The Status of Vulnerable Groups in the Chinese e-Government Construction

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Abstract:

The socio-economy has developed quickly in China since its reforming and opening up, but the problem of vulnerable groups has also become very outstanding relatively. It has become an important problem how to guarantee vulnerable group’s right and benefit, which influences the Chinese social political stability and has a vital political meaning. For China, under the background of globalization and informatization, it is an important theme of Chinese information society and e-Government construction how to use ICT to accelerate the social status of the vulnerable group and prevent the digital gap widening.

However, the informatization and e-Government construction of China have not paid enough attention to the vulnerable group so far. The problem lies in this aspect that lacks special consideration of vulnerable groups either in government policy or in actual application project of e-Government infrastructure. At present stage, the vulnerable group has gained very few advantages from informative development. Such reason lies in that Chinese government treated excessively the economic increase as its only goal with and had neglected relatively public service, especially neglected its function of serving for vulnerable groups. The economic increase and e-Government construction cannot inevitably bring the vulnerable groups’ welfare increase or their rights guarantee because the relationship between them is weak.

In spite of this, some e-Government application projects have still provided the vulnerable group tools and channels they could not get before and have brought them certain convenience and welfare. These application projects are major: city public information service, agricultural information service, employment information service for unemployed persons or peasant workers, suits and appraisals of the government, letters and calls, and appeals or vote on net system as well as forum. What should be noticed is that these projects which are helpful for vulnerable groups’ welfare and development are not only extremely preliminary but for experiment or exploration merely.

The Chinese government need make effort in a lot of aspects to play the role of informatization and e-Government in improvement the situation of vulnerable groups at the same time. Under the condition of improvement pressure that faces the government is of its transparency, openness, integrity, efficiency and ability, the e-Government construction of Chinese government plays a key role. E-Government may realize the more reasonable disposition of the social resource and the better optimization of benefits through Chinese government management optimization, and then guarantee the basic benefit of vulnerable groups on system. As for the vulnerable group, the government should raise their technical equipment level and their ability of operating the computer and other information equipments immediately, arouse them the effective demand for information at the same time cooperated with the corresponding socio-economy policy. Thirdly, the government should also establish an idea that "informatization benefits universal", set up an effective training mechanism and develop some e-Government or informatization projects which can bring larger benefit for vulnerable groups somewhat promoted cooperatively by the government, enterprises and financial institutions, and research and consulting organization. In this complex process, it is vital that the government undertakes further responsibility and establish a series of positive policies.
Introduction: Vulnerable Groups in China: Concept and policy

Since the 1990s, the unfairness of income distribution and the gap between the rich and poor have been dramatically expanded. With the development of reform and opening up and the growth of economy, the actual interests and welfares of some classes and groups didn’t increase as the anticipated, while, they have to bear the cost of the reform and opening up and therefore they constructed the vulnerable groups in China. The public opinion, the academic circles and the government have paid great attention to the living conditions of the vulnerable groups including the peasant, the migrant rural worker, the urban laid-off worker and the handicapped. In March 2002, Premier Zhu Rongji mentioned “the vulnerable group” in the “Government Work Report” at the Fifth Session of the Ninth NPC, and then the vulnerable groups drew even wider attention home and abroad.

As one of the prominent social and policy issues, the vulnerable groups in China are somewhat different from “the vulnerable groups” in the European and American social policies or social welfare literature both in definition and contents. In the European and American literature, “the vulnerable group” is defined from the point of losing the ability of working and living independently, therefore, it mainly refers to those who are comparably vulnerable or weak and then have to live on the social life and social welfare, and losing or having no ability of working and lacking the necessary living income are the common characters of them. Different to Europe and America, the current problems of vulnerable groups in China mainly concern the situation of possession and distribution of the economy growth outcome among different stratum or groups, which is resulted from the distribution structure of certain social resources and interests of the given government. It is not the individual naturalness or physiological-psychological reasons (though the physiological and psychological vulnerable is included) but the governmental policies or social structures caused the appearance of the vulnerable groups and therefore, it is a social phenomenon involving much wider social public. It is in this sense that the Chinese scholars tend to “define the vulnerable groups as those social colonies who need the help and support from his nation and society because they can not maintain the basic living standard for themselves and their family members with their own strength or ability”. They point out “the vulnerabilities reflect

mainly in the poor economic and political strength. The vulnerable groups are the groups who are
disadvantaged in the economic and right structures of the society they also found “the vulnerable
groups at the age of reform are different from that of the past and that of the western countries.
These groups have no advantages at all in power, rights, chances of development and living
materials because of the various objective limitations (of themselves or the social circumstance)
rather than the subjective lowliness or limitation. Specifically speaking, it refers to the
disadvantaged colonies (including the unemployed, the laid-off workers, people with low quality,
women, the elders and so on) who are disadvantaged in economic income, social status,
rights-upholding and competitive ability etc in the reform. On the whole, “The social vulnerable
group is a special colony who is poor in terms of wealth, low in terms of living standard and weak
in terms of endurance capability in the distribution of the social resources.” Obviously, the
problems of the social vulnerable group in China have the nature of strong social political and are
a special form of the public-government relationship. Therefore, the key point to understand and
solve the problems of vulnerable group is that the vulnerable group is a result of the government
policies and then depends on the government policies.

There are many methods to solve the problems of the vulnerable groups and improve their
situation in the distribution of the social economic growth so that they can earn greater share.
Giving the vulnerable groups necessary status both in political idea and authority is the starting
point and foundation. In fact, the obvious problems of the vulnerable groups in China have drawn
much attention from the highest ranks of the Communist Party of China. The report of the
Sixteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China pointed out “We will have a fairly
sound social security system. There will be a higher rate of employment. People will have more
family property and lead a more prosperous life”, “Bearing in mind the objective of common
prosperity, we should try to raise the proportion of the middle-income group and increase the
income of the low-income group”, and “Establishing and improving a social security system
compatible with the level of economic development constitutes an important guarantee for social
stability and long-term peace and order in the country.” The prepositions as the "the harmonious
society", and "sharing reform achievement" presented by the Chinese Communist Party afterwards
focus in narrowing the great income distribution gap and relieving social contradictions and
conflicts. All the above are the corresponding responses to the problems of the vulnerable groups
from the political dimensions.

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4 Jiu Jiansen, Cheng Xinzheng: *Study about Vulnerable Groups in Reforms, the Collection of 2nd National Theory
In the specific social policies of the government, the Chinese government has already carried on some necessary adjustments, such as taking actual measures to enlarge the investment into the rural area and agriculture to build a “new countryside”; nearly denying the trial reform plan which is at cost of the actual benefit of the low-income groups and launching the new trial reform of the medical care and health service system; putting free compulsory education measures into effect, reducing the quantity of the dropout in countryside and reliving the tuition burden of the students form the low-income families and increasing the strength of the social security reform and so on. Some of these policies have already worked and some are just at the beginning.

Making use of ICT, the e-Government, as the new form of government management at the information age, has the potential and the superiority to develop the management ability of the government, to expand service supplies of the government, and to improve the level and efficiency of service delivery. It will consequently contribute to the improvement of the vulnerable group’s situation. However, as technical facility and means of management, it is hard for e-Government to realize great achievement given that no obvious change occurred in the social structure and the government policy because the vulnerable group itself is resulted directly from the function of the improper social structure and the government policies. Meanwhile, limited by the decision-making mechanism of the Chinese government, the public and the vulnerable groups do not have effective channels and the opportunities to participate in decision-making. As a result, the e-Government has almost became “an independent kingdom” where the government executive authority can “do as they please”. This kind of system and the mechanism provide great convenience for the government to manage and is good to protect the specialty of the government and its benefits, however, it also adds characteristic of “Government Managerialism” to the E-Government application obviously and makes the construction and application of e-Government tend too much to the government itself while lacks functions and contents serving the public. The structural imperfection in the design and application project assignment of E-Government, and also make its ability to serve the public and vulnerable groups. Therefore, in providing more services to the vulnerable groups and improving their capability so as to make it easier for them to share the economic growth results and melt into the society, the construction and application of E-Government still face many challenges.
I. Development of Chinese E-Government and Its Major Orientation

(i) The development course of Chinese E-Government and its main achievement

The development of Chinese E-Government can be roughly divided into 3 stages. Time before 1993 is the stage of exploration and experiment, and focus in this period is office automation, that is to build crosswise internal work network. Around 1985, the central authorities implemented the “golden sea project” to serve the offices of Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council, which raised upsurges of office automation construction in the governmental system.

From 1993 to 2000, it is the primary construction stage. In the informatization construction of the central government, the State Council decided to construct the "golden bridge", "golden customs" and "golden card" projects in March. 1993, which pulled open the prologue of the construction of “golden” projects; decided to set up the State Economic Informatization Joint Conference to program, organize and coordinate the social system projects of national economic informatization.

In the informatization construction of the local government, Qingdao of Shandong Province established the first proper government website---"the Qingdao government affairs online " in April 1998. Based on the central and local informatization infrastructure and the foundation of E-Government construction, the China Telecommunication and the Economic Information Center of the State Economy & Trade Committee, united more than 40 ministries and commissions (office and bureau) proposed to launch “the government online project “ in January, 1999, raised upsurges of government online in the nationwide governments. Levels of governments, from the central ministries and commissions and province or municipality down to the districts or cities, jointed the campaign. The government online project impelled the governments to make use of networks and laid foundation for the governments to manage and serve online.

After the October of 2000, the importance of the E-Government was further realized by the high ranks of the governments and then the construction of E-Government came into the third stage. At this stage, the governments and the public opinion know more about the significance of the E-Government. It is acknowledged that E-Government is one of the most important infrastructures and the prerequisite to informatize the society completely; with its functions of strengthening the leadership of the Communist Party and improving its administration ability, E-Government can
improve the management of the government and so the construction of E-Government should be push forward positively just in order to adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party. E-Government spread rapidly across the whole country and became an important way to improve generally speaking, the main achievements in E-Government construction in China at this stage include:

First, the government website construction has obtained certain achievement. By the end of June 30, 2005, the websites named GOV.CN in China had amounted to 19,802. In 2005, 96.1% of ministries and commissions owned their departmental website, in 31 province authorities there are 28 ones (90.3%) own their portal website, 316 area-style governments (94.9%) have their own websites among 333 ones, 77.7% counties’ governments own their portals. In 2005, the Chinese Government Website was started which linked the Central Government site and each of the independent sites of the local governments and it is expected to be the portal of the Chinese Government site gradually.

Second, taking the government website as the basic carrier, E-Government obtained certain functions and transactions and interactions online have also developed to some degree. The idea of making the E-Government and the government website as the government entities to interact with the public and handle some businesses is approved by more and more people who are responsible for the construction of E-Government and it is taken by them as an important target in work. Some places have achieved great improvement. The Shanghai government’s portal named “Chinese Shanghai” has improved the ability of public service through integration resource, which over 1,000 pieces business services can be offered online and over 2,000 business forms can be downloaded, as well as over 1/3 items can be reported online.

Third, the publicity of government information obtained some achievement impelled by E-Government. The State Council asked the ministries and commissions to speed up the advancement of information publicity at some relative conferences in May 2003. A succession of laws, regulations, rules and methods related to information publication were set down and enacted by provinces or cities as Guangzhou, Shanghai, Hubei, Jilin, and Jiangsu and the State Ministry of Land and Resources as well as the State Food and Drug Administration. The "Regulations on Governmental Information Publication" has already been submitted to the Legislative Affairs Office of the State Council.

The openness of government affairs in all villages, towns and counties are being brought into the

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orbit of standardization gradually. There the procedure and results of management are publicized, and several patterns have been established such as one-stop office, journey charge d'affaires, the open government management hall and so on. Many cities (or areas) begin to open their government affairs officially, the overwhelming majority cities’ (or areas) governments have formulated the related standardization document for opening their affairs.

Fourth, the government affairs information service which depends on the government website has obtained some certain achievements. The major types of information service provided by the government website are "departments introduces (66.3%)", "the government function/business introduction (61.2%)", "laws and regulations/policies/documents (60.4%)" and "government news (59.4%)"; The interactive services which the government website provides most are "the government mailbox (45.8%)", "the message center (40.0%)", "suits/reports to the authorities/inquiry (38.0%)" and "poll/opinion collection (30.2%)"; The proportion of those government websites is 47.6% in which the government daily business and the website correlation service unifies extremely closely. Because the government affairs information service closely revolves the departmental function and unifies closely with its concrete business or prominently strengthens the interactive service, then they have accumulated some successful experiences.

Fifth, the economic informatization and the construction of macroscopic economical supervising & managing system offered by the government develop quickly. With the fast development of "the golden tax", "the golden customs", "the golden shield", "the golden audit", "the golden card" and some other priority projects, the information technology methods have played a vital role in improving the administrative supervising and managing ability and enhancing the law enforcement level. In order to construct a service-typed government, the government information publicly has sped up the government steps in institution and the standardization construction. The partial local government portals’ construction develops quickly, the government affairs transparency further strengthens, and the populace can handle matters more conveniently.

Sixth, the government synchronizes the development of countryside informatization with that of agriculture at many aspects. The Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Science & Technology and China Meteorological Administration have established two networks such as the Chinese Rural Science & Technology Information Network (http://www.crst.cn) and the Chinese Promotion Agriculture Network (http://www.cnan.gov.cn/cnan), which helps farmers to know the information of market, science & technology as well as the policies. There are over 6,000 nationwide websites for agriculture established by other social organizations or enterprises, which had issued massive information not only about agricultural supply and demand but also about attracting/bidding

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for/inviting investments. Theses websites have being promoted the agricultural product circulation and help the farmer gain additional interests. In addition, the informatization infrastructure construction also more and more receives takes in the countryside. The project that "every village has telephone" and "every village has broadcast and television" has being further carried out, and the universal information service in rural has turned into the concrete implementation stage.

**Seventh**, in social public domain, the informatization has become a part of the E-Government. The social efficiency and the economic efficiency of some applications are quite obvious in those domains such as long-distance learning, long-distance medical, digital library, digital entertainment and so on. In some economy-developed areas and cities, with the help of the utilization numeral technology and the network technology, the governments are advancing many informatization constructions such as residential card system, resident vigorously services hotline, non-native population management, social security information system, network education and community service, etc. After experienced those events arisen suddenly such as "SARS" and the bird flu and so on, the government has made some positive progress in using the information technology to impetus society emergency coordinated system construction. The information technology widespread application has improved the investment environment, enhanced the city synthesis management and the service level and has facilitated the people's life.

**ii. Chinese E-Government Construction and Its Main Orientation of Development**

The Chinese E-Government was raised as a tool of the government macroscopic economy management at the beginning. In the main application system construction process, it is always the major gravity of the E-Government not only to serve for the macroscopic economical development and management but also to enhance the management and surveillance ability of the government in those essential economic branches through informatization. Along with the embezzlement and corruption behavior appearance during the economy development, it also becomes an important goal of the E-Government construction to strengthen the corruption control through an information method.

Why can the Chinese government which continuously takes the economy increase as the essential target in its policy pay enormous warm attention to the E-Government development in the turn of the century? The reason directly lies in the goal of the Chinese economic development and its environment. Around 2000, The Chinese economy faced with the pressure which further develops and how to adapt the international economy competition has become a major problem which
puzzles the Chinese government leaders after China joined the WTO. Informatization becomes the breakthrough tool. In October 2000, the informatization has been read in the congress resolution for the first time in the Fifth Plenary Session of the 15th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in October 2000, which is the topmost senior political council of the Party, it pointed out that "(informatization) is the essential link to realize the industrialization and modernization as well as our industrial optimization & promotion. We must put it to the position which gives priority to development to advance the national economy and social informatization". To advance vigorously the national economy and social informatization is the strategic action to cover the whole modernization construction, and the congress presented later a famous slogan, that is "for industrialization by informatization, to display our advantage to develop after the other countries has developed, and to realize the great-leap-forward development of our social productive forces". This plenary has established the functional position of the informatization construction and this is the policy foundation of the E-Governmental construction and development later.

It is precisely because the informatization plays a functional role in economic increase and China also is a traditional government-standard country that E-Government considered as the vanguard of informatization therefore becomes an important tool to promote the economy development. The series of transformation relationship among economic development, informatization and E-Government has very quickly evolved into concrete policies. In December 2001, the National Informatization Leading Group hold the first plenary and presented five big policies which must be followed during the Chinese informatization construction. They pointed out that "the Chinese government should be develop informatization in advance", meanwhile, they also has made it clear and definite that the strategic direction is to promote informatization development through E-Government which is considered as the most important work. In 2002, the Informatization Work Office of the State Council formulated and promulgated an first Chinese informatization special plan, and they established a strategy, that is "the governments go first, then lead the national economy and social development together". In August 2002, the National Informatization Leading Group’s Instruction Opinion about Our Country’s E-Government Construction was issued, this document had stipulated the guiding ideology, basic principle, the primary missions and the safeguard measures of the Chinese E-Government construction during the period of the ten five-year program, and have carried on the whole deployment to an issue of priority project. In November, 2002, the 16th Party Congress Political Report further pointed out, that realization the industrialization is still the arduous historical task during our modernization advancement and informatization is our inevitably choice to speed up the industrialization and modernization. So
China must persist by realizing industrialization through informatization and promoting the informatization by industrialization. Then China can strive for going out a new industrialization path with high technology content, good economic efficiency, low resources consumes, few environmental pollution and full human resources superiority display. Obviously, the E-Government as the premise of the total social informatization will entrust with the important mission and its function will be manifested clearly. "Economic development first" is the mentality of Chinese E-Government construction and development which has played different-degreeted role in dealing with those overall major problems of Chinese macroscopic economical management. Some domains, especially the "strip-strip" domain, the government has obtained an astonishing performance in tax revenue and management as a result of the E-Government implementation and its ability to derive finance has also enhanced distinctly. Some local authorities namely “block-block domain” have also chosen many methods of E-Government in some domains such as attracting/bidding for/inviting investments, industry and commerce registration management and tax revenue though they have not obtained so much performance like "the strip-strip domain". Otherwise, they are proud for convenience, high effectiveness and the expense reduction.

On the other hand, the E-Government construction and its development have neglected and reduced the orientation of public services and the function development of E-Government consciously or unconsciously. In fact, not only have E-Government application projects of the central authorities seriously neglected the public service function, but also some lower levels in local governments. They all seriously neglected how to offer help and expand welfare supplies for the vulnerable groups. Therefore, looked from the overall characteristic, so far, in different aspects such as its basic idea, its policy and its application, the Chinese E-Government construct extremely lack attention to the public service, in particular to the vulnerable groups. The concrete manifestations are:

- In the most important policy document related to informatization and E-Government, those questions related to the vulnerable groups is basically neglected, though the conditions have changed in the recent year;
- There is no any E-Government project with nationwide significance which appeared mainly for vulnerable groups until now, although some local authorities have poured a certain enthusiasm regarding into this;
- During the process related the formation of E-Governmental strategies, laws, policies and projects, there are no any feasible mechanism and channel to obtain the request of vulnerable groups until now, and they cannot effectively enter in the policy formulation process of the E-Government development.
As in all levels of E-Government application and the website design are concerned, they also lack special consideration and attendance to the vulnerable groups generally.

II. The Public Service Function of China’s E-Government and its Influence upon vulnerable groups

i. The Public Service Function of China’s E-Government: Situation and Origin

Although the situation and function of China’s E-Government depends on the basic orientation of its construction and development, the overall orientation of its construction is obviously lack of the interests and enthusiasm of serving for the public, the vulnerable group, in particular. Also, the government websites and application system of all levels, which lack interaction and public service, always becomes an object of attack and criticism. But the reduction in time lag, the expansion of dissemination, on-line interaction, the simplification of administrative procedure, and the enhancement of government efficiency brought by E-Government itself objectively benefit the public in some degree when they deal with government-related business.

At the same time, despite the neglect of public service in the overall development of E-Government, it still has certain public service function due to many factors as given below:

· Although the construction of E-Government in China is economy-oriented in its mainstream orientation and main function, but leaders of all levels have realized the necessity and importance of public service in some sensitive social and political issues like “Three Rural Issues” (Farmers, Rural Areas and Agriculture Production), “come off sentry duty”; they are also aware that the construction of public information infrastructure, the interaction with the public through the network, providing some public information for the public, facilitating the populace and so on are important constituents of the construction of Information Infrastructure and where its value is. Therefore, though these reminders and request usually can hardly put into concrete construction project, but these words and instruction with "political correctness" played a role of supplement for the concrete construction of informatization and E-Government, and the shape of the pattern and function of E-Government in China.

· The criticism of lack public service on E-Government impelled some E-Government construction authority of local governments to enhance the service function of E-Government. The start of E-Government construction in many local governments and the Chinese vulnerable groups issue increasingly became the prominent social and political issues simultaneously. Therefore, public concern for vulnerable groups has been noticed by some local governments’ leaders, and
embodied with different degree in respective E-Government plan and construction projects, which will promote the realization of public service function of E-Government.

- The dissemination of concepts and experience such as Service-oriented Government, Good Governance, One-stop Service and so on, provides reference and instruction for determining the function of Chinese governments of all levels and planning the service function of E-Government. For Chinese government, from “Management-oriented Government” to “service-oriented Government” is a very big surmounting in concepts and practice, whether these concepts and experiences correspond with the present situation of specific locality and department or not. The dissemination of concepts, ideas and experience itself is a very good political advertisement. These ideas and experience have encouraged those people who are willing to change the present situation of government management as far as possible. They hope that bureaucracy as well as embezzlement and corruption can be reduced and constrained by means of improving public service function in government management.

- The local governments have relatively big independence in the construction of E-Government. The Chinese traditional centralization has already changed a lot during the process of reform and open, and the local governments have obtained a certain level of independence in some non-critical and non-mainstream aspects. Because the E-Government construction is a brand-new thing, the central government did not follow the common management pattern to manage informatization and E-Government, whereas implemented its leadership by “instructing”, “demonstrating”, “advising” as well as providing fund. Consequently, it has to allow the local governments, under the overall instruction guiding principle of the central government, to carry out independent exploration to certain degree. This kind of independence give local governments power to decide whether to strengthen the public service function of its application system in local E-Government project or not. In fact, it was precisely this kind of independency that caused some local governments, especially the low level local government to have greatly enhanced the service tendency in E-Government application.

ii. E-Government Application Projects and Informatization Infrastructure that Brought Convenience and Benefits for Vulnerable Groups

The E-Government application projects and informatization infrastructure, mainly provided by some local governments, have relatively stronger tendency to serve for the public. Comparatively, the informatization infrastructure construction under the guidance of administrative departments of the central government, which aimed to change the disadvantaged condition of the vulnerable
groups, mainly concentrated in a few specific domain and departments.

(i) Urban Public Information Service

Providing information needed by the public is one of the issues that the local governments attach importance to. The common government portal provides rich public information, and some websites provide the information service separately according to different participants, such as citizens, enterprises, and so on. As for the citizens, some websites provide information and online business guidance according to different needs of different physiological stage. But regardless of websites of the central government or local governments at all levels, and no matter how fascinating the design is, they all failed to give special focus on the vulnerable groups. The demands of the vulnerable groups for government information and business assistance are quite different from the common public. Even governments provided massive information service, the benefits that the vulnerable groups obtained from it is probably extremely limited, given that they did not take the vulnerable groups’ demands into account.

As a compensation for the neglect of the vulnerable groups’ capability by the common government website, some local governments facilitate the public, the vulnerable groups in particular, through public information equipments on the street corner or in the community, helping them share the benefits brought by information society. Many cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou, Foshan, Qingdao have set up some kind of terminal facilities like "kiosk"; some local governments also provide remedial class to those who don’t now how to use computer and the network through community. The “digital Beijing Kiosk” was one of the sixty businesses Beijing Municipality pledged to do for the public in 2003. The government made use of 40 million Yuan investments of enterprises to have completed more than 300 kiosks. Touch the screen, and the user will enter variety of social websites. Also, residents may pay water, electricity, and gas bills through the kiosk. In 2004, the “Digital Beijing Kiosk” was brought into 56 businesses of Beijing Municipality once again, planning to increase 300 kiosks. Although such problems as the high cost and low use ratio occurred in the construction and the use of kiosks, the government still took it as an important “Convenient Measure to people”\(^\text{10}\).

Suzhou Municipality of Jiangsu Province started to use kiosk in 2005, and they plan to deploy 300 kiosks in the city by the end of 2005. The kiosk has 22 columns, including 40,000 items, such as important government affairs, social security, medical information service, traffic and weather, community service, job hunting and recruitment, and so on. It also has many kinds of functions

like electronic map, information inquiry, payment service, delivery, and book selling\(^{11}\).

In order to facilitate and attract those who don’t have access to the internet to use the ICT to communicate with governmental agencies, these local governments have provided some terminal facilities like kiosks, digital home, information park, countryside information room, the Internet bar to help and encourage the vulnerable groups to enter the network and information society. However, some observations and reports indicated that many of these street corner terminal devices did not bring its due function into full play. In particular, the vulnerable groups seldom use them\(^{12}\). The possible reason of this problem is that the information provided by kiosks did not meet the actual needs of the vulnerable groups. In fact, for people in extremely disadvantageous situation of information, their information demands are extremely low\(^{13}\). To improve the information-disadvantaged situation of the vulnerable groups, the first thing to do is to promote their information effective demands that contribute to the improvement of their social and economic status, which requires them to have corresponding knowledge, culture and psychological bases. Obviously, if the vulnerable groups do not possess these basic conditions, and if the information offered by governments is not closely related to their daily life, the utilization rate of the information terminal facilities is certainly low.

**(ii) Agricultural Information Service**

China's agriculture production, farmers and rural areas are issues with very high political sensitivity. Compared with other vulnerable groups, farmers received more attention of governments at all levels. The agriculture information service was attached relatively greater importance by the government in China, and made some progress, which has direct relations with the importance of so-called “Three Rural Issues”. It is precisely under such a background, China has put greater importance on ICT construction concerning farmers than that of other vulnerable groups.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture's official data, 97% agriculture departments of the municipality level and 80% of county level in China all established the agriculture informatization teams in 2005, forming a system at various levels from the state to local governments; 40 stable information gathering channels have been formed in agriculture, stock-raising, aquatic products, reclamation, farm machinery and so on; 180,000 rural information collectors have been hired to


transmit the information to farmers directly; 31 provinces and municipalities and autonomous regions, 80% agriculture departments of municipality level and 40% of county level have all established LAN; 80% information service stations of villages and towns have networked computers; three application systems as the rural product examination early-warning, market supervising and managing, and the rural market science and technology information service are improving and consummating gradually.  

In terms of providing agricultural information, Ministry of Agriculture established the system of “Economic Information Issue Calendar of Ministry of Agriculture” in 2003, forming media issue window subordinating to the Ministry, with Farmers' Daily, Ministry of Agriculture Agricultural Information Network, CCTV - 7, Countryside Magazine, Central Agriculture Broadcast School as leading media; the Ministry set up satellite communication system with provincial Bureau of Agriculture, and has completed the establishment of the national agricultural portal with the agriculture network as the core and more than 20 specialized websites as a body. Some agriculture related departments, like scientific research institutes, Meteorological Departments, Water Departments and so on, also made efforts to push the establishment and utilization of websites at all levels. The database created by agriculture departments of all levels has almost covered every aspect of agricultural production. On the whole, the nationwide infrastructure and organization system of agriculture information service basically came into being.

Compared with other relatively improved infrastructure and organization system, nationwide agriculture information service has still not found a good solution to the problems of the pertinence and effectiveness of information. Some officials pointed out, although China has many agriculture related websites, most of them do not satisfy farmers’ actual needs. Information on some websites is identical and redundant, and some websites even do not aim at farmers. Some criticisms also pointed out, the problems arisen in the facilities and quality of agriculture information service are related with the fact that multitudinous special interest groups try to grab, and share the resources for “Three Rural Issues” provide by the government. Some scholars indicated that the agriculture information service has difficulty realizing its value due to the

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15 Zhang Yuxiang, the director of the Market and Economic Information Department of Ministry of Agriculture: To Develop the Sources Concerned to Agriculture and Promote Information Service in Different Forms, September 22, 2005. http://news.ceidnet.com/art/2049/20050922/339007_1.html.


“marginalization” of China’s rural informatization. Nowadays, the disadvantaged status of farms has not been effectively promoted yet, and the Internet has not been popularized in rural areas. Under these circumstances, the agriculture information service in the developing process of E-Government still needs further exploration. Otherwise farmers can hardly benefit from it.

In each local government, the agriculture information service construction has also made some progress in varying degrees.

Chengdu Municipality of Sichuan Province has created "West China Agriculture Online (www.cwaol.gov.ca)", as early as in 2001, and established some county level specialized agriculture information service websites, including 8 first level columns such as “news center”, “agricultural commerce”, “agricultural science and technology”, “online exhibition hall” and so on, as well as 62 second level columns, 312 third level columns. The website has increased more than 20,000 pages, and enjoyed a hit rate of more than 320,000 visits by 2004. According to incomplete statistics, 12,500 pieces of rural economic information were released, and the trade volume of online agricultural products reached 89 million Yuan from January to September in 2004 on Chengdu rural economy information network.

The Beijing Pinggu area agricultural comprehensive information website has different plates, such as policy, production, region, science and technology, business, farmers employment and so on, each plate providing different services for different groups from different angles and aspects. Farmers may learn production knowledge, market information, employment information and so on, according to their own needs. In addition, farmers may also select multimedia new technology study program, and through the network they may learn some new technologies concerning cultivation, management, plant protection and so on. In 2005 Dahuashan town sold more than 10 million kilograms peaches through “Chinese peach town” website of the Pinggu area, accounting for 57% of the total peach output 20.5 million kilograms of the entire town, and realized sales income of 32 million Yuan online. The agriculture websites become an information platform for farmers to search sales information for agricultural products and moneymaking information.

“Information service on towns and townships website” of Huizhou of Guangdong Province created in October, 2003, established information distribution platforms in the whole 82 towns and townships, providing service for farmers directly. Farmers of Longmen County distribute information through the Internet, and only by selling oranges their income was increased over 20 million Yuan one year. In agricultural model districts (such as Ma’an Town of Hui Cheng, Shiwan

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Town of Bolu), farmers may not only access the net to distribute supply and demand information about their agricultural products, but also gain abundant production information and scientific knowledge about crops-planting on-line. Besides, the network has also brought obvious benefits for local farmers in aspect of attracting investment, traveling and so on. According to the statistics, Longmen County receives altogether 1.103 million tourists in 2004, increased 78.7%, compared to that of 2003, and realized tourism gross income 348 million Yuan, with an increase of 130% over that of the same period last year. Meanwhile, hotel industry obtained fast development.

(iii) Unemployment and Employment Information Service for Migrant Rural Workers

Different with the agriculture information service, although China's present unemployment issue is serious, a little progress has been made in application systems for providing job-hunting instruction and service by means of informatization method. Only recently did related departments of the government begin to show their focus on this issue\(^20\). However, E-Government construction of few places has taken the question of offering employment information service for migrant rural workers and unemployed urban residents into consideration.

“Labor Export Platform” of Hengshui Municipality

Massive migrant rural workers go to some big or media-sized cities every year in Hengshui Municipality of Hebei Province. Hengshui Municipality created “Labor Export Platform” to solve migrant rural workers’ blind job-hunting. In accordance with the overall requirements of “export in order”, “establishment of employment base”, “specialized training” and “standardized service”, this platform uses means of informatizaion to help solving the labor exporting issue, providing accessorial service for it, thus forming an information service network covering the whole municipality, which can provide labor force resources, employment information, and related policies at any moment. In 2005 the whole municipality increased 124,000 exporting labors, shifted 177,000 people locally.

Long-distance Job Interview System for Migrant rural workers

The first long-distant job interview system for migrant rural workers in China was put into use in Sichuan in July, 2005. More than 20 million Yuan were invested in this system. It targets migrant rural workers, laid-off staff and workers, and unemployed persons as its service objects. This system enables migrant rural workers to have face-to-face communication with enterprises

through the Internet and video system, and reduced their risk and cost for job-hunting. According to a survey, it only costs migrant rural workers 10 Yuan to find a job through this system, less than three or four hundred Yuan than through job agency. This system constructed a platform providing omni-directional service for government departments, educational training organizations, enterprises and institutions, job agencies, and labors (migrant rural workers in particular), and became an information channel providing migrant rural workers with employment information, long-distance interviews, long-distance home visit, employment discussion, network training and legal aid. Sichuan Province has already installed terminal devices of this system in Chengdu, Jin Tang, Longchang, shehong (county) and Shenzhen, and are planning to install them in more than 50 provincial labor bases and extend to Beijing, Guangzhou, Fujian, Shanghai Sichuan where Sichuan exports more labors to.

The employment information auxiliary system integrated “Shanghai Public Employment network” with the “Public Welfare Card” for Internet Access.

Different with two above-mentioned cases, “Shanghai Public Employment network” started in May 2005 mainly aims at laid-off workers of living in the city. This system has already released information of 550,000 posts from May to October in 2005, and 1.5 million people applied for jobs online, of which more than 60,000 people had found the job through the public employment network. Given that some families cannot afford to buy the computer and install the “wide band” become of difficult financial situation caused by unemployment, Shanghai Changning district Labor & Social Security Bureau and the municipal community culture service center cooperating with Jiangsu street distributed Eastern information park “Public Welfare Card” for the Internet access. This card was paid by the government (15 Yuan a year per person), was provide to unemployed persons free of charge. The cardholder may not only search employment information on the Internet for free within one year, but also obtain technical guidance form the information park staff and the trained employment aid assistant. Obviously, integrating public information services with social aids will produce more values for the vulnerable groups for it is convenient for them to obtain the information and realize re-employment.

The above cases are about the attempts made by the local governments to enlarge the aid for migrant rural workers and laid-off worker by means of ICT, which has obtained certain effect. But compared with applications in other domains, the E-Government development in the employment information service still lags behind, which verified the deviation of the basic orientation in
China’s E-Government construction. In China where supply exceeds demand, economic growth does not depend on the full employment of labor force, so the informatization of the labor employment receives little attention from governments of all levels. Until the farmer and unemployed worker's issue was so serious that it might probably cause the society and politics unstable, was the issue of E-Government assisting the employment placed on the agenda. On the other hand, the above cases are also preliminary exploration. If related government departments do not effectively coordinate themselves, and share the information, in fact the employment information service is unable to be put into practice. Because Hengshui Municipality do not know the detailed situation of nearly 2 million rural labor force, the employment service provided still continued the original pattern of “enterprises recruiting-finding workers, farmers seeking work-finding enterprises”. Therefore, its role is extremely limited in practical application. Obviously, this involves the government’s management of labor force, not merely an E-Government issue. To solve such problem, the government departments should develop and share labor force information resources. Only E-Government project itself is useless.

iv. To Sue and Appraise the Government

All levels of governmental websites have established mostly a column for the public to present their opinion, sue and appraise the authorities. The column has different name, but its function is mostly the same except for minor differences. To those governments or officials who mostly long-term live in the situation of government standard or officialdom standard which usually lacks political competition, this kind of system used for criticizing and appraising the governments can play a certain role in surveillance and drive function. As for the public, "the words power" realized through network also has a kind of certainly "participation" significance. These systems are usually responsible by those local Discipline Inspection Commissions of Chinese Communist Party, local authority's supervision bureau and other related departments. The public may consult the government department concerned or the window unit about the its responsibility, management procedure, social service pledge and the related laws/ regulations/or policies through the hotline, the network information platform, the forum and so on; They also can sue those worse phenomena such as collecting fees randomly, fining randomly and allocating randomly, as well as those officials who like "eat-take-catch-want" style, etc.; Meanwhile, they can put forward rational proposal, opinion and criticism to the government about their administrative action and the manner construction. The public might click on many correlative units, the website administrative personnel can pass the suits to the correlative units according to their content, by the archives form and through the government archives exchange platform.
Looking from actual effect, the "Profession-Atmosphere Hotline" by e-Government method has some certain promoter action to improve the manner of the government service and the quality of the public suits. The "Profession-Atmosphere Hotline" of the Huizhou City in Guangdong Province officially cleared at the end of December, 2004, and it had received 584 letters till March, 2005. The various departments of the municipal government replied 352 letters with 65.4% reply rate. Before the hotline cleared, the rate is 32.2%. It has reduced from the past two weeks to 2-3 days that the various functional departments of the government reply to these matters. The quality that the government department replies the letter also has greatly enhanced, moreover, their reply manner has changed into a friendly way. For example, The Jiangmen City of Guangdong Province proposes a slogan "12345, everything by the government", attempts to develop the government service hotline into a green channel to solve the resident’ actual difficulty, to facilitate and strengthen the communication and the exchange between the government and the resident. A government interior statistics indicates that, "12345", the government service hotline of Jiangmen City dealt with 30,935 calls in June, 2005 altogether, equally 1,031 per day. Various correlative units altogether accepted 4,642 effective items, 2,407 consultation, 2,231 suits and 4 praises. In June 2005, the government carries on an investigation about the degree of satisfaction on 198 items among the resident, the number of satisfactory is 118 and basic satisfactory is 57. The degree of satisfaction accounts for 88%23. At present, in Jiangmen, the residents can dial 12345 (the government service hotline) to solve everything concerned their suggestions, suits, praises, emergency aids and so on that involves the municipal administration, the city's appearance, the botanical garden afforests, the urban planning, Real estate, the street tube, law enforcement, environmental sanitation, environmental protection, street light, water supply, gas, construction market, building quality, safety surveillance and work safeguard consultation, etc. At the same time, in order to guarantee the government department administration time-effectiveness and the solemnity, the Jiangmen City also divides information of the government hotline into three levels: ordinary, urgent, the top grade. Each related department all must carry on definitions of these three levels about their respective business scope information. Because the resident’s suit will involve different level, then the system should automatically start the corresponding mechanism and guarantee the information of different level to be responsible directly by the different person. In addition, this system had also stipulated the government department must undertake the responsibility to the suit. If somebody or a certain unit causes one thing sued again, then the correlative person will have to undertake the corresponding responsibility, The event sued more

than one time will be solved personally by the director of the correlative bureau, more than twice by of events by the correlative vice mayor and more than three times by the mayor of the city.

v. The Inquiry (Letters and Calls) and Suit System

Being different from the criticism faced with public complaint and Bureaucracy, the inquiry and suit mainly reflect the tension degree between the public and the government departments either in staff's politics or the legal in a certain way. As a result of the political system limits and the legal expirations, the public often adopt the "inquiry" method which is a special Chinese characteristic way to solve these kind of questions. At present, the inquiry has already become a serious political-legal puzzle of governments at all levels. The governments from the central to the local are paying high attention to how to reduce the political destructiveness which the inquiry accumulates through the E-Government. But then so, it is extremely partial that the inquiry work has taken advantage of the Information Communication Technology (ICT) and its mechanism, and the E-Government also develops slowly. Let's take the State Bureau for Letters and Calls as the example, its official website is just static place to issue the government information. Among the entire inquiry system, except for extremely few, the websites of the majority departments and local authorities do not provide the inquiry application on the net.

The minority advanced inquiry information system cases are being valued by the people. For example, the inquiry system of Xuhui District in Shanghai completed in 2005 as the experimental site has the unprecedented value. Because their former inquiry system had no strong openness, no broad coverage, sole service type and inferior limitation of information sharing ability, this district developed a new system which is more open to handle many matters, more stable and nimble, more effective authorization. This new system has abandoned former business pattern pointed to single inquiry organization, unified the whole inquiry information system, comprehensively combed the complete inquiry service business flow, taken the data conformity as the core, faced the policy-making support and public service, and formed an integrated "accepted-from-one-point-and-served-by-entire-net" inquiry service pattern. At present, those letters, visits, calls, e-mails and facsimiles from the entire area including 63 departments or units, various streets or towns and group companies will all be accepted, handled or answered in the information system. Statistics indicated that, from July 1, 2005 to October 31, 2005, the entire area there were 149,467 people who clicked on the inquiry information system and register 6,334 letters and calls, and 4,133 letters or calls registered by the District Office of Letters and calls, 2,201 by various units themselves. Among these letters and calls, there were 5996 pieces registered for the first time, 338 pieces repeated, 5,880 accepted by the correlative units, 353 not accepted and 2,073 replied by
letters. All levels of leaders had already critiqued these inquiries for 8,681 times on-line. This new system not only has led the entire inquiry work to management intensively initially, information sharing, the resources conformity, but also has enhanced the ability level, the quality and the efficiency of entire area inquiry work. 24 This kind of pattern of Xuhui District has extremely high serviceability and value both for the government units and for those people who have to duplicate the inquiry many times, these inquiries will seriously waste the social resources and intensify opposition mood between the public and the government department.

vi. Forum and Vote Online

6. Forum and Vote on Net

Nearly, all government websites have established a kind of forum for the netizen to present their opinion, or a system for them to vote online. As for those people who attempt to influence government’s policy, the forum form is one of channels to be worth for try in such kind of society which relatively lack free discussion and free speech opportunities, though the effectiveness of this kind of channel has not received any high appraisement from the people.

In general, it has gotten certain achievement on the construction of opinion-poll, leaders’ mailbox, complaint on net and public forum, and has been received high attention of all levels of the government. About 50% of the ministries’ website of central government sets more than two volumes for public, most of them can offer 1or 2 kinds of public participation program. About 80% of provincial-level government’s websites at least offer the public one kind of participating form, for example, "Online Visit and Talk " as a new participating channel now is in preliminary try stage in Beijing, Shanghai, Jilin and some other provincial-level websites. About 40% of area-level government’s websites have possessed a relatively perfect channel for public to participate. The construction of opinion poll, suits on net and leader’s mailbox are also built relatively better in county-level government’s websites. 25

Some local governments with advanced e-Government construction are still using public participation program to enlarge the actual influence of the public in local government work. Qingdao municipal government website has designed 40 indexes to collect suggestion of citizens and enterprises through network and questionnaire, this method can not only offer important basis for website program and design but also strengthen the sense of responsibility and initiative of each department when they maintain and update the information and service resource by public supervision. Besides, The Party committee and municipal government of Qingdao Municipality has begun to held an activity through government website in July of each year, which is named "The Citizen Month I offer advice to Qingdao development" since 2003. They received over 12 thousand pieces of suggestion in the Citizen Month of 2005, and 95% of them were from network.

The Wuhu City of Anhui province has realized the negotiation between citizens and government leaders through the governmental website, the citizens’ suggestion has become the reference of mayor decision-making.

Conclusion

Seen easily from the simple investigation of the courses and situation of Chinese E-Government development, the actual and specific benefits brought by E-Government to the vulnerable groups have not been emphasized enough by the people so far. In China, E-Government serves mainly for the economy development of the society and the government; Even if in the aspect of public service, E-Government also lacks the special consideration for vulnerable groups. Obviously, along with the development of information society and the completeness of E-Government, the problem of vulnerable groups will be more and more stressed. The Chinese E-Government construction need to give vulnerable groups more barriers when it promote the government management to realize its goal of improvement continuity, thus, the development of E-Government and information society of China may be just valuable.

From the angle that solves the problem of vulnerable group, nowadays in e-Government construction, these questions should be paid special attention to:

**First**, the government must pay more attention to the situation improvement of the vulnerable group. If the government cannot raise vulnerable groups’ political status and cannot consider the equality of their socio-economy position as an important governmental goal, then it is also very hard to solve vulnerable groups’ position in e-Government.

**Second**, China should twist the idea that the E-Government construction serves the economic increase excessively, furthermore, should treat how to improve the government management and how to optimize the political system as the independent goal of E-Government construction. To serve for the public and the vulnerable group is as important as for economic development. Only in this way can the e-Government construction show its genuine respect and sincerity to vulnerable groups.

**Third**, China should abstract more public opinion during the policy decision to be relevant to E-Government construction and change the situation of pure administrative authorities’ individual dominant. Excessive policy-decision of administrative authorities has caused the government-standard color in Chinese e-Government construction, some E-Government projects, which is not only for administrative authorities themselves somewhat purely but also with huge cost, can not definitely bring positive influence to public welfare.

**Fourth**, under the condition of the actual economic status of vulnerable groups is still impossible to improve thoroughly, the construction of e-Government should consider the actual situation of low-income group, adopt various terminals and means and proliferate the effectiveness of e-Government and information society instead of being limited in general computer and network. From this angle, the construction of e-Government application project should be completely in accordance with the local actual condition instead of excessively emphasizing "purity".

**Fifth**, E-Government should make an important contribution to vulnerable groups to process more and better abilities to change their fate by informatization. So the supply of service and

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government management optimization realized through e-Government should be improved as possible as we can. Referring to this point, the improvement of government management optimization and its efficiency, is the major contribution to the improvement of vulnerable groups’ welfare.

**Sixth**, it is the lower level of economic income and the insufficient education that caused their lower ability of vulnerable group to accept the service form information society and E-Government low. Because it is impossible to raise their economic income quickly during a short period, one of replacing choice is to improve vulnerable groups’ ability in informatization’s application and adaptation through education and training.