Chapter 1

Stimulus funds, transparency and public trust

In the face of the rapidly unfolding global economic crisis, governments have acted swiftly to stabilize markets, restore economic growth and promote job creation. By October 2009, more than $20 trillion in public funds had been committed to addressing the crisis by some 50 countries – equivalent to more than one-third of world gross product. About 90 percent of this support went to underwriting the financial sector, with the remaining 10 percent allocated to the sort of government spending and tax breaks that constitute fiscal stimulus packages.¹

Many observers agree that central banks, acting with the concurrence of national governments, can claim partial credit for the stabilization that has been achieved and the prospect of a recovery. But the general public seems to hold a completely different opinion. In the United Kingdom, United States and European Union, trust in central banks dramatically decreased in the six months following September 2008, just as they were rolling out substantial crisis-response initiatives.²

Figure 1.1 Net trust in the European Central Bank (euro area 12), 1999-2009

Source: Gros and Roth (2009).
Net trust is defined here as the percentage of respondents surveyed indicating that they trust the European Central Bank minus the percentage who indicate they do not trust it, based on twice-annual Eurobarometer surveys.
Part of the public's unease may be attributed to the vast sums involved and the shock of financial calamity. General anxiety over tax increases and future obligations has combined with uncertainty about the implications of the crisis to sour the public mood.

Another cause of unease may be the highly specialized nature of the field. The technicalities of governmental responses to the crisis are not easily understood by the general public. The intricacies of public finance provoke anxiety with discussion of such things as direct capital injections, purchase of assets and lending by treasuries, liquidity provision to financial institutions, market guarantees and preferential taxes – all on top of the 'simple' task of monitoring government spending. When citizens of the United Kingdom, United States and European Union were asked whether central banks had responded appropriately to the challenges of the economic downturn, 40 percent said they were not sure.3

E-government has much to contribute in addressing such a situation. Information services, knowledge-sharing, and tools for participation and collaboration may all serve to reduce uncertainty and assuage public unease. An increasing number of studies suggest a positive relationship between e-government and improvement in citizens' attitudes towards government.4 Research in Canada and the United States, for example, suggests that using the Internet to transact with government has a positive impact on trust as well as public perceptions of government responsiveness.5 Also, satisfaction levels may increase when government uses the Internet to solicit ideas from citizens and engage them in decision-making. Citizen participation, in turn, can make it easier to implement policy and is likely to lead to better outcomes as a result of increased public awareness and buy-in.

1.1 Crisis response websites
Governments around the world have created websites that enable citizens to track stimulus packages and other public funds committed to addressing the financial and economic crisis. A total of 115 such sites were analysed to determine the extent to which ICT was being used to increase the overall effectiveness of government responses. Three issues were explored in depth:

- The degree of transparency in crisis-response programmes;
- Whether citizens are engaged in decisions about the types of response, how much money and to whom funds should be made available;
- Current policies on information disclosure and the extent to which civil society is able to use government information to raise awareness of particular issues.

The selection criteria for these cases were designed to maximize geographical coverage, include national and sub-national levels, and consider the work of both governmental and non-governmental actors. Finally, preference was given to cases that offered readily transferable policy lessons or that simply provided a greater amount of information for the study. It should be stressed, however, that the final ensemble of cases was the result of a stocktaking exercise and is neither a fully representative nor exhaustive listing of relevant e-government initiatives.

1.1.1 Tracking public funds
Citizens can recognize transparency – and the lack thereof – when they see it, and providing the public with more and better information on decisions taken and the reasons for them is a major need to be addressed by governments.6 At least for the moment, many appear to be responding. Some 83 percent of crisis-response websites studied have as a common denominator the use of ICT to increase transparency.

Indeed, governments can easily provide general information on stimulus spending policies and amounts committed to various interventions. This is the case for Switzerland’s State Secretariat of Economic Affairs website, which includes a section containing general information about the stabilization measures taken by the Government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.1 Number of websites studied by type of owner</th>
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<tr>
<td>Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>National governments and European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sub-national governments</td>
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describing the three phases of the country’s stabilization plan and domains of intervention such as infrastructure and employment.

Similarly, a section on the website of the Swedish Government provides general information on measures taken in different sectors, such as warranty programmes for financial institutions and support for Swedish municipalities. This is also the case for a section of the Korean Ministry of Strategy and Finance website, which outlines policies related to fiscal stimulus measures, employment and support to various industries. The website for the Philippines’ Resiliency Action Plan provides useful information on the country’s stimulus plan and fiscal measures as well as updated information on the latest measures taken by the Government and other news related to the crisis.

In contrast to the fairly simple initiatives described above, other governments have taken advantage of interactive tools to assist in the provision of information. German citizens are invited to ask questions concerning their government’s recovery measures on the website of the German Ministry of Finance, which added this feature in an attempt to make its section on the economic crisis more attractive to its users by allowing for a more interactive experience. Prominently displayed in the main section dedicated to the crisis is a tool that allows citizens to enter an e-mail address and to ask questions that are later answered by the Ministry’s staff, which posts the answers online. This simple application bears the potential of creating a direct link between concerned citizens who would like to have further information on the actions taken by the Government, and the Government itself. In addition, by publicizing the questions that are asked, the civil servants in charge of replying can avoid answering duplicate inquiries on an individual basis (i.e. recurrent questions), consequently reducing the workload when it comes to responding to the public.

Funds committed to addressing the crisis often can be linked to a geographic area, and citizens might well be interested in finding out how much money is directed to nearby places, and for what purposes. Governments are using geographic information systems to provide information in a more contextualized and attractive manner, while facilitating users’ comprehension of the data conveyed. Forty percent of the websites identified present geo-referenced information.

Kazakhstan’s crisis response website, for example, offers an interactive map and with just a few clicks the user is able to localize the areas where investments are made, along with detailed descriptions of projects (e.g. amount of resources allocated, name of contractor, how to contact the person in charge of the project, time for the realization of the project, number of jobs created by the project). All of this information is conveyed through an interactive map that enables the user to identify the regions where funds are being allocated as well as the agencies responsible for the projects. Similarly, on France’s stimulus website the user can click on a map and find information on the allocation of recovery funds in the area selected and the total costs of individual projects taking place in the region. In a Brazilian example, the national government’s Programme to Accelerate Growth is explained using an interactive map that provides information on investments by regions of the country and the public works taking place.

Other online tools also provide geographical information. The United States Recovery Act and Australian Economic Stimulus Plan websites both allow users to track funds by entering their postal codes. The State of Arkansas in the United States allows users to track recovery funds by county using their mobile phones.

In addition to the generalist websites described above, some e-government initiatives serve very specific purposes. Innovative e-government solutions address specific needs raised by the crisis. A United

**Figure 1.2 Australia Economic Stimulus Plan website with geo-referencing tools**

**Australia: Economic stimulus plan**

Breakdown of stimulus plan and tracking stimulus projects at local level. Enables interactivity (ask a question). It could also be asking questions from citizens themselves. Links to sub-national websites of similar scope. Makes link to national jobs website, a pre-existing initiative that helps mitigate the effect of the crisis. Subscription to updates.

States federal Government website assists recipients of recovery funds to meet quarterly reporting requirements by providing them with the means to submit project updates online. The system allows the recipients to view and comment on reports, as well as update and correct them whenever necessary. It illustrates the role that e-government tools might play in providing faster, more standardized and more effective transactions between the recipients of crisis funds and governments.

1.1.2 The value of low-cost solutions
The websites studied represent varying levels of sophistication, as illustrated above, yet there appears to be no correlation between the resources invested in technology (e.g. in website costs) and the quality and quantity of transparency that is achieved. Moreover, there is widespread evidence that expressive results can be achieved at very low costs,7 which in a context of constrained budgets is important for policy makers to know as they debate to what extent governments should prioritize e-government applications (e.g. websites) as a means to increase transparency.

Governments should not lose sight of the fact that the benefits obtained through improved monitoring and oversight of public spending are most likely to outweigh the initial costs of setting up sites for communicating with citizens online.

The benefits obtained through improved monitoring of public spending tend to outweigh the initial costs of setting up sites for communicating with citizens online. The technological capability of a given government is another relatively insignificant factor affecting the actual level of transparency achieved. Consider the variance in transparency across the different countries, and their level of e-government development as measured, for example, by the quality and scope of their Web presence. There is no evidence that governments that perform better in terms of e-government development are necessarily those delivering the most efficient services for monitoring crisis-response funds. That is, evidence suggests that there is no correlation between the level of technological development of governments – as measured by its level of e-government development – and the factual provision of transparency with regards to crisis-response funds that are allocated by governments around the world.

When comparing cases at the international level, however, one is bound by serious limitations, given the disparity in aspects such as institutional frameworks (e.g. federal versus unitary) and crisis-response measures. An example from the state level will help to render this question of e-government and transparency more evident and less anecdotal. At this level, analysis can be carried out in a controlled environment where institutional traits are equal among all the sub-units (i.e. states) of the federation. In other words, cases are more comparable than at the international level. In the United States, where all of the states currently run stimulus websites, the use of public funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is subject to calls for transparency.

The scatterplot below illustrates the relationship between the transparency that is conveyed by those websites with regard to the allocation of recovery funds, in contrast to the e-government development of each State’s government.

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Clearly, in this instance, no correlation at all can be found between the two factors.11 That is, a State’s level of e-government development does not predict its efficient use of ICT to track public

### Figure 1.3 Crisis-response website objectives, October 2009

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<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Prevalence (percent)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Public scrutiny of funds</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management of funds</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government to business communication</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social protection information</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>27</td>
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0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90

Prevalence (percent)
stimulus funds. The extreme cases make the point. Delaware scores the highest on e-government development, yet its transparency website has one of the lowest scores. Conversely, Maryland’s website is considered by far the best website for monitoring stimulus funds, yet the state ranks 48 out of 50 at the bottom of the index for State e-government development in the United States.

Evidence gathered at the international level, added to this analysis at the sub-national level, suggests a rather limited relationship between e-government development and the provision of transparency – as counter-intuitive as it might seem. Likewise, as mentioned above, little relation can be found between the cost of crisis-response websites designed to enhance transparency and their quality.

This bodes well for reformers at a moment when budgets for investing in technology are limited, particularly in countries in which e-government structures are less developed. Transparency policies, in the context of the global economic crisis, might produce better results when implemented incrementally and when taking advantage of existing ICT solutions that can be deployed without constituting an additional burden to governments’ budgets.

In sum, rather than focusing on the expensive implementation of unnecessarily sophisticated technology, governments might provide better value for money by creatively utilizing pre-existing and low-cost ICT infrastructures to provide comprehensive and detailed information in a single point of access, and in an accessible and timely manner.12

1.1.3 Coordination across agencies

The global nature of the financial crisis, with the depression being highly connected as between regions and nations, requires more of government ICT initiatives. It requires that not just a few but all governments endeavour to build up networks to provide transparent information for the public, and to do so in a coordinated fashion.

It is naturally the case that the progress achieved towards building e-government systems will be different in different localities. Generally, according to a study of Spanish regional governments,13 regions with higher performance usually play an outstanding role, disclosing higher amounts of financial information on the Internet. To address this point, countries may need to foster regional e-government systems via programmes supported by the central government. In particular, central government can provide regional governments and agencies with basic website frameworks. These frameworks can be developed by special projects, or outsourced from coordinated developers to ensure their interconnection. From such support by central government, the construction of e-government systems in comparatively backward regions and departments can be promoted, and the overall cost can be reduced by copyright-trading or economies of scale in software development.

Following on from the above point, common software standards are needed to realize interconnectivity, integration of data and convenience for users. Open standards are often good candidates because open software is fundamentally interoperable.

Web 2.0 is a popular term with advocates of e-government. Web 2.0 applications provide decentralized patterns for data submission and analysis, and provide a platform for the provider-user interaction, in contrast to non-interactive websites where users can only passively view information. Since the financial sector is a broad-wide connected industry, users in a variety of locations may find value in data and analysis of different locations and different investors. Therefore, the demands on data usage (e.g. downloading and

There appears to be no correlation between the resources invested in an established website and the quality and quantity of transparency that is achieved.
applying) and interaction is correspondingly broad-wide. However, data integration and interaction can be achieved only by smooth data interconnection. In other words, there will be no true Web 2.0, no integration and application, if there is no broad interconnection across the relevant scope.

In fact, this lack of interconnection is at the heart of the current weakness of e-government systems being built. Taking the e-government projects that present economic recovery plans in the United States as an example, it becomes evident that most geographic information systems applied by state and local governments are not the same, frequently incompatible, and based on proprietary standards. Regarding this point, the International Monetary Fund issued a set of recommended standards and codes after the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. Such principles ought to be taken up and advanced further as a partial solution to the ongoing financial crisis.

In many countries, information and services provided are not often presented in a centralized and coordinated manner, which requires business actors to navigate any number of different websites in order to gather the information they need. To address this problem, the Lithuanian economic stimulus plan website provides businesses with extensive information on crisis-response measures, policies and opportunities for different categories of businesses. In a similar vein, the French website for business development and employment provides useful information for small- and medium-sized enterprises in a format structured around thematic clusters (e.g. financing and investment support), functioning then as a single entry point to all information relevant to businesses in the context of the crisis.

Better delivery of services depends on the extent to which services offered take user-centricity as a guiding principle, and it does not refer to the size or level of sophistication of e-government structures. In many cases, the creation of a simple website that centralizes and organizes useful information that had been previously scattered across different government agency portals constitutes by itself a major step towards offering better support for citizens and businesses.

Information is a resource that individuals might not be willing to spontaneously share unless specific settings and motivations to do so are generated. It is important to bear in mind the resistance that reformers might face when confronted with the logics of the public sector. This is particularly so in contexts where esprit de corps is deep-rooted and where information-sharing is the exception, rather than the standard procedure. Beyond changes of a technological nature, deeper structural and organizational changes are necessary to bring about change in the way governments use and provide data and ICT services. Policies aimed at transparency can achieve their goals when governments create suitable institutional and organizational frameworks, incentives, and means such as e-government technologies that promote information-sharing at the collective and individual.

1.2 From transparency to participation

Most government websites with aims of transparency tend to be one-directional in their provision of information, enabling citizens to track and monitor government spending but not to take a more active role. More advanced websites, however, offer features and facilities enabling citizen participation and engagement. These websites are geared towards active interactions. In this regard, citizens are no longer passive consumers of government-provided information but active participants in the related content and information generation.

A range of opportunities for citizen participation are offered by Web 2.0, a term that refers to web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centred design and collaboration. In the particular context of crisis-response funds and their usage, it is generally observed that governments lag behind non-governmental actors. The findings here seem to confirm this relationship when it comes to ICT in relation to crisis-response funds and policies aimed at mitigating the effects of the economic downturn. As shown by the figure below, only 23 percent of government crisis-response websites make any usage of Web 2.0 tools, compared to 57 percent of websites sponsored by non-governmental actors.
Few governments are taking advantage of the prospects offered by interactive technologies to foster participation with relation to economic crisis issues, although they could be reaping the benefits of inclusive policy-making while doing so at lowered implementation costs. No more than 27 percent of cases had explored the prospects of ICT for promoting some kind of citizen feedback or participation, as modest as these attempts might be, through traditional means such as e-mail or through the usage of Web 2.0 tools.

In other words, only a minority of cases explore the prospects of ICT tools for supporting a modality of engagement with external audiences. The budget consultation website of the Canadian province of British Columbia, for example, invites citizens to submit videos with their views on alternative ways of addressing the economic crisis and their indications of budgetary priorities. Another interesting deployment of ICT tools occurred in June 2009, when a message on the Twitter account of the Governor of California invited citizens to provide feedback on policies to address the State budget deficit. In August of the same year, a website was designed specifically to aggregate all the responses received from citizens via Twitter, with a user-based system also allowing users to rate each others’ ideas in an attempt to identify the best submissions.

A misleading assumption frequently made with regard to public participation, be it ICT-enabled or not, is that the simple creation of channels for citizens to interact with governments necessarily engenders citizen participation. Evidence shows that most e-participation experiences have repeatedly shown disappointingly low levels of participation, despite the multiple and varied initiatives implemented by governments in recent years to engage citizens online, and apart from a few highly publicized examples. Likewise, discussion groups, blogs and other forums on the topic of crisis-response funds report that, in most of the cases, participation has been extremely low.

By contrast, participatory budgeting has been reasonably successful. The practice, which can be broadly defined as the participation of citizens in decisions about budget allocation and in the monitoring of public spending, has been identified with a number of positive outcomes. These include increased transparency, innovative delivery of public services and reduction of tax delinquency. In Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and La Plata, Argentina, 10 percent of the population has voted on budget proposals online or via mobile telephones. Citizens in the municipality of Pune, India, have made suggestions for budget allocations online through the municipality’s e-budgeting application. In Freiburg, Germany, the city has combined the use of an electronic budget planner with an online moderated deliberation and aggregation of results in wikis edited by the participants.

More specifically related to the management of crisis-response funds is an example from the district of Heathcote, Australia, where citizens were invited to decide through the Internet on the allocation of stimulus funds from the State Government. Through a website, users prioritized the eligible proposals formulated by local community organizations, indicating which projects were the most deserving of existing funds. Citizens cast more than 20,000 votes in a short period of time, with groups actively engaged in canvassing campaigns both online and offline, some setting up stands and others launching online campaigns through social networks. The meaningful involvement of citizens in budgeting processes is one of the most efficient ways to generate an awareness of the existing tradeoffs when allocating limited resources. This opens up space for dialogue and cooperation, while allowing policy makers to identify citizens’ preferences and demands. Participatory budgeting initiatives illustrate how meaningful e-participation can be achieved.
Open data enhances public sector efficiency by transferring some of the analytical demands of government to NGOs, research institutes and the media, which have been found to combine data from various sources in original and inventive ways.

1.3 Data access and civil society

Much of the innovation in the use of ICT to enhance management of crisis-response funds comes from the use of open data by non-governmental actors providing services of high public value without governments having to bear the costs. The aim of the open data movement is to make information freely available to everyone, without restrictions from copyright or patents and in standard machine-readable formats that can be exploited without the use of any given piece of software.

Open data enhances public sector efficiency by transferring some of the analytical demands of government to third parties such as non-governmental organizations, research institutes and the media, which have been found to combine data from various sources in original and inventive ways. The potential for actors outside of government to provide such services when government data is made freely available is suggested by SubsidyScope, an initiative of a non-profit foundation based in the United States. Its website draws on publicly available records to deliver high-quality information on the disposition of financial bailout funds by the government.

Through the global economic crisis, it has also become clear that an ability to perceive and understand the concept of risk is important for citizens to master and, indeed, is a competency of citizens that is important for the long-term health of the financial system. Such building of competencies (e.g. through formal education) and capabilities (e.g. through learning by doing and by using) among the citizens would require the use of data.

1.3.1 Government as a platform

The idea of ‘government 2.0’ is generally associated with the use of social media by the public sector. Recently, the notion has assumed greater definition through its association with government as a ‘platform’ or provider of data and services for others to exploit as they see fit. Advocates for the concept of government as a platform privilege the role that governments should play as providers of web services, allowing third parties to innovate by building upon government data and applications. They believe that if governments provide data in a non-proprietary and predictable format, third parties are more likely to maximize the value of this information, hence providing services that better respond to users’ expectations and needs. Consequently, it is claimed that governments should use the Internet to provide free data in formats that are open, structured and machine-readable, while the Web presence of governments is incrementally reduced as third parties start to provide information to the general public.

The creation of the data.gov website by the United States Government is one of the most substantial steps taken so far to provide such a platform for third parties. Launched in 2009, the website functions as a clearinghouse for datasets generated by the government in an accessible developer-friendly format. The United Kingdom and the State of Sao Paolo in Brazil are following a similar path towards the creation of websites that will serve as a single point of access to public data. With the intention of providing added value, both Governments have invited application developers to provide feedback on the conception of the sites. Similar feedback was sought for the second version of United States Recovery Act website by the United States Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board, which asked the community of developers for their views on the most convenient format for disclosing data on crisis-response funds.

For the moment, the provision of open government data via online and mobile channels is limited primarily to developed countries. Nevertheless, the prospect of third parties delivering services of high public value, which would otherwise have to be provided using taxpayer funds, is a path that should not be underestimated for both developed and developing countries.
1.3.2 The economics of open data

In recent years, third parties have shown not only that they are able to deliver online services of great public value but also, in many cases, that they are able to provide such services even more efficiently than governments. To increase this kind of innovative work, the first step is to create a structure to ensure that governments provide data and web services in an appropriate manner. This will promote the co-production of public goods that foster transparency and deliver better services.

Most governments possess an extensive amount of data that could be reused and combined in groundbreaking ways by third party actors, but this data is dispersed across agencies of different levels and diverse branches of government. To put it bluntly, most governments may not be fully aware of how much and what data they create and dispose of, or from where it can be sourced. The majority of these highly dispersed datasets are unlikely to be available in structured and machine-readable formats.

In organizational terms, addressing the problem of data dispersion and the lack of common standards would require governments to implement and enforce policies for shared standards of data gathering and reporting across public agencies at different levels and branches. Finally, acquiring the structure necessary for the delivery of data to third parties entails the provision of a single point of access, conveying and updating all the data gathered in a developer-friendly manner. The steps involved in the appropriate provision of data, as briefly described above, produce better results when they occur simultaneously and in a gradual manner. For instance, governments might achieve their goals more efficiently if they release their data as it becomes available, rather than waiting to reach a hypothetical threshold or target before starting to release their data.

The deployment of human and financial resources to create the structure required for open data is a particularly sensitive matter for governments in the context of an economic downturn and tightening budgets, and it is a major issue at any given time for developing countries. Thus, the incentives to bear these costs rely on the expectation of concrete medium- and long-term results. The delivery of value-for-money when building a structure for the provision of open data is highly dependent on whether third parties will actually come into play or not. That is, for an existing offer of data there must be a corresponding demand, and vice-versa. The economics of open data is about releasing governments from the costly delivery of services online while decreasing marginal costs for the provision of government-held data. The prospect of completing this virtuous cycle, which offsets governments’ initial investments, is the compelling argument for governments to deploy efforts to incrementally reinforce their role as providers of data and Web services.

The economics of open data, with governments as data providers and third parties delivering the information to the public in more innovative and creative ways, has an inevitable resemblance to economic models that privilege market efficiency with the least governmental intervention. It is particularly interesting that such views are put forward precisely at a moment of increased government interventionism and scepticism towards unregulated markets. Will third parties increasingly co-produce online services if governments are to continuously withdraw from their previous roles as information providers? To what extent will non-governmental parties be able to address public demands and needs once governments start providing the necessary infrastructure in the form of datasets and Web services? If governments free the data, will third parties come?

Third parties have proven their ability to innovate and deliver, yet their range of action has been generally restricted to certain sectors of government activity and mainly concentrated in developed countries. It is still too early to paint a clear picture of the
The economics of open data, with governments as data providers and third parties delivering information to the public, has a resemblance to economic models that privilege market efficiency with the least governmental intervention. Capability of non-governmental actors in scaling up their existing efforts. Non-governmental actors have demonstrated their ability to go beyond simple resilience under difficult circumstances by actually mobilizing resources for the increased provision of online services of high public value. The majority of initiatives led by non-governmental studied in the United Nations e-Government Survey blossomed precisely during the worst moments of the economic downturn. In general, evidence suggests that the demand by third parties for data by far exceeds governments’ offerings. Despite the possible existence of a limit on the extent to which third parties may come into play in empirical and normative terms – there is clearly a potential to be explored, which may prove to be an exceptional model to be further explored.

As previously highlighted, there are sufficient incentives for governments to incrementally strengthen their role as providers of data and Web services, but the cycle is only completed with the intervention of third parties. The costs of innovation for non-governmental actors are, obviously, significantly reduced when governments provide data in a suitable format. In addition, much of the technology that is developed by third parties in developed countries is conceived in open source formats that allow non-governmental actors from developing countries to use and adapt applications developed elsewhere. However, third parties still require technological capabilities in order to build upon government data – capabilities that might be scarce or under-mobilized for public purposes in developing countries.

Even in presumably adverse contexts, non-governmental actors are increasingly harnessing the potential of the convergence between ICT and government-held data for increased accountability and the provision of services of public value, according to anecdotal evidence. In Argentina, the website Dinero y Politica allows citizens to monitor expenses, budgets and campaign contributions to political parties. In a similar vein to the United States Open Congress website, a group of developers in Brazil have joined forces in the development of MeuParlamento a website for monitoring legislative action at all levels and inviting citizens to provide feedback on the lawmaking process. Similar initiatives led by non-governmental actors that build on government-held data can be found in countries such as Georgia, India, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon and Lithuania. In Kenya, for example, the Budget Transparency Tool allows citizens to track the allocation of development funds and to report, via mobile SMS messages or e-mail, any irregularities identified by citizens.

Evidence, albeit anecdotal, implies the potential of third parties to provide online applications and services of public value by building upon government data. In developing countries, some governments might initially play a role in supporting the development and mobilization of the technological capability of third parties. In other words, under certain circumstances in the context of developing countries, some governmental intervention might be necessary, going beyond the simple provision of a structure for open data. The costs of such interventions would have to be offset by the services and applications subsequently provided by third parties. The initiative Apps for Democracy, implemented in the United States by the District of Columbia, offers a pertinent example. Launched in 2008, Apps for Democracy featured a contest with awards for the best applications built upon data supplied by the district government. In thirty days, at a cost of $50,000 in awards, participants developed 47 applications that would have cost $2.6 million if developed internally by the District. Such a model provides high value for money while mobilizing and leveraging technological capabilities for public use, all factors important to the sustainability of the open data model.

International cooperation may also prove to be a valuable means for leveraging the capacity of non-governmental actors from developing countries to co-produce services of public value. A current project led by MySociety, a non-governmental organization in the United Kingdom, provides funding and technical support to individuals and organizations in Central and Eastern Europe to build ICT tools to enhance public transparency and accountability. Governments and donor organizations might well consider following a similar path, encouraging partnership and cooperation among communities of technology actors from developed and developing countries. This approach carries the promise of fostering the sharing of technological knowledge among non-governmental actors at an international scale.
level, ultimately strengthening the capabilities of third parties from both developed and developing countries in the co-production of services.

1.3.3 Who guards the e-guardians?
A paramount value of public service is the extent to which it is amenable to public accountability. While third parties increasingly use ICT as a means to enhance transparency and empower citizens to hold governments accountable, the absence of mechanisms to hold third parties themselves accountable remains an issue to be addressed. This is even more pertinent if governments are to increasingly redefine their role as ‘platforms’, with third parties becoming gradually more significant in their emerging role as techno-political intermediaries between governments and the public.

If governments are to act mainly as providers of data and Web services, third parties come into play as the central actors in the definition of how data is presented and contextualized. The positive aspect of this is that third parties have shown a greater ability to represent data in innovative and accessible ways. This is useful if the consequent representation can reduce cognitive overload from access to so much information, improve its understanding and highlight patterns and associations that might otherwise go unnoticed. Yet, the manner in which data is represented, as well as the patterns and correlations highlighted, are the fruit of human judgement. It remains to be seen how skilled third parties will be in helping the public to see the validity behind the information.

The techno-mediation deployed by third parties has proven valuable and their legitimacy has not been seriously challenged to date. However, if their role is expected to develop further, labels such as ‘non-partisan’ and ‘non-profit’ might not be sufficient to ensure public trust and accountability in the long term. Last but not least, the competition for audiences online should not be regarded as a mechanism capable by itself of rewarding the third parties that are committed to the values of transparency and public good. The emerging role of third parties in providing information to the public calls for creative and considered reflection on ways to ensure that public trust, both in governments and third parties, is not being taken for granted or undermined.

1.4 Conclusions
E-government tools have been used in an unprecedented manner as a means to support policies to alleviate and cope with the effects of the recent global economic crisis. They have played a major role in providing transparency of crisis-response measures, conveying relevant information and support to citizens and businesses, and encouraging feedback from citizens on alternatives for addressing the effects of the economic downturn.

The capacity to convey transparency is within the reach of, if not all, most national governments around the world. Moreover, there is growing evidence that the provision of transparency – and the use of e-government tools to support it – constitutes an approach wherein the initial investments required are quickly offset by the outcomes generated, such as increased savings and enhanced public trust.

Third parties can play an important role in the co-provision of services of high public value by deploying technologies in a manner that is creative and innovative. By enacting open data principles, governments lay down the foundations that reduce the entry barriers for non-governmental parties, thus allowing for the co-production of public services at minimal costs for governments and, consequently, for taxpayers.

The extent to which user-centricity is a component of each of the initiatives is a factor in its success. There exists a nearly systematic discrepancy between the offer of e-government facilities and the actual take-up of the services offered. This indicates that, less than a technological issue, users' take-up depends ultimately on the extent to which services are able to effectively address their needs and preferences.

Participatory practices, when appropriately designed and implemented, can address users’ needs. Interactive ICT tools have proven to be an effective means for policy makers to identify the needs, demands and preferences of citizens. However, it is not sufficient to simply create of ICT-mediated channels of communication between governments and citizens. It is essential to identify users’ needs, be it for the design of new e-government services or for the allocation of resources. This implies not
only creating channels to give a voice to citizens, but also creating the means to listen to the citizens and to provide them with meaningful responses.

The capacity of governments to address the issues that emerge as the economic crisis continues to unfold constitutes the core element through which trust can be renewed and reinforced, while transparency is also enhanced. As governments find themselves with constrained budgets and mounting demands, the need for providing better value for money has never been so pressing in the recent history of the public sector.

Although governments cannot easily afford to make mistakes, risk-aversion should not have the upper hand over innovation. The more prudent action is to move away from the comfort zone of standard procedures and logics anterior to the crisis, as paradoxical as this may seem. The current environment should be regarded as an opportunity for change in the way governments operate and interact with society. As experience with crisis-response websites shows, the Internet offers governments an opportunity to reinvent themselves even as they address a host of financial and economic challenges.
Table 1.2  Features of selected crisis-response websites

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Country/Program</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Draws on pre-existing site</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breakdown of stimulus plan and tracking stimulus projects at local level. Enables interactivity (ask a question). Links to sub-national websites of similar scope. Makes link to national jobs website, a pre-existing initiative that helps mitigate the effect of the crisis. Subscription to updates.</td>
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<td>Intergovernmental site explaining recovery measures for business.</td>
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<td>Aims to provide simple and centralized place to find information that is available on the Internet, regarding federal and regional measures that promote employment both for business and for the unemployed. By filling in a profile the business or the jobseeker can find which measures and opportunities are applicable.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Brazil. Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento</strong> <a href="http://www.brasil.gov.br/pac/">http://www.brasil.gov.br/pac/</a></td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>Government’s programme for accelerated growth. Information on the allocation of funds by region and sector. Link also to the pre-existing government budget consultation.</td>
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<td><strong>Canada. Department of Finance</strong> <a href="http://www.fin.gc.ca/n08/data/08-103_1-eng.asp">http://www.fin.gc.ca/n08/data/08-103_1-eng.asp</a></td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>Fiscal stimulus budget consultation.</td>
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<td>Outlines Canada’s Economic Action Plan. Links to Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, Youtube and MySpace.</td>
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<td>National Development and Reform Commission website with information on the Chinese stimulus plan.</td>
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<td><strong>France. Les 1000 projets de la relance</strong> <a href="http://www.relance.gouv.fr/">http://www.relance.gouv.fr/</a></td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>Details projects being carried out under stimulus package. Link to relance TV. Specific section for incentives for companies willing to hire, given that one of the objectives of the initiative is protection of employment.</td>
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<td><strong>France. Agir pour no entreprises, c’est agir pour l’emploi</strong> <a href="http://www.nosentreprisesnosemplois.gouv.fr/">http://www.nosentreprisesnosemplois.gouv.fr/</a></td>
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<td>G2B2G (government to business to government interaction) portal centralizing information relevant to businesses, e.g. information on where small and medium enterprises (SME) can find relevant information on how to access funds deployed by the government to address the crisis.</td>
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<td><strong>Germany. Bundesministerium der Finanzen</strong> <a href="http://www.fuer-alle-da.de/">http://www.fuer-alle-da.de/</a></td>
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<td>Ministry of Finance. Details of financial crisis and bank bailouts. Page allows citizens to ask questions online and the answers are also displayed online. Functions as a FAQ (frequently asked questions) that relies on user-generated content.</td>
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<td><strong>Iceland. The Icelandic Government Information Centre</strong> <a href="http://www.iceland.org/info/iceland-crisis/">http://www.iceland.org/info/iceland-crisis/</a></td>
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<td>The Iceland government web-portal prominently features a link on the economic crisis on each page. Seriously affected by the crisis, Iceland provides a simple website with provision of general information in English concerning policies to address the crisis, which might indicate some effort to regain confidence from the external public and markets.</td>
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Table 1.2  **Features of selected crisis-response websites**  (cont.)

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<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Website</th>
<th><strong>Objectives</strong></th>
<th><strong>Tools</strong></th>
<th><strong>Draws on pre-existing site</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Ireland. Losing your job</td>
<td><a href="http://www.losingyourjob.ie/">http://www.losingyourjob.ie/</a></td>
<td>- Public service information for those who are currently unemployed or are becoming unemployed. Aggregates information from pre-existing policies and websites.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Republic of Korea. Overcoming the Crisis</td>
<td><a href="http://www.mof.go.kr/recover_eng/">http://www.mof.go.kr/recover_eng/</a></td>
<td>Section of Ministry of Strategy and Finance website. Sections on general policies, fiscal policies, employment, industries and green growth actions to overcome the crisis. Information provision with some FAQ.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spain. Plan “E”</td>
<td><a href="http://www.plane.gob.es/">http://www.plane.gob.es/</a></td>
<td>Plan “E” is the government website on economic stimulus and employment, in five languages to reflect the country’s linguistic diversity. Pages provide information on courses of action, video interviews with public officials, and links to local-level project information. Periodic online chats serve as a platform for dialogue between public officials and citizens. News can be followed on Twitter. Interactive animation allows the user to see the results of the recovery plan, e.g. estimates of jobs that have been retained by the programme.</td>
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### Table 1.2 Features of selected crisis-response websites (cont.)

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<td>Introduces Building Britain’s Future, the government’s plan for economic recovery. Outlines campaigns in consumer rights, crime, education, health, housing, low carbon and youth jobs and citizens can upload comments/videos on these commitments. The government is soliciting citizen feedback on the plan. Use of Twitter and blogs.</td>
<td>Advice for citizens on how to cope with the financial crisis (e.g. homeowners, business, jobs). Possible to search for initiatives at the local level concerning the recovery plan as a whole.</td>
<td>The government’s official website to ‘track the money’ with data related to United States Recovery Act spending. For citizens to track the development of the recovery for greater transparency and accountability. Links to existing jobs websites. Use of Twitter, Facebook, MySpace and YouTube.</td>
<td>Website on the financial stability plan. News, reports and relevant information, for example on the local impact of the capital purchase programme.</td>
<td>Details federal spending including that related to stimulus funds. Includes ‘IT Dashboard’ to follow investments in the information technology sector. The dashboard is considered to be one of the most innovative tools to enhance public scrutiny of government spending.</td>
<td>Business to government (B2G) website that serves as the central data collection system for Federal Agencies and Recipients of Federal awards under the United States Recovery Act. Registered users submit quarterly reports and review data. It provides support online through a live chat.</td>
<td>Part of the Whitehouse website. Introduces the President’s SAVE Award to enable Federal employees to submit their ideas for how government can save money and perform better, as part of annual budget process.</td>
<td>Online dialogue on solutions to improve the design of the recovery.gov website. Hosted the Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board with the National Academy of Public Administration. Now closed.</td>
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<th><strong>Draws on pre-existing site</strong></th>
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