Analisis Kontekstual dan Teori Kritis Terhadap Realitas E-government Sebagai Bentuk Akuntabilitas Publik dan Pemerataan Pelayanan Publik*

### ABSTRAK

Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis secara kritis dan mengontekstualisasikan implementasi e-government di Kabupaten Situbondo. E-government diadopsi oleh pemerintah dengan keyakinan bahwa hal itu dapat memperkuat akuntabilitas publik dan meningkatkan distribusi layanan publik. Namun, sebagian besar warga negara masih tidak dapat mengakses layanan e-government. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan analisis kontekstual yang dikombinasikan dengan wawancara mendalam untuk mengeksplorasi ide-ide kunci yang relevan dengan analisis. Reformasi birokrasi dalam sistem kebijakan publik tidak memiliki nilai-nilai kemanusiaan, melemahkan semangat pelayanan publik, dan tidak mencerminkan pemerintahan yang baik. E-government, meskipun dipandang sebagai revolusi teknologi, menghadapi tantangan kesenjangan digital, yang membungkam hak-hak warga negara karena kurangnya literasi digital. Akibatnya, akuntabilitas publik tidak dibangun secara efektif melalui e-government.

Kata Kunci: E-government; Akuntabilitas; Kesenjangan Digital; Pemerataan Pelayanan Publik.

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## INTRODUCTION

The transformation of traditional government into electronic government (e-government) remains a relevant public policy issue. Originating from the desire to reform government management by adopting the principles of New Public Management (NPM), e-government has evolved into a tool for bureaucratic reform. This trend is evident not only in countries that have successfully implemented e-government, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand, but also in middle-income and developing countries, including Indonesia. The design of information systems claims to liberate individuals from entrenched customs and dogma. Emancipatory information system design, which diverges from the pure instrumental rationality of positivist science, seeks to achieve true participatory democracy. This approach aims to empower citizens by dismantling power structures that impose limitations, thereby enabling them to shape their own destinies. Advocates of this design philosophy argue that computer-based systems should enhance human communication competence by fostering an "ideal speech situation" supported by a symmetrical distribution of power. In such a scenario, individual interests align with broader human interests, guided by the normative framework of general rationality (Wilson, 1997).

Indonesia has set its sights on transitioning from a developing to a developed nation. However, the suitability of applying the NPM framework to public sector management in Indonesia warrants scrutiny, given its non-native origins. Widaninggar (2022) and Widaninggar et al. (2023, 2024) advocate for internalizing public sector management using Indonesian values, as exemplified by Notonagoro's Public Management framework. This framework incorporates core values such as religiosity, piety, integral understanding, and the hierarchical pyramid of Pancasila, offering a potential solution to public management challenges in Indonesia.

The distinctiveness of public sector management demands attention due to cultural differences influenced by geography, customs, and systemic issues such as corruption and low bureaucratic capacity in many underdeveloped nations. While developed European nations face challenges with the operationally focused, American-style NPM framework, they benefit from the more philosophical European Public Management (EPM) approach (Miller & Dunn, 2006).

Mahmudi (2010) highlights Malaysia's success in implementing Total Quality Management (TQM) as a contrast to the failures of similarly situated developing countries like Bangladesh and certain African nations. This underscores the importance of tailoring bureaucratic reform models to specific national contexts, considering variations in political, economic, and social conditions (Widaninggar, 2022). Bureaucratic reform, a response to globalization, emphasizes improving human resource quality to ensure the right individuals occupy the right roles, enhancing public service quality, and fostering environmental awareness (Saefullah, 2002).

In Indonesia, the 1997 reform era brought hopes for significant improvements across various sectors, as the centralized, authoritarian New Order government was heavily criticized for its reliance on military dominance (Siddiq, 2019). Despite progress, corruption and a lack of community-responsive programs





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continue to undermine the spirit of bureaucratic reform as a public service initiative (Balashov et al., 2020). However, certain lessons from the New Order, such as the establishment of clear constitutional frameworks and stable government objectives across leadership transitions, remain valuable (Kamuli, 2011).

During that era, the vision and mission of the state, including those of ministries, institutions, and government centers, remained stable across leadership transitions. These objectives were predetermined for specific periods, ensuring that changes in leadership – whether at the level of president, minister, governor, or regent – did not disrupt the performance of state apparatus and governance. The continuity enabled the government to operate in alignment with its established vision and mission. In contrast, the current context reveals a lack of consistency in governance. Leadership changes often bring shifts in vision and mission, as well as differences in strategies and program implementation, resulting in an absence of clear continuity in development efforts (Chabibie et al., 2021).

This raises a critical question: can e-government genuinely enhance public service delivery to the community? Research by Sholihah et al. (2022) indicates that while e-government services provided through websites are generally effective from the users' perspective, gaps remain in addressing their needs. Furthermore, Kawabata and Camargo (2023) highlight that research published in reputable journals, particularly those with high citation counts, predominantly originates from the United States, the Netherlands, and Spain. Indonesia, however, is notably absent in the VOSviewer-generated images of influential research contributions.

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The discussions surrounding e-government primarily focus on applications, including technological benefits, constraints, costs, innovation processes, responsive customer service, public policy improvements, citizen relationships as service users, social media, implementation barriers, and citizen adoption intentions. However, theoretical studies and research on citizen accessibility in using e-government services remain underexplored. This study aims to bridge this research gap.

## RESEARCH METHODS

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The critical paradigm serves as a methodology situated in dialectical tension between philosophy and science. It moves beyond the objective data and facts characteristic of positivism to delve into social realities, uncovering conditions of inequality – both transcendental and empirical. This paradigm critiques modern society, which is fraught with irrationalities such as the nature of debt and the oppressive nature of modern technology (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004). The Critical Paradigm is particularly apt for critiquing or addressing structures and conditions that oppress or create dilemmas for society (Bungin, 2020; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Chua, 1986; Creswell, 2013; Kamayanti, 2017). Rooted in philosophical tradition, it ontologically posits that humans ascribe meaning to their lives freely (nominalism) and are inherently self-determined (voluntarism). This stance culminates in an anti-positivist epistemology, emphasizing truth and liberation expressed deeply to those affected by dominant conditions.

This study employs contextual analysis and in-depth interviews to achieve its research objectives. Contextual analysis integrates a literature review of context-

related keywords, supplemented by a specific contextual focus and insights from in-depth interviews with informants. This method is guided by the Social Change Approach, which analyzes discourse in relation to social change (Ismail, 2008; Osman et al., 2021). Originating from Fairclough's (2013) framework, influenced by Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and Bakhtin, the Social Change Approach views discourse as a social practice that connects discursive practice with identity and social relations. Consequently, Fairclough's model is often referred to as the social change model. By treating discourse as a social practice, it underscores language as an action within the world, particularly as a form of representation when confronting reality (Ismail, 2008; Osman et al., 2021).

Based on this contextual foundation, in-depth interviews were conducted with two key groups of informants: government officials involved in the electronic-based public service system and members of the public who use these services.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The concept of good governance in public administration reform emerges as a response to societal demands for government officials who are transparent, accountable, effective, efficient, and citizen-oriented. This approach, often associated with the principles of New Public Management (NPM), highlights five key elements essential for its successful implementation (Miller & Dunn, 2006): (1) Core, referring to the clear communication of organizational goals, including vision, mission, and strategies, to both the community and government employees; (2) Consequences, representing the tangible outcomes of communicating these goals, which manifest as concrete actions; (3) Customer, emphasizing a focus on citizens as the primary beneficiaries of public services; (4) Control, involving effective oversight at lower and middle organizational levels to empower individuals, organizations, and communities to address societal challenges swiftly and accurately; and (5) Culture, aiming to transform detrimental government employee behaviors, fostering a service-oriented mindset that remains memorable and impactful.

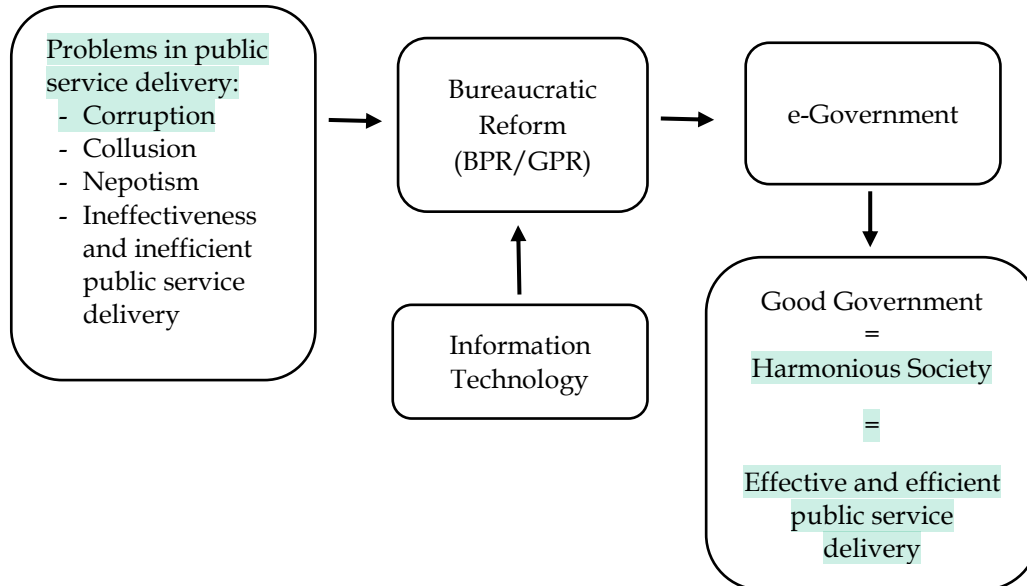
In practice, the application of these values during the NPM era differs significantly from the bureaucratic era. The NPM era emphasizes accountability for results, productivity, efficiency, citizen-orientation, and a clear mission and goals (Persson & Goldkuhl, 2010). To achieve these objectives swiftly and effectively, the following strategic steps are recommended (Kamuli, 2011): (1) Corporatization and privatization policies for government organizational units with service functions, such as hospitals, universities, and state-owned enterprises (BUMN); (2) The utilization of information technology by establishing an e-government network to accelerate transparency and accountability in public services; and (3) The restructuring of public service functions and the development of integrated service models.

The public policy system that supports these strategic measures should be democratic, decentralized, transparent, participatory, and rational while incorporating both logical and human-centered cooperation. Among these measures, e-government stands out as a strategic approach that fosters interaction and reciprocal relationships between the government and various stakeholders,

including citizens, businesses, and public institutions, through the use of modern information and communication technology. Analogous to e-commerce, e-government enables public institutions to communicate electronically, fostering new forms of decision-making, business transactions, and communication that transform the workings of government.

Unlike NPM, e-government is less influenced by fiscal pressures, political or administrative crises, or dissatisfaction among public managers, as it is not a program or policy but a tool that supports public administration reform. Over time, e-government has been increasingly advocated in Indonesia as a means to curb corruption. Direct communication in public service provision often creates opportunities for corruption, making e-government a viable solution for fostering good governance and a harmonious society.

However, e-government is not a universal remedy for all governmental issues in Indonesia. While it has the potential to improve public services, reduce corruption, and enhance coordination among government institutions, many e-government implementations remain fragmented and unintegrated (Damanik & Purwaningsih, 2018; Legi et al., 2020; Salsabila et al., 2022; Wahab & Arsyad, 2015; Wijaya et al., 2022). Factors critical to the success of e-government include ICT literacy among bureaucrats, leadership commitment to its implementation, the legal framework for ICT, and adequate ICT infrastructure. Thus, integrated improvements in these areas are essential to achieve the successful implementation of e-government in Indonesia.



**Figure 1. Relationship Between Bureaucratic Reform and E-Government Implementation**

Source: Budiati, 2005

Figure 1 presents a schematic representation illustrating the logical connection between bureaucratic reform and the implementation of e-government in fostering effective and efficient public services in Indonesia. This model aligns with the success stories of e-government initiatives in countries such as Canada and New Zealand. Since the introduction of e-government in the 1990s, its concept

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has paralleled the role of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) in the private sector. ERP technology is described as an integrated system that unifies all business processes, departments, and units within an organization through a single data entry framework (Agustin et al., 2020; Ambarwati et al., 2020; Hamilton, 2002; Widaninggar, 2013).

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The fundamental concept of ERP lies in its ability to integrate processes, ensuring seamless connectivity among various systems within departments. Technically, ERP functions to unify diverse information systems spread across departments, enabling data and information sharing. This integration fosters synergy between departments and ultimately enhances the overall value for users, as evidenced in the private sector (Agustin et al., 2020; Ambarwati et al., 2020; Hamilton, 2002; Widaninggar, 2013).

Similarly, in the Canadian government, inspired by NPM principles that prioritize efficiency, convenience, cost-effectiveness, and citizen-focused services, Information Technology has been pivotal in enhancing service quality and citizen satisfaction. This is achieved through mechanisms such as call centers, self-service kiosks, and internet websites (Longford, 2002). However, critics, including Longford (2002), highlight a paradox: while IT is intended to benefit citizen services, it can inadvertently erode the relationship between governments and their citizens, diminishing trust rather than improving service delivery.

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When considering public services and transitioning the bureaucratic paradigm to a customer-centric model, excessive reductions in direct interactions between officials and citizens should be avoided. This approach undermines the humanistic philosophy that should govern the relationship between the government and its citizens. To create a transparent, open, and accountable government, it is essential to increase both the quality and quantity of dialogue and meetings with citizens. Positive and meaningful dialogue strengthens these relationships, focusing on fulfilling the community's needs. However, as Budiati (2005) pointed out, direct communication in service provision can create opportunities for corruption. Thus, the nature of the service determines whether face-to-face interactions are necessary.

For technical services, such as processing personal documents like ID cards (KTP), vehicle registration certificates (STNK), or payments for income tax, advertising tax, or land and building tax, online systems can be effective. For instance, the ePN vehicle document processing system in Arizona, United States, serves as a successful example (Schedler & Scharf, 2001). However, challenges arise when services directly involve citizens' personal, economic, or social aspects, such as health, family planning counselling, child development, tax socialization, transmigration, forestry, agriculture, drug abuse prevention, social assistance, and cooperative or SME development. These services require face-to-face interaction to be effective and cannot rely solely on online systems.

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Klinger and Nalbadian (1985) identified four core values in public administration: administrative efficiency, individual rights, political responsiveness, and social justice. With these values in mind, the application of NPM alone is deemed insufficient, leading to the emergence of an alternative approach—New Public Services (NPS)—introduced by Dernhart and Dernhart (2003) in their work *The New Public Service: Serving, not Steering*. This NPS





paradigm was developed as a response to the dominant administration paradigm at the time, and even today, the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm, which is based on the principle of "run government like a business" and "market as a solution to the ills in the public sector."

According to Dernhart and Dernhart (2003), the NPS paradigm is influenced by the Theory of Democratic Politics and Governance Theory. In Political Theory, particularly regarding the relationship between citizens and the government, the NPS adopts a humanistic approach to organizational and management theory. On the other hand, Governance Theory argues that in the global era, the state or government is no longer the only institution capable of providing public services efficiently, economically, and fairly. Thus, the Governance paradigm emphasizes the importance of partnerships and networks between various stakeholders in the delivery of public services. Based on the theories underpinning the NPS, it seeks to integrate multiple perspectives to address public issues. As a result, the NPS paradigm differs in significant ways from the New Public Management model (Widaninggar, 2022).

As previously noted, while the challenges faced by developed countries tend to revolve around social, economic, political, and cultural differences, developing countries often face additional challenges typical of the Global South (Mahmudi, 2010), such as collusion, corruption, nepotism, and inconsistent policies. Consequently, the application of NPM must be adapted to the specific context of each country, as no two countries are identical. This necessitates different approaches to bureaucratic reform in different regions. Moreover, Barzelay (1997) emphasized that the focus should not only be on the end result but also on the policy formulation process itself, as NPM is part of government policy.

A practical example of the development of Information Technology (IT) in public administration can be seen in Situbondo Regency. Located in East Java Province, Situbondo has garnered attention for its remarkable achievements, such as advancing from a Disadvantaged Regency to an Advanced Regency without passing through the Developmental stage. These accomplishments have captured the public's admiration for the region's leadership. One key factor contributing to these successes is the strong support for IT development in Situbondo Regency. IT policies in the region were initiated in 2017 with the issuance of the Regent's Regulation on the Guidelines for the Utilization of Information and Communication Technology in the Implementation of Situbondo Smart Society. This was followed by the 2020 Regent's Regulation on the Implementation of the Situbondo Regency Smart City Masterplan. As a result of these policies, Situbondo Regency achieved significant recognition, winning an award in the Electronic-Based Government System (SPBE) for four consecutive years. Additionally, Situbondo's Smart City initiative was ranked among the top 25 cities/regencies in the *Movement Towards 100 National Smart Cities* in Indonesia.

One of Situbondo Regency's flagship IT initiatives is the Intelligence Room (IR), a central space for data visualization and integration. This system aggregates both online and offline data from internal and external sources, which is displayed simultaneously on a large video wall. The collected information, drawn from various applications, is integrated into a dashboard that allows executive officials to easily monitor developments in Situbondo Regency across sectors such as

education, health, government, population, and the economy. The primary benefit of this application is its facilitation of meetings and coordination between Regional Apparatus Organizations (OPD). The IR also supports decision-making by providing accurate, data-driven insights, enabling responses and actions based on real-time information.

The significant IT advancements in Situbondo Regency suggest that technology is becoming a solution to the administrative challenges and data gaps that have previously hindered rapid and strategic decision-making. However, paradoxically, officials at the Population and Civil Registration Service have observed that, despite the implementation of IT, there has been an increase in the involvement of third parties in managing population administration. This is surprising, as the purpose of IT implementation was to prevent such issues.

The uneven distribution of IT literacy within the community, coupled with challenges related to the geographical conditions of Situbondo Regency – such as the vast stretch of land from Probolinggo Regency to the eastern border with Banyuwangi Regency, as well as the region's mountainous highlands and coastal lowlands – has created difficulties in accessing reliable internet networks. Resistance to IT adoption has also contributed to the issue, highlighting the so-called "Digital Divide." This divide is preventing some communities from fully benefiting from the advantages of IT in administrative processes.

The issue of personal interaction between the community and its government has also been explored by Gilbert et al. (2004) in England, with a focus on the obstacles and benefits of implementing e-government. Initially, the researchers included the avoidance of personal interaction as a factor that would support the community's willingness to use e-government. However, contrary to their expectations, this was not the case, even though four studies conducted in the 1990s had indicated otherwise. This suggests that face-to-face meetings with government officials remain important to the community.

This issue is closely linked to the digital divide. As e-government services expand, the digital divide has once again become a prominent concern. The disparity in access to information, with some citizens having access while others do not, along with differences in technological literacy, creates significant challenges. These differences lead to unequal treatment and rights for citizens in their interactions with the government. When e-government implementation still relies on resources that are not equally accessible to all citizens, it contradicts the fundamental philosophy of bureaucracy, which is to serve and empower the community.

As long as the digital divide persists, certain demographic factors continue to influence the disparity in e-government usage. Bélanger and Carter (2009) categorize this gap into two types: the access gap and the skills gap. In developing countries, this issue is more critical than in developed countries. The access gap, influenced by variables such as ethnicity, income, education, and age, remains a significant challenge in the implementation of e-government and the relationship between government and society. This problem is further compounded by the skills gap, which includes technical competencies related to computers and the internet, as well as public information literacy. For people below the poverty line,



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both economically and educationally, the use of e-government to interact with the government is less prevalent, thus widening the existing gap.

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However, this should not be interpreted as a reason to halt the development of e-government by the government. In fact, e-government, as implemented in developed countries, has been primarily aimed at rationalizing government administration for efficiency and reforming public services for faster delivery (Longford, 2002). This approach, however, does not necessarily require widespread access or advanced skills from the community. Essentially, e-government implementation has thus far been more about reforming bureaucratic processes. There is a clear connection between the successes and failures of e-government initiatives, especially when linked to the community's willingness to engage with them. The success of e-government programs depends largely on the priorities set by the government. This is because e-government is essentially a tool to address issues within government processes and to support bureaucratic reform.

E-government cannot be seen as the solution to all bureaucratic problems. Although technology is often viewed as a panacea for various community activities—both economic and non-economic—Heeks and Bailur (2006) caution that overestimating its potential can lead to a high risk of failure. This is especially true when technology is not used as a supporting tool but is instead treated as the focal point of efforts to reform an outdated government system. Furthermore, Heeks (1998) emphasized that when information technology is overly glorified, the true value of the information itself can be overlooked, with the focus shifting to technology rather than its intended purpose.

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Goudzwaard's (1984) research on the phenomenon of 'idols' in modern life, which was conducted more than forty years ago, remains highly relevant today, according to Harihara and Basden (2008), particularly in analyzing e-government, which has become an 'idol' for addressing efficiency issues. The characteristics of this idol have contributed to the emergence of a new ideology, encompassing the values of systems, concepts, beliefs, and norms. This new ideology in modern society calls for a national revolution, aimed at increasing welfare and ensuring security.

Harihara and Basden (2008) linked Goudzwaard's concept of idols to e-government, concluding that e-government has indeed become an idol of modern government because it represents a transformation from its original form, evolving from ancient government structures to new forms of governance. It shifts from an agency-centric model to one that is customer- or citizen-centric.

Additionally, e-government has led to the establishment of dedicated institutions to manage it, such as E-Europe, E-Russia, and E-Jordan. It has been elevated into something special and even 'cultivated,' as evidenced by numerous studies, papers, seminars, and specialized journals on e-government. Moreover, it is emphasized to the public as a government initiative that must run according to the public's will, with many studies focusing on its benefits and continuously seeking solutions to any obstacles - essentially, e-government must be implemented no matter the circumstances.

E-government is also portrayed as an entity capable of standing independently, unaffected by external factors. However, it requires significant

4 sacrifices, including forcing the public to adopt information technology, leading to unabsorbed workers in the government sector due to the efficiency effects, a decrease in direct interaction between the public and the government, and high initial investment and maintenance costs. It also forces the public and government to recondition their rules, rather than having e-government adapt to the public and government's conditions.

Finally, e-government is often viewed as 'worthy of being adored' because it is modern, a new discovery, revolutionary, and capable of bringing about transformation. It also offers perceived added value, such as efficiency, time savings, and increased work effectiveness after its implementation.

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25 Technology can have both positive and negative impacts, depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. Returning to the issue of norms and philosophy, the implementation of e-government, especially when it is imposed on the community—particularly those with low levels of accessibility and computer literacy—can create new problems related to citizens' equal rights. Additionally, the decreasing interaction between the community and the government can create a distance, leading to miscommunication.

Heeks and Bailur (2006) present a matrix that outlines both the positive and negative perspectives on technology and its impacts. From a positive viewpoint, the emphasis is on cost efficiency and improvements in public services. In contrast, the negative viewpoint focuses on the high costs involved and the potential loss of public accountability. Looking at the impact of technology from the technological perspective, the concern is the loss of job opportunities. However, from a social perspective, the risk of job losses is attributed to the preference of public sector managers for technology over human workers.

In this context, it would be beneficial for studies to always incorporate psychological, sociological, economic, and political perspectives to determine the best alternative for implementing e-government. This is especially important because, despite numerous studies and international conferences on e-government, none have specifically addressed the philosophy of science behind e-government, whether in terms of epistemology or ontology. Researchers tend to develop their own e-government models and concepts based on their views, without adequately considering other similar studies

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32 Even Heeks and Bailur (2006) concluded that the main literature widely used by researchers still focuses primarily on the technical aspects of e-government, information systems, and the personal experiences of researchers, most of whom come from the fields of management, business, and public administration. This is likely because the concept of e-government originates from information technology and public administration. However, there is a pressing need to further develop research on the influence of e-government from the perspectives of economic and sociological theory, which serve as the foundation for research in the field of government.

The development of such theory is crucial in e-government research as it helps researchers communicate their findings more effectively with practitioners and fellow researchers, consolidates scientific insights, and provides legitimacy and recognition from colleagues in related disciplines (Sahay & Walsham, 1995).





This is evident in several domestic studies, which predominantly focus on issues such as the readiness of human resources (HR), the stages of e-government implementation in a region, the influence of e-government on HR performance, and the technology used in e-government. Existing research often applies theories from outside the e-government field rather than building a strong theoretical framework specifically about e-government. This results in difficulties in connecting theory with e-government practices in the field, as e-government itself does not inherently require a theory, given its role as a tool in bureaucratic reform.

Regardless of the origin of the theory or whether a specific theory has been formed about e-government, something very interesting occurred in Sragen Regency, a pioneer in the implementation of e-government in Indonesia. Since the use of this technology for population data collection at the village level, the idea initially emerged to establish an Integrated Service Office (KPT) as a one-stop service provider. This evolved with the creation of an Integrated Service Unit for Poverty Alleviation (UPT-PK) to support government programs aimed at reducing poverty. In this case, e-government was able to provide added value that exceeded expectations – something that may not have been anticipated initially. Ironically, while European society is already focused on economic growth issues when discussing e-government, many third-world countries are still grappling with the fundamental challenge of improving people's welfare. This phenomenon is what Heeks (2002) refers to as "local improvisation" in the implementation of e-government.

This research was conducted in Situbondo Regency by interviewing echelon III and echelon IV officials responsible for innovation (Informant I) and public services (Informant II), as well as members of the public who use information technology-based public services (Informant III and Informant IV). When asked about the importance of innovation through information technology (e-government), Informant I and Informant II responded as follows:

*"... Public services based on information technology must always be developed. In our office, there are seventeen services, which are certainly our innovation. Some of them have received awards from the Director General, but the most phenomenal is the one that involves other Regional Apparatus Organizations, so it's not just within our office environment. This has been very helpful for the community. They are really assisted by this innovation..."* (Informant I)

*"... Information technology clearly makes it easier for us to classify data and speed up the work done by the apparatus, and this has an impact on the speed and accuracy of public service targets. Thus, I think innovation is very important to develop. Innovation also helps achieve Key Performance Indicators, which encourage the achievement of the vision and mission of the local government..."* (Informant II)

Next, they were asked about the benefits of innovation using information technology (e-government) from the community's perspective, considering that community literacy is still not high enough and there is a digital divide, particularly in a district with highland/mountainous contours. The responses of Informant I and Informant II are as follows:

*"... It cannot be denied, this is true. We from the service have conducted socialization about the ease and efficiency that can be obtained from the use of information technology-based services, explaining the types of services available. However, the*

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*community prefers offline services, except for those implemented through socialization, such as the innovation where mothers and babies, after giving birth, immediately receive a Family Card, Child Identity Card, and Birth Certificate (without having to go to Population and Civil Registration Office). So, in the end, it's up to the community whether they want to use it or not. But to be honest, many people are reluctant to adopt online services. Even so, we continue to educate the community..." (Informant I)*

*"... This digital divide is a problem. Honestly, this is also what makes it difficult to fully implement online services. The community feels the difficulty, and perhaps only a few percent benefit from it. The obstacles are literacy and infrastructure that do not yet support, such as internet networks and communication tools used..." (Informant II)*

Meanwhile, the community users of information technology-based services (Informant III, who has literacy, a higher education background, and is not in the poor economic category, and Informant IV, who lacks literacy, has a low education background, and is in the poor economic category) conveyed the following:

*"... I understand that there are many online services, and I have used them several times. I've processed documents online, but when I need to print them, I still feel more comfortable going to the office and meeting an officer. There are also times when I'm busy, and I use a third party, because honestly, at that moment, I felt it was easier that way. It wasn't complicated, the process was accepted smoothly, and it didn't take much time. I was happy with that..." (Informant III)*

*"... I was given information about online services, but why do I often ask acquaintances to handle these matters for me? I don't understand online services, and I also have difficulty going out for work because when I go out, I don't earn money. My house is far from the district, I'm in the mountains, so it's better to leave it alone. Paying is also okay because that's what I prefer..." (Informant IV)*

The next question concerned the existence of third parties, as expressed by the community (Informant III and Informant IV), and the potential degradation of social cohesion with the online system. The responses from Informant I and Informant II were as follows:

*"... There is indeed a kind of third party that helps, yes. We're trying to eliminate it, but it's difficult to completely eradicate, though not impossible. As long as there are still users, it will continue. Honestly, I've met some of them who even wear uniforms similar to non-officials (honorary). The online system clearly reduces social cohesion because interaction is minimal or even non-existent. But that's the reality. What about those of us with distant families? We don't meet during Eid, only via WhatsApp or phone. But this doesn't mean I support the elimination of online services. Even though only a few use it now, there are alternatives. Don't forget that information technology is just a tool, and I'm sure that one day, the entire community will have this literacy..." (Informant I)*

*"... Yes, I've heard about that (third party). I've also heard that many efforts have been made. In fact, what's often complained about is that their income, if calculated, is greater than an ASN salary. Yes, this is a matter of public service, and there are many problems that are beyond our control. There are often opinions from the community that it's okay to go through a third party because they feel it's done with sincerity. In terms of social cohesion, yes, it has decreased. In fact, I think it's unfair to the entire community. There's inequality because of technology, and some people are left without service. Yes, we*



*should not make this technology the only solution. It is merely a tool in public service, and the interests of the community must still be prioritized...*" (Informant II)

31 The interview results indicate that the impact of implementing information technology can be positive or negative, depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. However, the added value is ultimately greater when information technology is applied, provided that the digital divide is minimized to ensure equal rights for all citizens. This approach would yield significant benefits in supporting e-government, including fostering an information-literate society and establishing a more accountable government.

Nevertheless, e-government reduces social cohesion due to minimal interaction between officials and the community. This situation also contributes to the persistent issue of third-party intermediaries, which are challenging to eliminate. The emancipatory essence of e-government is not apparent in its implementation, as field findings reveal that e-government functions merely as a tool for bureaucratic reform. This tool should not be regarded as a definitive solution to all problems. Therefore, its malfunction or non-functionality would not result in catastrophic consequences, given that it is not a fundamental element of the governmental system.

Positioning e-government as an alternative means of public service, rather than fully implementing it, would be a more prudent approach. This ensures that no citizen's rights are overlooked or suppressed.

## CONCLUSION

19 The reform of public services is exemplified through the implementation of e-government, reflecting accountability and aligning with the principle of emancipation. However, bureaucratic reform should prioritize a public policy system that incorporates humanist philosophical values and embodies good governance, rather than merely focusing on technological advancements. The digital divide remains a critical issue, as it silences citizens' rights due to a lack of digital literacy. This limitation prevents the formation of public accountability through e-government and creates opportunities for third-party intermediaries, which hinder the achievement of integrity and good governance. When information technology is implemented in a way that diminishes the digital divide, it can significantly enhance the equality of citizens' rights and provide substantial contributions to the success of e-government. These contributions include fostering an information-literate society and enabling a more accountable government.

13 The concepts of New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Service (NPS) share a focus on citizens; however, an overemphasis on NPM risks reducing government-community interactions to a cost-benefit perspective. Conversely, leaning heavily towards NPS might undermine the professionalism achieved under NPM, potentially reverting to outdated bureaucratic models. Thus, integrating Indonesian cultural values into e-government becomes both logical and crucial.

Ultimately, there is no universally "best" model of e-government; the optimal model is one that is tailored to regional needs and provides added value to its implementers. This study, conducted in Situbondo Regency with a limited

number of informants, highlights the need for further research in areas with restricted internet access. Expanding research to such regions would allow for more generalized findings relevant to public management and e-government in Indonesia.

Additionally, future studies should explore psychological, sociological, economic, and political dimensions to identify the best approaches to e-government implementation in the Indonesian context.

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