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The institutionalization of e-government and its sustainability in the context of internationally assisted projects

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I Endrit Kromidha hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

DEDICATION

To my parents Tatjana and Apostol, for the glory of God!

ABSTRACT

This study examines the institutionalization of internationally assisted e-government projects and their sustainability. The original contribution of this research is related to the study of socio-technical coexistence of different actors and reforms. E-government initiatives advance together with information and communication technologies in a changing environment regulated by different forces. A sustainable system in the perspective of this study is more about stable reforms influenced by strategic choices and coordinated actions among different actors, networks, and institutions. The research question in this context is: How are internationally assisted e-government projects institutionalized?

The study addresses the research question by looking at three elements: international assistance, e-government projects, and sustainability of reforms. Starting with a literature review and conceptualization of international e-government assistance, an initial background combining all three elements is provided. The study builds a case for the advancement of institutional theory, by first discussing and critically reviewing models and frameworks used in previous e-government research. An interpretivist paradigm and case study approach guides the methodology based on the principles of Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008). The two case studies are the National Registration Center for businesses and the National Register of Civil Status in Albania. The research design of the field research and analysis is based on mixed qualitative and quantitative methods in order to analyse institutional structures, institutional processes, and institutional integration.

The most important findings of this study are related to the changing roles of institutionalizing actors involved in e-government reforms. The research methodology brings together the initial objectives of internationally assisted e-government projects and their post-project institutionalized outcomes. Exploring the sustainability of reforms through the lenses of management information systems and public administration, makes this study an important contribution to e-government research, policy, and practice.

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Mother, I am sorry for all the nights you spent worrying for me being away from home for so many years. Your strength and love made me carry on. Saying just thank you is not enough. Father, I wished you could be with me to see how I walked this research path after you. You don't stop inspiring me and every day I understand you better. May your soul find peace where you are now. Dear relatives and friends who never understood what I was really doing these three years or who thought that I was still doing a Master's degree: Thank you! I know you always meant good to me when you said that I should stop being a student and get a proper job. This made me finish on time. I love you all.

A final thank you to a special person who suffered my life inside my mind for months and years, but whose words and patience with me always brought a smile on my face. Those moments and your unfailing support will be always remembered.

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"Research topics in developing countries are usually deeply intertwined with issues of power, politics, donor dependencies, institutional arrangements, and inequities of all sorts. These are precisely the type of issues where critical work can "open up the black box" of accepted ways of doing things as an aid to deeper understanding."

(Walsham, Robey & Sahay 2007)

1.1   E-GOVERNMENT REFORMS: A QUEST OF CHANGE AND STABILITY

In today's world of networks and communities there is an increase in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in most countries (UNCTAD 2011). The information society we live in allows more choices but at the same time requires people to be up-to-date with the pace of technological developments (Castells 2011b, Castells 2011a). However, almost any electronic device can no longer be imagined without access to a broader network. For example, having a mobile phone without a data transmitting signal has very limited benefits, and a radio or TV are completely useless without it too. ICTs consist of systems that, regardless of the bottom-up demand in the modern society, need to be coordinated at a larger scale in terms of services, connections and regulations. In the private sector these issues are generally regulated by market forces with an increasing concern on sustainability and society. In the public sector however, the use and coordination of ICTs, otherwise referred to as e-government in this study, is more complex. Public administration forces are not only about the demand and supply of services, but also about policies and international relations that influence the use of ICTs in the government. Their coordination and reforms through e-government projects is the complex object of study in this research.

Countries differ in their level of ICT usage and developments (UNCTAD 2011). However, less developed countries tend to show more dynamic developments in e-government in order to move closer to the current technological systems in other countries of the world (UNPAN 2003-2010). The ICT developments, on the other hand, are not uniform in all countries (Kromidha 2012), and often not even within the same country. An increasing use of ICTs is often related to development (Unwin 2009), implying a better connected and interdependent world. Many developing countries, however, do not have the tools and

know-how to develop complex public administration ICT systems, in which case they would turn to foreign aid.

As in the case of individuals or corporations moving towards a collaborative relationship (D., Tapscott, A.D., Williams, 2008), this study initially assumes that international e-government assistance can adopt similar collaboration patterns. According to this logic, it would be good for developed countries, or international donor organizations, to help the less developed ones to achieve a state where the system of them all is better than its parts taken separately (Ackoff 1971). Without going into the interoperability debates in information systems' research, which are beyond the scope of this study, a simple analogy to the previous idea would be this: It makes sense for someone with a Facebook account to help other friends to open one, so that they can be in touch together within the same system. Similarly, member states of international organisations can be motivated to help other partner countries in need, so that the whole community can be better-off.

The coordination of international assistance for sustainable development of the system as a whole is of course more challenging than helping a friend to learn to use Facebook, as the problems with many Southern European countries have shown lately (Arezki, Candelon & Sy 2011). The current situation suggests that more research is needed in order to understand better, and possibly prevent, internationally assisted public administration failures that generate debt instead of sustainable development. In the context of this research the focus will be on the generally unexplored area of electronic government assistance in a developing country like Albania, progressing towards European Union integration.

This study will look at two main areas: internationally assisted e-government projects on one hand, and sustainability and stability of such initiatives on the other. Believing in the importance of stable developments, the original contribution of this research is related to the study of socio-technical institutions in the context of international e-government assistance. Such e-government initiatives are ideally expected to evolve together with information and communication technologies to be deemed stable and sustainable in the long term. Projects here appear as mechanisms of change that involve many actors and their involvement in the institutionalization of e-government reforms. A sustainable

governance system in the specific context of this study is assumed to be influenced by strategic choices and coordinated actions, considering stability an important value.

1.2   THE CONTEXT OF ALBANIA

Albania is chosen in this study as one of the best examples of substantial and diversified international assistance on e-government projects (OSCE 2010, MCC - USAID 2010, UNDP Europe and CIS 2010). The motives and goals of such assistance projects have often been related to the journey of this country from communism to post-communism, a process often referred to as the creation of *"capitalism without capitalists"* (Eyal, Szelenyi & Townsley 1998). This research intends to share some light on how this happens in the digital age.

In the geopolitical and historical context, Albania shares a common communist past with many Balkan and eastern European countries, starting at the end of World War II and ending between 1989 and 1992. Communism, as a regime of planned economy and single party ruling, had a very strong influence in every aspect of life (Kornai 1992). Following this idea, a mind-shifting use of media, supported by controlling and monitoring social and political structure with no freedom of speech, shaped the new working class of citizens in Albania and in the region.

The new post-communist states created in the early nineties were a radical shift towards democratic representation, market economy and international integration. However, the leaders, as well as the citizens, in the new systems were normally the same people who were born in, grew up during and ideologically shaped by communism. As a consequence of this social and institutional inertia (Peng 2003), communist dictatorship patterns of control and governance were somehow preserved. In Albania the physical (i.e. buildings), organizational (i.e. ministries), or human actors (i.e. the public servants) preserved many elements of the past in the new post-communist state, although they were performing according to new scenarios.

New models of doing business entered post-communist countries through multinational companies (Clark 2008). Western goods, capital inflows, economic structures and governing models all started to have a great impact in post-communist countries (Cooley

2003, Brown 2000, Linz, Stepan 1996). Once the biggest enemies during communism, Western companies, goods, countries and international organizations were now perceived as the most important partners for development and integration. A good example of such a positive perception towards 'Western' integration is the highly positive attitude towards the European Union integration in the Western Balkans countries (Gallup Balkan Monitor 2009). As the study from Gallup Balkan Monitor suggests, integration in international institutions is perceived as an opportunity that will promote development and modernization.

The network participation in the global public spheres (Keane 1991) is often related to a strong image of development through international integration (Gallup Balkan Monitor 2010) that differs from the old communist regime. International organizations providing a strategic e-government vision have contributed in this direction in a number of Western Balkan countries (Kromidha 2012, Kromidha, Córdoba-Pachon 2010). This thesis builds on these preliminary studies that give a general overview based on secondary data from reports, by exploring how e-government reforms are implemented and institutionalized in practice. Whether the current one is the right approach to a sustainable e-government development in Albania or similar countries is something that needs to be further studied in this research.

One of the most common words in post-communist societies during the last decades has been 'change', while the countries themselves are often referred to, in world reports related to the development of information economies, as 'transition economies' (UNCTAD 2011). In order for changes to become normally embedded in the society and used at their full capacity, a process of de-institutionalization of old governance models had to be followed, by re-institutionalization into new more efficient forms (Greenwood, Hinings 1996, North 1990). The tensions arising as a result of the transformation from communism, to what is called 'chaotic capitalism' (Lane 1999), are one of the main reasons why Albania and post-communist countries are often associated with such terms. Evidently, there is a continuous conflict between the need for change through privatization, market economy and political pluralism, and the need for stability through rule of law and stable institutions (Holmes 1997). This conflict is assumed to persist also in the e-government sector (Fountain 2001), where old and new governing forces, public administration reforms, the need for

international integration and co-operation with international actors meet with each other. In this context the aims of this study are the following:

1. Explore how internationally assisted e-government projects can be better managed in terms of strategies, processes and integration.
2. Develop a study methodology for researching internationally assisted e-government projects before, during, and after their implementation.
3. Critically evaluate the role of international assistance and different actors on the sustainability of e-government reforms in developing countries.

This study does not aim to simply research the dynamics of e-government processes and conflicts, but also what influences their sustainable institutional development. To guide the research in achieving these aims, the following section presents the research question and sub-questions.

1.3   THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The research angle of this study is related to the narrow meaning of sustainability as the stability of internationally assisted e-government projects. Heeks (2003) mentions that e-government projects often risk failure due to their novelty, diversity and potential misuse of the exclusive law-making and law enforcement powers of the state itself. Rose (2005), on the other hand, makes the following statement when writing about a global diffusion model of e-governance:

> *"Differences in the capacity of countries to supply standard e-government services are a consequence of its degree of modern resources and to supply e-participation facilities reflects its political openness and extent of corruption."*(Rose 2005: 5)

This statement implies that the role of international e-government assistance can interfere with the capacities of a recipient country. The majority of research on e-government as it will be discussed later, has been focused on the coordination of their implementation and adaptation. This study builds on previous approaches, but focuses more on e-government institutional structures and discourses, looking towards their long-term sustainability. The formal research question in this context is:

How are internationally assisted e-government projects institutionalized?

From some preliminary research in Albania (Kromidha, Córdoba-Pachon 2010) and the Balkan region (Kromidha 2010) it can be suggested that stability may be used as a standard of evaluation for the sustainability of internationally assisted e-government projects. To be able to apply this concept in practice, an evaluation framework needs to be generated from the literature review and theoretical analysis in the following sections. The element of international assistance in this study adds another degree of complexity, but also of originality to the general multifaceted picture of e-government. To provide some clarity and focus the main research problem would be addressed by answering the following two sub-questions:

1. How are internationally assisted e-government projects managed?
2. Is international assistance generating sustainable e-government development?

The issues raised in these sub-questions will be explained in this thesis according to the structure of chapters presented in the following diagram:
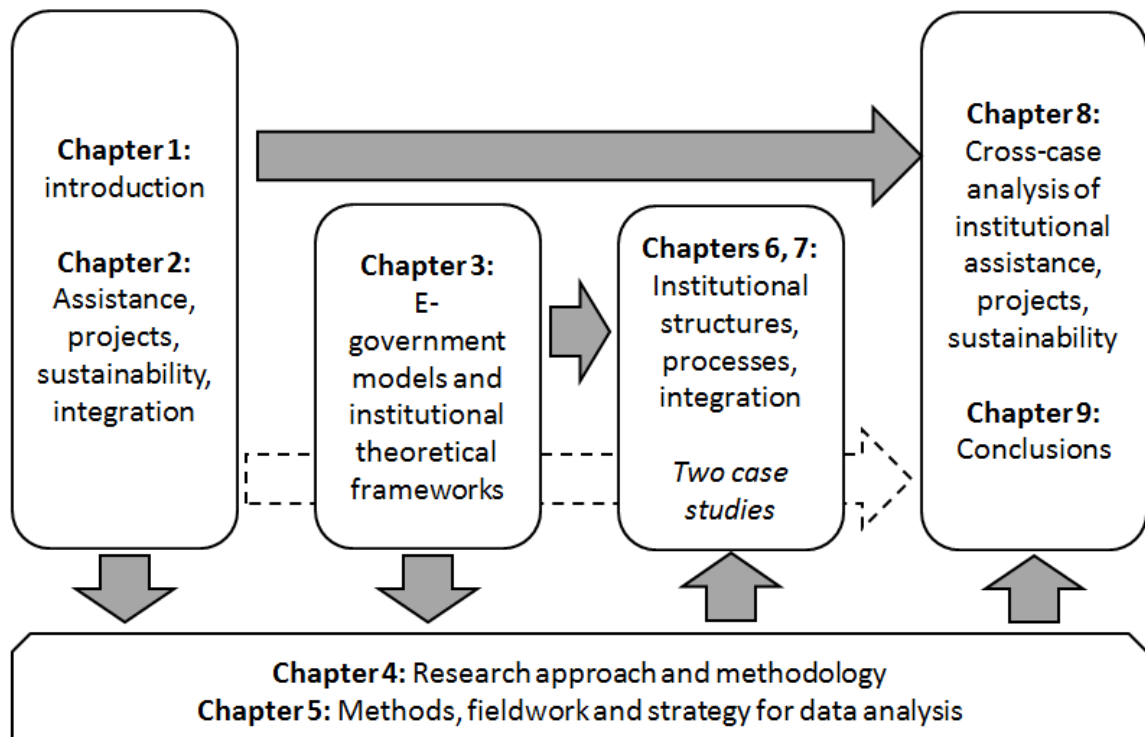
FIGURE 1: THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The arrows moving from left to right show a connection in structure. The one with dotted line indicate the cohesion between them. Starting with a literature review and conceptualization of international assistance in the context of e-government, the next chapter provides the initial context. In Chapter Three, after a critical discussion of theoretical models and approaches used in previous e-government studies, I suggest a theoretical framework that will guide the methodology and analysis in this study. Here I build a case for the advancement of two neoinstitutionalist approaches applied in this thesis. Chapter Four discusses different methodological paradigms, justifying an interpretivist case study approach for this research. The research strategy and the different qualitative and quantitative research tools and techniques are described in Chapter Five, laying out the research design and plan for the fieldwork. These are the two foundation chapters as the vertical arrows demonstrate. Chapters Six and Seven discuss in length the institutional structures, processes and integration of the two case study projects respectively: the National Registration Center[1] for businesses and the National Register of Civil Status in Albania. Chapter Eight gives a cross-case comparison of the main policy formulation challenges in e-government assistance, projects and sustainability, generalising from the research findings and discussions. The theoretical, methodological and practical contributions of this study are summarised in the final conclusions, together with its limitations and directions for future research.

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[1] The name of the National Registration Center is used in U.S. English throughout this thesis, as given by the donor, Millennium Challenge Corporation and the United States Agency for International Development.

2   INTERNATIONAL E-GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE PROJECTS AND SUSTAINABILITY

2.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a literature review of assistance, projects and sustainability in e-government reforms. These three elements will be discussed in detail in three subchapters, providing a general overview and background of the main research problem.

There is little work on the involvement of international organizations assisting the public sector in developing countries, although there are many international management studies on the involvement of multinational companies in other countries (Clark 2008). International assistance with e-government systems is a new phenomenon emerging with the development of information technologies in the public sector. It certainly has a direct impact not only over economic entities such as businesses or households, but more over systems regulating these economies.

The background of Albania and its historical relationship with international assistance specifically on public administration is very important to understand the discussions in this study. The elements of analysis for the communist and post-communist period are based on historical data, official publications and research, but also on personal perceptions and experiences as someone who is born and lived in the country during both periods. This will allow a better understanding of international e-government assistance in a post-totalitarian state like Albania, before moving to theories in the next chapter.

International e-government assistance is perceived in this study not only as an information technology solution, but also as a system of embedded ideas, values, processes, and policies. The goal of this research, as mentioned before, is to reveal what is being institutionalized (Schmidt 2008, DiMaggio, Powell 1991b, Hay 2006) in this case, how, and why. The institutional theories considered in this study will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Three. International assistance is given and received based on certain needs (Burnside, Dollar 2000, Alesina, Dollar 2000, Collier, Dollar 2002), aiming at some positive results for both the donor and recipient (Crawford 2001). The problem here can be with the efficiency and effects of international assistance in the long run when this

assistance is no longer available. The three elements considered to analyse this problem and give an answer to the research question are summarised by the following diagram:

Assistance

E-GOVERNMENT
REFORMS

Sustainability   **Projects**

FIGURE 2: THE STUDY AREAS OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

These three concepts are directly related to both research sub-questions: the first on the management of e-government projects, and the second on their sustainability. Whether international e-government assistance really helps a country in the long run, or if it is only a quick fix for immediate problems, is what this study will try to unveil. Governance here is related to democracy and public administration efficiency, while sustainability is more about the stability and institutionalization of reforms. These two concepts will be explained in more detail in the subchapter on governance sustainability, but before that, let us start with a discussion of international e-government assistance.

2.2   INTERNATIONAL E-GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

What is international assistance and foreign aid? Many elaborated studies in this field rarely give a clear definition of them. These terms generally mean all types of help a country or an organization gives to another. I will use this approach as a start. The problem in the literature on assistance and aid is that rarely any distinction is made between types of assistance, and how these studies reflect one or the other type. To set a clear foundation for the future analysis, first of all some very important definitions of different types of assistance and aid will be given. The difference between Foreign Aid and International

Assistance will be explained in the beginning of this analysis. The purpose of this study is to focus on assistance given for institutional and governmental reforms, especially those related to information technology and e-government.

The literature on international assistance is generally divided in two main parts: one analysing the effect of international assistance in the receiving country, the other analysing the donor side, and the reasons why such assistance is given (Alesina, Dollar 2000). Being closer to the first body of literature, this study takes for granted that international assistance is not a simple product or service given from one donor to another party as a gift. It is not only about inputs and outputs, but has become a complicated system of parties, structures, values, and processes. Criticism on international assistance is the other aspect to be discussed in this section.

2.2.1   TYPES OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

Before starting to use any tools, it is necessary to first define them. In this part, different types of international assistance will be mentioned, but the focus will be on those related to governmental reforms, state infrastructure and information technology. To start with the most important definitions:

> *Foreign Aid (FA), also referred to as International Aid or Overseas Aid, is a voluntary transfer of public resources, from a government to another government, NGO, or to an international organization, one goal of which is to better conditions in the country receiving it.* (Lancaster 2007).
>
> *International Assistance (IA) or Foreign Assistance is a voluntary transfer of resources from governments, NGOs or international organizations to developing countries, to help them solve development problems in accordance with a strategy that aims to insure wide participation of the parties involved in the benefits of development on a sustained basis.* (US House of Representatives, U.S. Senate 2003).

There is a very important difference between these two definitions as given here. Foreign Aid is a general term, usually referring to humanitarian actions, where the planning, strategy and involvement is more from the donor side. *"Better conditions in the country receiving the aid"* is a subjective expression in this definition that infers its general nature.

Most of the criticism on the inefficient use of aid inflows (Bauer 1971), as it will be explained later, is related to Foreign Aid. International Assistance on the other hand, refers to a planned action where the donor and recipient of assistance are both involved to achieve a mutual goal through interaction. This study will focus on the second which is directly related to its research question.

2.2.2   LAYERS OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

From its definition, the aim of International Assistance is the improvement of the current system on a sustainable basis, more than solving a current short-term problem. Therefore, this type of voluntary transfer often takes the form of development assistance. In this context, International Assistance is directly related to governmental reforms in the following ways:

> ***Official Development Assistance (ODA):*** *"Flows of official financing administered with the promotion of the economic development and welfare of developing countries as the main objective, and which are concessional in character with a grant element of at least 25 percent (using a fixed 10 percent rate of discount).* (OECD 2008)

Based on this definition, it can be implied that the notion that international organisations like OECD have about the sustainability of reforms in assisted countries is about continuous economic development and welfare. This study takes a critical approach to this perspective, believing that the stability of positive reforms is more important for a developing country to preserve the achieved progress. Therefore, sustainability in the narrow context of this research is more about institutional stability than economic efficiency. The role of different international donors is important here, as the following quotation from the same sources as before explains:

> *"By convention, ODA flows comprise contributions of donor government agencies, at all levels, to developing countries and to multilateral institutions. ODA receipts comprise disbursements by bilateral donors and multilateral institutions."* (OECD 2008)

According to these definitions, ODA is about all general assistance given for public sector reforms and developments. The term *'official'* here means that this is governmental

assistance, from country to country, only for the public sector. It only excludes assistance given from the private sector or other non-governmental organizations. A very important element of ODA is the following:

> ***International Government Assistance (IGA)***: *the transfer of resources and contributions from a country or organization to another, with the aim of improving and facilitating government structures, processes and systems.* (Crawford, Kearton 2002)

IGA is generally related to democracy. This is clearly expressed as one of the main goals of this assistance when given from international donors, such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID), World Bank (WB), or United Nations (UN) (Crawford, Kearton 2002). Along with the general implications of IGA in the reforming of governments in developing countries, one of its most important, recently developed forms is:

> ***International Electronic Government Assistance (IEGA)***: *the transfer of resources, contributions, systems or services from one country or organization to another, with the aim of improving governance and public services through information technology.*

IEGA is a new concept introduced here. Because of its novelty, there is lack of evaluations and analysis in the literature on this subject. A graphical presentation of the role and position of IEGA in the general context of assistance is given in the following figure:
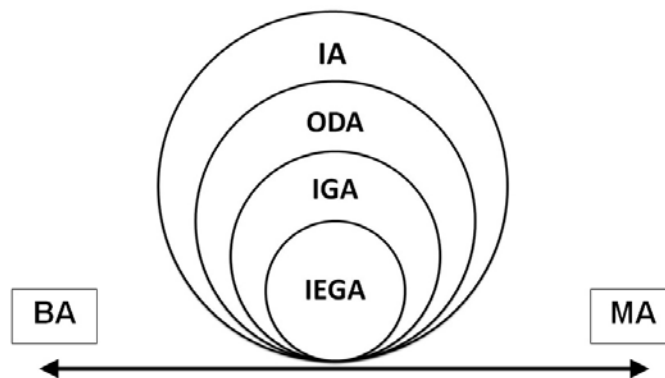
FIGURE 3: DIMENSIONS OF INTERNATIONAL E-GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

The different layers and subsets of this diagram are a summary of the discussions so far. IEGA is a subset of IGA related to information systems and technology in the public sector. IGA is a subset of ODA because of its focus on government reforms only. ODA finally is a subset of IA because of its focus on development rather than on humanitarian aid. The bilateral (BA) – multilateral (MA) dimension adds another level of complexity to this diagram and analysis, indicating that internationally assisted e-government projects are very complex.

In this research, the National Registration Center is the first case study and example of bilateral IEGA between the government of Albania and the United States of America represented by the United States Agency for International Development and the Millennium Challenge Corporation. This is discussed in Chapter Six. The National Register of Civil Status on the other hand, is an example of multilateral assistance where the European Union and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe are involved. This is discussed in Chapter Seven. A cross-case comparison in Chapter Eight informs a better understanding of internationally assisted e-government projects and of their institutional sustainability.

Detailed evaluation and studies on IEGA are missing not only in the academic literature, but also in the reports or donors, governments, or consulting businesses. Because of the limited research in this area, the effects of IEGA on organizations, states, and society are yet to be explored. This study will try to address this gap. In this context, the following section continues by looking at the motives and aims of such assistance.

2.2.3   MOTIVES AND AIMS OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

The reasons of governmental assistance and electronic governmental assistance in this section will be investigated from two angles:

- What are the aims of assistance?
- Who helps whom and why?

Both points are related. The first is about the aims and the second about the players that share those aims. However, it would be naive to think that assistance and aid is given simply as a charity, to promote economic growth out of good will (Alesina, Dollar 2000,

Griffin, Enos 1970). When IGA is part of a more general assistance i.e. a grant focusing on poverty reduction and economic growth in general, the situation can be more complicated. A number of studies try to show that economic growth can reduce poverty (Collier, Dollar 2002, Roemer, Gugerty 1999). Alesina and Dollar (2000) writing on *"Who gives foreign aid to whom and why?"* agree that international assistance and aid has been partially successful at promoting growth and reducing poverty, its general objectives. However, their study goes further on listing the main factors influencing assistance allocation being:

- Colonial past,
- Un friend,
- Egypt or Israel,
- Income of the recipient,
- Openness,
- Democracy
- Religion

The study from Alesina and Dollar (2000) points out that bilateral aid is more related to the colonial past, UN friendliness and religion, while multilateral assistance considers more the income of the recipient, openness and democracy. This is in line with the national or supranational interest of the donors. When we look at Albania, the main reasons that will fit this framework would be the low income of 3,824.69 USD/capita in 2009 when this study started (Economy Watch 2009), the openness of the country, the level of democracy, and role of UN, together with other international organizations.

Foreign aid and international assistance allocation aims and objectives can be summarized in two points of view: The first is the **strategic interest** approach developed by many (Burnside, Dollar 2000, Maizels, Nissanke 2004, Schraeder, Hook & Taylor 1998). This concept differs from study to study, depending on the context, but in general it means that the donor is looking also after its own interest in allocating aid or assistance. The second is the **moral vision** (Lumsdaine 1993), consisting of the idealistic approach based on charity values and democratic principles. Internationally assisted e-government initiatives are often in the middle of national and international aims and visions.

In more specific terms, an important definition in this context is *'democratic governance'* (Crawford, Kearton 2002, March, Olsen 1995). The term generally refers to an exercise of entitlement to representation rights (Franck 1992) but also as the institutionalization of representation beyond national states into international organizations (March, Olsen 2004). The aim of international assistance practices in this case is:

> *"To strengthen the democratic process [...] and help public institutions become efficient and accountable. It tracks governance policy, promotes knowledge sharing, innovation and leadership, and contributes to influencing the regional discourse on governance"* (UNDP Europe and CIS 2010).

UNDP's Governance Practice in Europe and in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) addresses three main areas in this regard:

- Local Governance and Decentralization (LGD),
- Public Administration Reform (PAR)
- Anti-Corruption (PAR-AC), Human Rights, Justice and Legal Empowerment (HR&J).

From some academic literature it can be implied that democratic governance is related to better integration (Layne, Lee 2001, Chadwick, May 2003) and increased trust (Tolbert, Mossberger 2006) in the public sector. Chapter Three takes into consideration some e-government development models; however, the motives and aims of international assistance remain out of those debates. A study from Crawford and Kearton (2002) contributes by giving a comparative analysis, and summarizing the intentions and aims of such donors giving IGA. From their discussion and the analysis in this section, the motives and implied advantages of international assistance can be summarised in the following five elements:

- **Democracy** – Support free elections and fair representation, including the political education of citizens, the empowerment of civil society, and media.
- **Economic growth** – Assistance on strategies and resources that promote economic growth, investments, and welfare.

- **Justice** – Supporting the independence and integrity of judicial systems and legislations by promoting transparency, fair procedures, and state responsiveness.
- **Decentralisation** – Assisting the decentralization of political and governmental powers, especially in developing countries with a centralised system in the past.
- **Integration** – Promote international collaboration that is beneficial for individual members as well as for the group of countries in an international community.

From this summary of objectives and implied advantages, in contrast to IA or ODA, IGA appears to be more related to political rather than economic objectives. As IGA is delivered both from national or multinational donor agencies, theoretically and empirically (Burnside, Dollar 2000, Berthélemy 2006) the second one is supposed to be more effective. The first reason is that the involvement from the receiving country is higher, if the assistance is given from an international agency where it adheres. Second, multilateral assistance reduces the risk of IGA being perceived as political influence, at least in principle. The validity of these assumptions, however, needs to be examined further in the context of e-government assistance by considering also its possible disadvantages in the following section.

2.2.4   A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

One of the strongest critiques on foreign aid is a well-known statement of Milton Friedman (1958), arguing that foreign economic aid would retard economic development and promote socialism instead of democracy. But if this is the case, why international assistance exists? The answer to this question is not so simple, but it starts by pointing out that that the statement of Friedman is too simplistic, especially in today's world. In order give details of the problems with international assistance, the following issues are presented.

Autocracy and expanded governments - Because the government receiving the assistance has another source of income rather than taxes, its focus could shift from voters and citizens to donors. This could lead to the government not performing one of its main goals, representation of voters' interest. Previously it was mentioned that one of the main aims of IA, and especially IGA, is to promote democracy. However, studies on how

international assistance has reached this goal are inconclusive, showing a lack of direct relationship (Knack 2001, 2004). Anyway, they point out the risk of governments and politicians shifting their focus from citizens to donors. The other argument for decreased government efficiency is that IA promotes the expansion of governments (Remmer 2004), especially in small and medium countries. The problem here is that when the assistance is gone or shifted to another project, it is very difficult to reduce the size of the government agencies created in that case. To summarize, international assistance could lead to autocratic behaviours by reducing its accountability to voters. At the same time it could decrease governments' efficiency by expanding their structures.

Voracity effect and slow growth - The voracity effect means that *"the growth rate declines as the raw rate of return increases"* (Tornell, Lane 1999). In Tornell's analysis voracity is evidenced in developing countries that lack strong regulatory institutions, and are populated by multiple powerful groups. Foreign aid or assistance has been shown to have a voracity effect, especially when related to corruption (Alesina, Weder 2002). Although some evidence shows that foreign aid does not directly increase corruption (Tavares 2003), it is often associated with increased corruption in countries more likely to suffer from competing social groups (Svensson 2000). International assistance donors or involved businesses are among these powerful groups, having therefore a great influence on the country that lacks regulations. Swenson (2000) develops also a mathematical model which is beyond the scope of this study, to show the voracity effect of international aid relation to corruption. The final remark remains that foreign assistance inflows in countries with low level of regulations and strong interest groups have a voracity effect. Assistance inflows might go to inefficient sectors influenced by these two factors, resulting to a decrease on the growth rate.

Fungibility effect - This is when governments use partly or fully international assistance not for the purpose it was given by the donor, but for other activities such as deficit reduction, debt payments, or even defence (Devarajan, Swaroop 2000). A number of studies (Pack, Pack 1993, Cashel-Cordo, Craig 1990, Feyzioglu, Swaroop & Zhu 1998, Guillaumont, Chauvet 2001, Chauvet, Guillaumont 2004) evidence different forms of fungibility of international aid and assistance. In this same context, there is general agreement that increasing aid assessments, controls, and supervision on aid allocation is

not enough. To avoid fungibility, the donor and recipient should both have interest on developing the project, programme or sector the assistance is aiming for. An interesting fact presented by Feyzioglu, Swaroop and Zhu (1998) in their findings is that fungibility is much lower when assistance is given in the transport and telecommunication sectors. Connecting this fact with International Electronic Government Assistance (IEGA), this is one of the reasons why IA and IGA are shifting towards infrastructure, telecommunication and information technology assistance.

Internal market disruption - As Wolfgang Reinicke (1997) pointed out, *"While globalization integrates markets, it fragments politics"*. IA could be considered as a form of globalization, but being almost always related to governments, makes it a political tool as well. Market and other disruptions from international assistance and aid could be caused either in the donor's or recipient's country (Friedman 1958). Focussing more on the second, the main criticism is assistance use as a subsidy for some specific sectors. Their development puts the other sectors in misbalance, thus disrupting the market (Cooper 1972). IA, especially IGA, often aims to help market-liberalizing policy reform (Heckelman, Knack 2008). But the same study shows that it has to be corrected for its potential endogenity. This means that a surplus of aid and assistance can slow market liberalization. To conclude, international assistance effects on markets are much debated.

International assistance dependency - As argued by Dos Santos (1970) foreign loans, aid or assistance creates dependency through control on currency, investments and technological development. It is necessary to separate here assistance from aid, and especially from loans and foreign direct investments (FDI). The monopolistic international market Dos Santos envisages, with support given on dependent development, production and reproduction still exists. Assistance dependency is the most debated problem in relationship with technical assistance (Knack 2001, Berg 1993). The typical case is when the donor provides such assistance in the form of specialists, but not of transferable knowledge systems (Kanbur 2003). The problem of aid conditionality in poor countries has started many debates on the efficiency of international assistance (Thodbecke 2000). However, Dos Santos' final conclusion that radical forms of government such as communism or fascism could be the only solution, is questionable. As a conclusion to this

part, the following diagram gives a summarized presentation of international assistance advantages and related disadvantages:
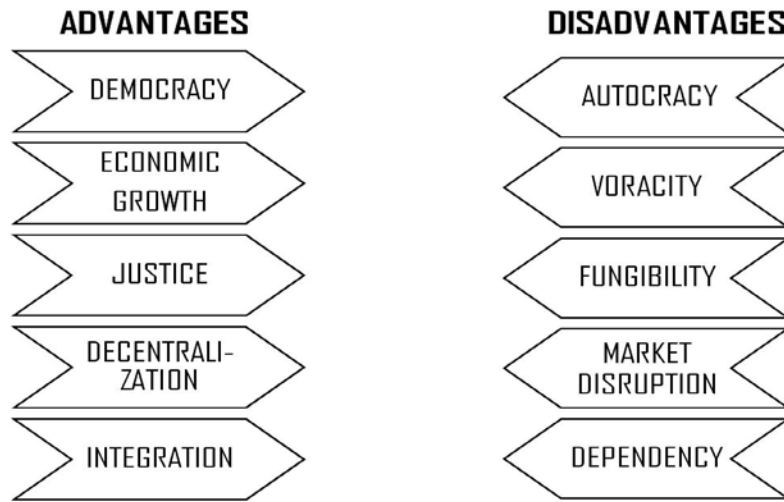
FIGURE 4: INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

This figure shows the complex reality of IA and consecutively of IGA and IEGA where multiple forces and actors are involved, often representing contradicting interests, norms, and values. To deal with this situation, international donors, but also governments and different actors are realizing the importance of evaluation and assessment on assistance, especially on democracy and government assistance (Crawford, Kearton 2002). The goal of this study is to give a modest contribution, filling some of this gap in the direction of international e-government assistance research.

A generally high level of positivism has been noticed towards e-government reforms (Heeks, Bailur 2007), and internationally assisted projects in this sector could very well follow this trend. In this context, the previous diagram unfolds the debate mentioned earlier between strategic interests and the moral vision of international e-government assistance. Discussing both advantages than disadvantages of IA in this section could contribute towards a balanced view and critical analysis in this study. Understanding such forces helps understand how e-government reforms are institutionalized and how they can become sustainable. To examine this in more practical terms, the following section continues with the project nature of e-government assistance.

2.3   THE PROJECT NATURE OF E-GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

The literature on international government assistance doesn't say much on how to increase the advantages discussed in this section, and minimize its disadvantages discussed in the previous section. The implied motives and advantages of international assistance listed earlier are often based on best practices from developed countries and donors promoting their values of democracy, economic development, or justice. Projects are often the tools to support and deliver such reforms to a developing country. However, the critical review in this research is expected to give some useful insights on the applicability of these ideas. Therefore, project management principles that frame such developments in the context of international e-government assistance will be the subject of this part.

2.3.1   PROJECT MANAGEMENT METHODOLOGIES AND PRINCIPLES

There are a number of project management approaches and methodologies, so this section intends to give a critical review of them, before deciding on which one to use in this research. Regardless of the multitude of project management courses of practices, the approaches used can be divided into 'Waterfall' or 'Agile' models, not excluding here any hybrid combination of the two.

The waterfall model is about a sequential design of planned processes from requirement specifications to maintenance (Boehm 1988). Regardless of the criticism of this approach since its birth by Winston Royce (1970), the waterfall model continues to find many applications in practice. In the context of e-government projects, the waterfall model can be applied in the risk management context (Pardo, Scholl 2002), or even users' involvements in development projects (Følstad, Jørgensen & Krogstie 2004). The strictly aligned nature of processes after each other is the drawback that receives most of the criticism in the waterfall methodologies, especially when compared to agile approaches.

The agile approach on the other hand would be about a holistic framework of knowledge-based e-government that is flexible to changes (Stojanovic, Mentzas & Apostolou 2006). According to the Manifesto for Agile Software Development (Beck et al. 2001), such project management methodologies are driven by customer-focused scenarios. This methodology recognises changes from plans as inevitable and develops systems through

iterations and increments to adapt to the environment. This flexibility towards change makes the agile approach more expected to be found in internationally assisted e-government projects in developing and transition countries.

The waterfall or agile principles have been combined also into well-structured methodologies of practice. The Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) by the Project Management Institute (2009) is the oldest international standard, originating from USA. PRINCE 2 (Office of Government Commerce 2009) is a similar project management methodology, initially developed for computer systems and software development, but now adapted also in many public administration projects in UK. According to PMBOK projects go through number of overlapping stages and process groups that are initiation, planning, execution, monitoring and controlling, and finally closing (Project Management Institute 2009). This is a hybrid combination of the 'Waterfall' and 'Agile' approaches. PRINCE 2 (Office of Government Commerce 2009) takes a very similar approach, but it focuses more on the formal procedures of monitoring, controlling and reporting rather than on a holistic view of project management, compared to the PMBOK.

This study will be based mainly on the Project Management Body of Knowledge (Project Management Institute 2009) as a holistic and widely accepted framework for project management on an international level. However, the limitations of PMBOK due to its rigidity and similarities to the waterfall approach are recognised in this study. PRINCE2 is also similar in this context, limited for the same reasons in addressing change in project management and as a consequence. The analysis of institutional change in this research requires a more flexible approach.

A neglected area remains also the post-project adaptation stage (Wagner, Newell 2007) which is important in this research. Therefore, this study will adapt the initiation, planning, execution, monitoring and controlling and finally closing (Project Management Institute 2009) projects stages, but will build on it based on the institutional framework adapted for this study, as discussed in Chapter Three later. This should fill an important research gap and provide a broader view of the project management of reforms, extending their analysis before their start and after their closing.

2.3.2   PROJECTS: MECHANISM OF INTERVENTION OR ASSISTANCE?

Government reforms often consist of complex transformations in the public sector. In this process, international e-government assistance can be a combination of demand for aid from the recipient country, and an intervention from the donor. The literature on international interventions is focused on humanitarian actions (Wheeler 2000), military involvements (Hoffmann 1995, Hoffman 2004) or most often on a combination of the two from a political and ethical perspective (Jamieson 2005, Orford 2003, Singer 1972). However, there is very limited research on the project nature of such involvements of international donors in the general context of aid, let alone e-government assistance specifically. This study will attempt to fill this gap, revealing more on how international projects are managed in e-government assistance and interventions, focusing on their long governance sustainability.

To provide some background on international assistance projects in Albania, it is necessary to mention that during the totalitarian communist system (1945-1989) the country was isolated from the world, including from the communist bloc during the last decades of the regime. Now Albania is trying to join the European Union, but to do so it has to meet a number of economic and political criteria. The democratic changes and the introduction of the market economy in 1989-1992 revealed the huge gap between Albania and other European countries, including those from the Western Balkan region. Since communism was part of the past, the challenge became to move away from isolation. Integration in the World Trade Organization (2000), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (2009), and an expected European Union integration became goals on themselves. This was followed by assistance from these organisations and other ones such as the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund etc. (Kromidha, Córdoba-Pachon 2010). Because of this pro-integration attitude, international assistance has been easily accepted in Albania.

Because projects have been the main mechanism of international assistance reforms and change in a developing country like Albania, it is important to clarify some definitions about them. There are many books, literature and research on project management, but the

most important definitions for this section were taken from the Project Management Body of Knowledge according to which:

> *A **project** is a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result. […] **Project management** is the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements.* (Project Management Institute 2009: 5 - 6)

> *A **program** is defined as a group of related projects managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits and control not available from managing them individually.* (Project Management Institute 2009: 9)

In the context of international assistance, *Project Assistance (PJA)* consists of contributions made available to a recipient country for a specific purpose. *Programme Assistance (PGA)* consists of contributions made available to a recipient country for a specific sector (OECD 2008). Some literature suggests that Programme Assistance has emerged from Project Assistance, as a more efficient way of sustainable development (Mosley, Eckhout 2000). In practice, there is often a third element involved namely *Technical Assistance (TA)* or Technical Co-operation, referring the provision of know-how in the form of personnel, training, and research with associated costs (OECD 2008). In the classical project management language, this can be associated to Project Procurement Management: the processes of purchasing or acquiring products, services or results needed from outside the project team to perform the work (Project Management Institute 2009). According to the International Monetary Fund (2009), technical assistance supports the development of both human and institutional resources by designing appropriate macroeconomic, financial, and structural policies. All three: PJA, PGA and TA interact and overlap with each other, forming the *Sector-wide Assistance (SA):* contributions made available to a recipient country for a specific sector, and specific purposes within that sector (OECD 2008). According to the PMBOK, this is equivalent to:

> **A Portfolio:** *"A collection of projects or programs and other work that are grouped together to facilitate effective management of that work to meet strategic business objectives. The projects or programs of the portfolio may not necessarily be interdependent or directly related."* (Project Management Institute 2009: 8)

Because this is a new form of aid channel, also referred to in the literature as Sector-Wide Approaches or SWAPS (Riddell 2007), its impacts are not well studied. This research will explore some of its implications in the context of international e-government assistance. One of the two case studies reviewed later in this study, the National Registration Center for the electronic register of businesses, was part of a Sector-wide Assistance portfolio between USA and Albania. Its goal was to modernize public services not only for businesses, but also to create an administrative court or assist with the land registration processes as a number of other unrelated projects. In other words, Sector-wide Assistance is a combination of PJA, PGA and TA.

Two cases are selected to be studied here from Albania, representing clear examples of international e-government assistance. The first is the project to develop the **National Registration Center** (NRC), a new one-stop-shop agency providing e-government services for business registration through an electronic system. This was supported by the United States of America. The implementing agencies were the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), as part of a sector-wide assistance from these organisations.

The second project is the **National Register of Civil Status** (NRCS) in the General Directorate of Civil Status. This project was also part of a larger sector-wide assistance from the European Union (EU) with implementing agency the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). International assistance from Statistics Norway was also merged into the larger sector-wide assistance from EU mentioned before. The cases are complex and they will be discussed in more detail in the empirical Chapters Six, Seven and Eight. Here however, in order to have a better understanding of e-government assistance, the discussion in the following section will continue by looking at project stakeholders.

A preliminary research on these two case studies show that projects can be used for interventions through assistance. This will be explored in more detail in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight. As explained in the previous part, the goal of project management principles and methodologies is to institutionalise and standardise certain practices that should facilitate the coordination of different activities. The goal of this research is to study

not only the e-government solutions brought by the international donors that implemented the two projects in Albania, but also their project management approaches in a bilateral or multilateral context. Whether and how the project management definitions introduced in this part, the methodologies used by the donors, and the local context in Albania could be integrated together to achieve success, is what this study is about. To build on this argument, the sustainability of e-governance systems is discussed in the following section.

2.4   GOVERNANCE SUSTAINABILITY

This section discusses the debate between stability and change in the context of governance sustainability in a developing country. The definition of sustainability on which this study is based is that of the ability of a system to *"survive and persist"* (Costanza, Patten 1995). This is the ability of the e-government institutions to deal in the long run with both needs for change and stability. The authors of this simple, but straightforward definition of sustainability (Costanza, Patten 1995) present and analyse three questions summarised in one here: What persist, for how long and how to analyse it?

The first and the third question are directly related to the research question of this research on the institutionalization of international e-government assistance. The second question identifies the contradiction between the temporary project nature of international government assistance and its desired results which are expected to last, or in other words, survive and persist. These debates are explained a bit more in the following sections.

2.4.1   SUSTAINABILITY BETWEEN STABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

The abstract idea of sustainability can be related to both stability and development as two conflicting concepts. The first is related to the status-quo and the second is more often related to continuous change and improvement. In this study the idea of stable development is consistent with the belief that preserving improvements is as important as initiating them. Furthermore it implies that changes need to be considered carefully and if necessary not to be implemented if there is no satisfactory degree of certainty that the new form will be better than the existing one. This relatively conservative approach is more focused on the long-term goals and objectives rather present developments.

Sustainable development is a concept that appeared for the first time in 1980 (IUCN 1980). It was described later as the *"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"* (Brundtland 1987), always in the context of natural environment. Sustainable living on the other hand has to do with *"Improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems."* (IUCN 1991). These reports given as a reference in this paragraph after pointing out the risk of unsustainable living, suggest sustainable development as a solution. But whose unsustainable living are they referring to as being a major problem of exploiting the resources of the planet if not that of developed and industrialized countries? This implies that sustainable development comes after development itself. A non-developed or developing country is not a major exploiter of resources for its own needs. However, from the developing country's point of view, development in general remains one of the primary objectives.

This research focuses on governance assistance through information technology systems, rather than on foreign direct investments and environmental issues related to development. As a consequence, it is not the scope of this research to address the problems of natural resource exploitation in exchange of development in many poor countries like, for example, in Africa (Alvaredo, Atkinson 2010), nor discuss sustainable governance models (Fischer et al. 2007) in that context. The aim here is to examine the stabilization of public sector reforms in the case of international e-government assistance. This is the reason why focusing on sustainability rather than on sustainable development is more important in the context of a developing country discussed here.

The environment and institutional forces influencing internationally assisted e-government projects cannot be neglected. Sustainability takes another meaning in this approach, as it needs to accommodate important elements such as democratic representation and public administration efficiency. The first is related to the consideration end-users who at the same time can be voters deserve. A sustainable e-government system is considered here to be one in which the will of the sovereign is adequately satisfied over a long period of time. The second is referred to as simply governance: *"the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs"* (Commission of Global Governance 1995). A sustainable system in this case is assumed to be one in which the

power given by the sovereign to government is exercised in a way that it serves the sovereign's interest.

Internationally assisted e-government initiatives are analysed with socio-technical characteristics in this study. It is initially assumed that their sustainability is essential to the sustainability of democratic governance in developing countries, but this study is expected to share more light in this unexplored area. The focus of this research remains on political, administrative and social sustainability, rather than on environmental sustainability. In this context, this study suggests a conceptual shift from the idea of ecosystem to the idea of eco-institutions. The capacity of society to reinvent different forms of institutionalized practices in this regard is theoretically unlimited, unlike the case of natural resources. Continuing this argument, some alternatives to international e-government assistance are discussed next.

2.4.2   ALTERNATIVES TO INTERNATIONAL E-GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

It is almost impossible to find any example of international assistance or aid being rejected by any country. However, following the critical discussion from the previous part, alternatives to international e-government assistance exist, and can be important to judge on the sustainability of reforms in this study.

International assistance is an exogenous variable in the activities of a developing country. Because it depends much on the donors and their aims, recipient governments rarely base their programmes only on that. The country's needs on the other hand are clear. They derive from the demands of its citizens and businesses, as well as from the government itself. The idea of a system approach of a government management (Mintzberg 1996) and the relationships between the government, businesses and citizens have been already analysed in the context of e-government (Fang 2002, Holmes 2001, Funabashi, Grzech 2005, Heeks 2006). What is new in this study is the introduction of the donors as important actors in the equation of e-government projects and reforms.

Reforming the institutions and government systems through new approaches, systems and technologies is a very important part of this agenda. E-government is the typical example where this restructuring process is very dynamic, and requires the coordination of many

stakeholders. In absence of international assistance in this sector, a developing country could still consider one or many of the following options.

Keep existing system - This means no reforms or change in the government systems and institutions. There are no additional costs, but at the same time no expected development. The pioneers of *'reinvented government'* would argue that reforming government should be done continuously (Osborne, Gaebler 1992, Osborne 1993, Kettl 1994, Nathan 1995, Thompson, Riccucci 1998). Regardless of some critics on reinventing government (Thompson, Riccucci 1998, Williams 2000), the majority would argue that systems' change is an essential part of organizational and political developments in e-government (Hood 2000, Dunleavy, Margetts 2006, Margetts 2009). Therefore, keeping existing system would not be considered as a good choice to consider, especially for developing countries like Albania in this study. A focus on development is expected by globalization and information technology trends everywhere. However, its power to break instead of keeping existing systems and structures can be greater in post-dictatorial systems, as many witnessed in the case of Arab spring countries lately. Nevertheless, in developing countries or transition economies, change with all its risks can often be not only accepted, but desired and institutionalized.

Develop governmental own solutions - Some would argue that IA has a negative effect on the development of in-house capacities, creating dependency and assuring the technological advance of the donors (Santos 1970). When free from IA, a country could develop its own solutions in terms of structural and development reforms. This would work for many policies and organizational changes, but it is difficult when some technological development is required. Therefore, developing in-house capacities for governments might provide some advantage over keeping existing systems unchanged, but is not the most affordable option when related to technology developments. Two other problems are efficiency and accountability of government expenditures (Wildavsky 1966, Heinrich 2002). Until the 90s, even developed countries like the USA would consider developing systems themselves, like the Internet, for example, in the 60s. Now governments are limiting their activities to governance only, looking at the most efficient outsourcing options even in sectors like defence. To conclude with the idea of Adam Smith (1937), even governments should not develop everything themselves if there are other

more effective ways of doing so. Developing countries does not have to be an exception when it comes to e-government reforms in this context.

Outsource from the private sector - Many governments have been outsourcing activities to the private sector (O'Looney 1998) from a long time. This is generally the case for all developed countries, being themselves the international assistance donors, and not having access to aid given to them. Governments, however, try to use home companies to outsource services, or develop systems that would lead to organisational changes, especially in the IT sector (Dunleavy, Margetts 2006). The current trends on technological development show that multinational partnerships and outsourcing work better than developing in-house capacities (Robertson, Gatignon 1998, Currie 2000, Kakabadse, Kakabadse 2005). Information technologies in particular require not only resources, but also knowledge which a developing country might not have.

Collaborative International Government-to-Government Assistance (CIG2GA) - Following the two previous ideas of developing systems themselves or outsourcing a hybrid option could be a partnership between two or more governments to develop shared projects, systems or reforms with national, regional or global impact. This goes beyond the normal G2G relationship when government agencies cooperate with one-another within the same country. The context here is when the government agencies of from two or many different countries work together in a joint project. The other important term is 'collaborative'. Based on the semantic web concept developed by the founder of the World Wide Web (Berners-Lee, Hendler 2001), knowledge shared management (Iyer et al. 2006) and information exchange (Fan, Zhang 2007) government projects are undergoing a fundamental change in terms of information management and stakeholders' involvement. Such intergovernmental 'e' initiatives, however, are at their grassroots, but new research has started to emerge in this area (Navarrete et al. 2010, Peristeras, Tarabanis & Loutas 2007). Such international e-government exchanges are beyond the scope of this study, but could constitute an interesting ground for future research.

Alternatives are almost never considered in the literature about international assistance, e-government projects or their sustainability. Rather than focusing only on the closed system of assistance interactions, this study attempts to see or at least think about other scenarios.

This approach suggests evaluating the sustainability of international assistance not only based on their actual outputs, but also reflecting on the alternative solutions that could have been chosen. Because of the hypothetic nature of this approach, researching it retrospectively and in practice is a challenge which goes beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the alternatives identified here could help a better decision-making process from e-government policy-makers in the future.

2.5   CONCLUSIONS

This chapter discussed three important concepts related to the research question: assistance, projects and sustainability. The literature on international assistance does not provide much about the management of e-government projects, but focuses more on their expected outcomes. Project management and e-government literature, on the other hand, are often limited to the organizational context. The purpose of this chapter was to bring these two approaches together through a clearly defined focus on the sustainability of internationally assisted e-government projects.

International assistance aims to help developing countries to solve development problems in accordance with a strategy of wide participation of the parties. It differs from foreign aid, which deals with humanitarian issues as well. Bilateral or multilateral is the continuum of donor-recipient relationship, with the latter being more efficient due to better control, supervision and mutual involvement. On a global level, international assistance aims at the development of democracy, human rights, and economic growth. On a governmental or intergovernmental level, its aims are more specific, focusing on the legal system, elections, transparency, accountability or decentralization. Criticism on international assistance is based both on its objectives as well as the methods to achieve them. Some of the most debated issues as a result of international assistance are autocracy, expanded governments, voracity effect, fungibility effect, market disruption, or dependency. Solutions are possible through better management, control, and involvement, and e-government appears to provide a satisfactory area of assistance to achieve this in an efficient way.

Projects play an important role as mechanism of intervention and change in the public sector. However, the challenge is to streamline efficiency, decentralization, and

accountability management goals with the needs of developing countries like Albania. This is necessary to recreate and re-engineer government processes to keep pace with the global technological developments which put e-government and international assistance on this field at a very important place. Reflecting on the interventionist nature of international assistance, this study will critically examine the complex role of assisted projects in the context of e-government reforms.

The governance sustainability of internationally assisted e-government projects was the final part in this chapter, highlighting the debate between stability and development in public reforms. Alternatives to international e-government assistance were also part of this debate. Keeping existing systems, developing governmental own solutions, outsourcing from the private sector, or collaborative international government-to-government, are only some of them, the latter still being a visionary choice. However, to answer the research questions of this study, a theoretical framework is required in order to explain some of the main issues and challenges raised here. This will be addressed in the following chapter.

3 IMPLEMENTATION AND ADAPTATION PERSPECTIVES ON E-GOVERNMENT

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a critical discussion of the theoretical models and frameworks used in previous e-government studies. The goal is to select a theoretical framework that could guide this study. A discussion of of-government stage model, the technology acceptance frameworks, public administration approaches and socio-technical dialectics helps to reveal some of the current trends in e-government research. The analysis then moves to theories of stakeholders and actor-networks. However, in order to answer the complex research question on the institutionalization of internationally assisted e-government projects, institutional theory and its different approaches are considered in the final sections.

The critical analysis of the different flavours of institutionalism in general, and in the context of e-government, is finalised with a theoretical framework developed to guide this study. Informed by Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008), this framework aims to look deeper into international assistance, project management, and governance sustainability discussed in the previous chapter. To unfold these lines of arguments and decisions, this chapter starts with a general review of the e-government literature in the following section.

3.2 GENERAL REVIEW OF THE E-GOVERNMENT LITERATURE

It has often been argued that e-government, being a new area of study, lacks theoretical depth (Heeks, Bailur 2007). In a study of e-government research papers published on three recognized referred journals, they offer a detailed and thorough study of work done in this area. Heeks and Bailur (2007) note that "*E-government research is therefore in a poor state: viewed as the offspring of information systems and public administration*".

After years of e-government research and practice, a number of more recent literature reviews have tried to analyse this body of knowledge in the information systems domain (Dwivedi, Kuljis 2008), or through more general approaches (Kræmmergaard, Schlichter

2011, Yildiz 2007, Dwivedi 2009, Dwivedi, Weerakkody & Janssen 2012). The general positivism, lack of critical approaches, absence of deep analysis, of theoretical frameworks, and of rigorous methodologies, are some of the key problems in e-government research. Conducting a word-frequency analysis of the most commonly used terms in 4,672 titles selected in the E-Government Reference Library (EGRL) 7.5 for the period 1981 – December 2011 (Scholl 2011), the picture appears as follows:
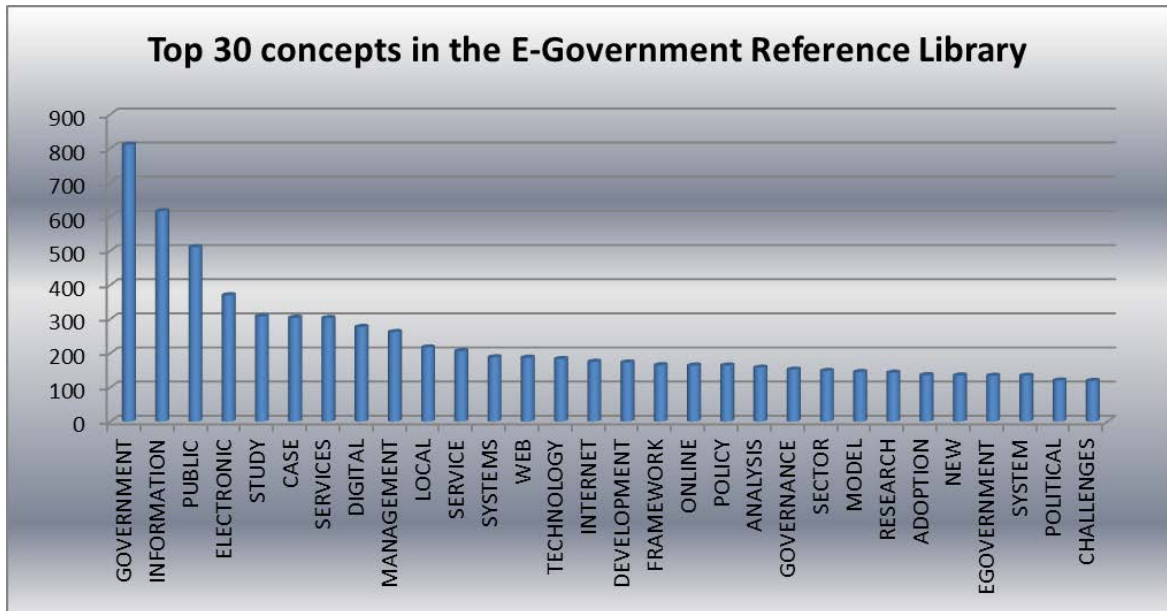
FIGURE 5: FREQUENT TERMS IN THE E-GOVERNMENT LITERATURE (EGRL 7.5)

The most frequently used concepts appearing in the titles of these publications were extracted and ranked according to their frequency using ATLAS.ti 7. This is the main qualitative data management software used in this research. Its features and application in analysing the textual research evidence in this study is explained in more detail in the methodology Chapter Five. The author of does not claim it to be all inclusive (Scholl 2011). Nevertheless, this is a good starting point for the literature review.

Trying to understand the frequency and use of models, frameworks, and theories in e-government research, using the same source, the E-Government Reference Library 7.5 (Scholl 2011), a focused investigation on these specific terms was conducted. The results are summarised in the following table:

Concepts	Ranking place[2]	Number of occurrences
Theory	105	51
Theoretical	353	16
Theories	888	6
Model	23	145
Models	102	51
Framework	17	165
Frameworks	361	15
Assistance	1635	2
Aid	1618	2

FIGURE 6: SELECTED CONCEPTS IN THE E-GOVERNMENT LITERATURE (EGRL 7.5)

This table clearly reconfirms the overemphasis on models and frameworks over theories in e-government research. On the other hand, a very limited number of articles and materials on e-government use the terms *'assistance'* or *'aid'* in their titles. Even those two and two articles respectively are not in the context of international assistance as discussed in the previous chapter. It is also worth mentioning that the terms *'donor'* or *'donors'* do not appear even once among the 4698 different concepts in these titles, after excluding here the stop-words form the top 100 terms as explained in the footnote.

The selection and use of a theory in this study is not only expected to contribute to a better understanding of the research question, but also help filling this gap in the e-government literature. The research problem here is to understand how internationally assisted e-government projects are institutionalized, and how they support sustainable reforms in a developing country.

A theoretical framework for this study should be able to explain how structures and processes are organised into forces of change and stability in a complex environment. Based on this idea, a detailed discussion of e-government models, frameworks and theories follows in the next parts of this chapter, concluding with the selection of an approach.

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[2] 13 stop-words such as 'of', 'and', 'in', 'for', 'to', 'on', 'from', 'towards', 'with', 'as', 'or', 'at' and 'by' appearing in the original version of the list generated automatically with ATLAS.ti 7 have been removed from the top 100 concepts appearing in this final list. The remaining stop-words have been left untouched. The ranking presented in this table is affected accordingly.

3.3   MODELS AND CURRENT TRENDS

The literature review confirms the extensive use of e-government models, starting with those related to the development and integration of systems. Analysing and explaining e-government, it has been noted that that model-based work that is presented without any deeper framework of knowledge represents most of the research on e-government (Heeks, Bailur 2007). However, different models have been used extensively in e-government studies to organised ideas and to represent current trends. Therefore it is important to critically discuss in this section some of the most well-known models, and decide if they can contribute to answer the research question.

3.3.1   E-GOVERNMENT STAGE MODELS

Heeks and Bailur (2007) identify the Web Stage Model and its four stages of information, interaction, transaction, and transformation, as one of the most commonly used in the context of e-government development. This four stage model has been known and presented also by the e-government consulting industry such as Gartner (Baum, Di Maio 2000), but Layne and Lee (2001) provide one of the most cited and well know approaches in this regard:

- Stage 1: 'Catalogue' is about an online presence.
- Stage 2: 'Transaction' is about online forms and a working database.
- Stage 3: 'Vertical integration' is about links between local and higher level systems.
- Stage 4: 'Horizontal integration' is about links between different functions.

The authors recognize the simplicity and limitations of the model by suggesting that *"major rethinking about how governments provide services may be needed"* (Layne, Lee 2001). To address these limitations, this model has been extended and developed further by other works presenting it in other forms (Reddick 2004) or focusing on e-government maturity (Andersen, Henriksen 2006, Misra, Dhingra 2002, Shareef et al. 2011, Valdes et al. 2011).

With some small adaptations, the government of Albania and its National Agency for Information Society has embedded the model in the National Cross Cutting Strategy on Information Society:

E-GOVERNMENT PHASES

TRANSFORMATION

TRANSACTIONS

INTERACTIVITY

WEB PRESENCE

BENEFITS AND COSTS

Distribute the information for the public through website

Enhanced offering more information to citizens and business, it starts the way of interactivity "G2C", "G2B"

Government offers online services, download forms, access of services is adopted with users needs, reliable, sustainability and secured

E-gov has transformed the way of governance and the relations between G2C, G2B, both way communication the communication is secured, easily accessed and reliable

CULTURE AND ORGANISATIVE CHANGES

INFRASTRUCTURE OF DISTRIBUTION OF SERVICES

E-GOVERNMENT A LONG TERM & A COMPLEX PROCESS

FIGURE 7: E-GOVERNMENT STAGES (National Agency for Information Society 2009)

What the e-government stage models and this government vision fail to explain, is how the reforms are carried forward in practice. This study tries to fill some of this gap by analysing the implementation and adaptation of internationally assisted projects.

E-government stage models have also been related to benchmarking in the literature as a method to evaluate services (Magoutas, Mentzas 2009), Earlier criticism on e-government benchmarking highlights their limitations in what they measure, influenced by the aims of those that prepare them, mentioning also the unnecessary pressures they place on public managers, in line with their earlier criticism (Bannister 2007). The problem is the gap that exists between e-government theories, conceptualisation of best practices, and their implementation in different contexts (Gil-García, Pardo 2005). Therefore, although the web stage model is a good and practical approach to track and evaluate e-government reforms, it provides little insight on the network and institutional interacting forces. The model is limited in explaining international and national interests, strategies, policies and actions. Furthermore, in practice, the four stages do not necessarily have to happen according to the given sequence.

More recent works have extended the initial idea of a general e-government development and evaluation model to the level of municipalities (Moon 2002, Carbo, Williams 2004) or cities (Anthopoulos, Tsoukalas 2006). Other works move away from a general model of e-government development by focusing on specific processes and outcomes. Aagesen and Krogstie (2011), for example, review models and scenarios related to services' delivery in e-government developments and transformations. Others recognize the importance of trainings in e-government developments, and introduce a model for this (Aggarwal 2009). General recent approaches have shifted towards the idea of an open source e-democracy model (Berthon, Williams 2007), or open data stage models (Kalampokis, Tambouris & Tarabanis 2011).

Lee (2010) summarizes the last 10 years the e-government stage models in five metaphors: presenting, assimilating, reforming, morphing, and e-governance; and two underlying themes: citizen/service and operation/technology. Recalling from the previous chapter the part on e-government assistance aims, this is similar to the strategic interest approach (Burnside, Dollar 2000, Maizels, Nissanke 2004, Schraeder, Hook & Taylor 1998) And the idea of moral vision (Lumsdaine 1993). The theoretical depths of the stage model and previous attempts to synthesize it (Siau, Long 2005) can be extended by identifying persisting patterns and themes of e-government development. This research will address such current e-government trends, but build on institutional theories discussed later. However, there are some other e-government perspectives that focus on the users' acceptance and public administration models discussed in the following two parts.

3.3.2   ACCEPTANCE AND ADAPTATION FRAMEWORKS

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis 1986, Davis, Bagozzi & Warshaw 1989) appears to be the most widely used theoretical approach in e-government studies (Rana et al. 2011). It is based on two dimensions: Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease-Of-Use (PEOU). TAM is used in a number of e-government studies (Dadayan, Ferro 2005, Carter, Bélanger 2005, Horst, Kuttschreuter & Gutteling 2007). Recent studies extend it with the idea of learning (Shyu, Huang 2011) or by focusing more on the government-to-citizens relationship in a developing context (Hussein et al. 2009). In

the context of e-government, this approach implies that the more its users will perceive its usefulness and ease of use, the more they will engage with it.

The e-government acceptance models build on previous works such as the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen, Fishbein & Heilbroner 1980, Fishbein, Ajzen 1975) or the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1985, Ajzen 1991, Ajzen, Madden 1986, Kanat, Özkan 2009, Ozkan, Kanat 2011), Innovation Diffusion Theory (Brancheau, Wetherbe 1990), or Diffusion of Innovation model (Rogers 1995). Innovation models have been extended into the e-government field, trying to bridge the gap between resistance and support in adoption and diffusion (Ebbers, Van Dijk 2007, Faisal, Rahman 2008). They all aim to explain human behaviour and engagement with technology, but say little on what exactly influences their actions.

Studies on the development of instruments to measure the perceptions of adopting an information technology innovation (Moore, Benbasat 1991) recognize the complexity of the subject to come up with clear indicators. A recent version of TAM is the e Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh, Davis 2000, Venkatesh 2000, Venkatesh et al. 2003). The UTAUT was applied or mentioned in a number of e-government adaptation studies in countries such as Kuwait (AlAwadhi, Morris 2008) or Qatar (Al-Shafi, Weerakkody & Janssen 2009) for example. The problem, however, remains not only the human-technology micro-interaction, but explaining the engagement of the whole network. This is the main criticism on such models, accused to not pay enough attention at the 'big picture' of the multi-actor institutional environment in which technology or e-government adoption happens.

More recent research tends to move away from general technology acceptance models. They take a more focuses approach on digital inclusion (Andersson 2004, Becker et al. 2008b) and users' satisfaction (Abhichandani, Horan 2006, Lee et al. 2008, Chan et al. 2010). The acceptance and users' satisfaction from e-government mobile technologies has also been attempted to be modelled in research discussions (El-Kiki, Lawrence 2006).

A paradigm shift is happening now in this context, moving from the acceptance of given technologies to models of participatory design. Some examples from the literature focus on collaboration about general processes (Colombo et al. 2011) or risk management between

e-government and businesses (Liu, Tan 2010). The collaboration these models and frameworks manage to describe is related to the different policy-makers, practitioners, and users of e-government services. This becomes more evident by looking at economic development models in the following section.

3.3.3   E-GOVERNMENT MODELS OF DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS

A great amount of studies especially in the 90s focus on economic policies for development through projects (Picciotto 1995, Gezon 1997, Rondinelli 1993, Moore 1995, Brinkerhoff, Garcia Zamor 1985, Brinkerhoff 1994, Picciotto, Durán 1998). Some insights from these studies are relevant for this research in explaining that *"projects came to be viewed as policy experiments and as instruments of institutional reforms"* (Picciotto 1995). However, the notion of projects in all these studies does not go beyond the principal-agent economic debates. The research problem on the other hand goes deeper into the organisational context of norms, beliefs and legitimacy of internationally assisted e-government reforms from a management perspective.

Information technologies in the public sector and the current trends of open collaboration governance have brought new challenges that have not been sufficiently addressed by current research. These new research grounds required a reconsideration of previous theoretical, methodological and empirical tools. To address such developments, Amartya Sen's ideas of development as freedom (Sen 1999) from economic sciences has been translated into the Capability Approach (Zheng 2007, Zheng 2009, Kleine 2010), trying to explain the role information and communication technologies for development. However, a critical study by Ciborra and Navarra (2005) that uses New Institutional Economics, points out that the standardised development aid on ICT and e-government solutions is not necessarily generating sustainable growth in the long run. Nevertheless, this study and approach is limited to an economic rather than management perspective, discussed also later in this chapter along Rational Neoinstitutionalism.

Development economics in general, and the Capability Approach in the ICT for development context specifically, do not focus on the managerial aspects of involved organisations, but tend to take an overall picture of stakeholders and interactions. This

research will try to fill this gap by focusing more on the organisational impact of e-government projects. Organisational institutions, projects and information technologies are at the centre of the micro-discussion here, while international assistance for development is only the macro-background. Because of the focus of this research on assistance projects and their sustainability, it was decided to focus more on their micro and organisational level rather than on the macroeconomic level of the country.

3.3.4   PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION APPROACHES

The importance of strategies is recognised beyond the private or public sector (Mintzberg 1996). Mintzberg's idea of managing the government is not new. This approach of business-like public administration to increase its cost-efficiency is explained, for example, by Public Choice Theory (Buchanan, Tullock 1965), being also related to Rational Neoinstitutionalism discussed later in this chapter. New Public Management (NPM) on the other hand is a general concept referring to the replacement of rigid hierarchical organizational structures with more dynamic networks of small organizational units by adopting a more customer-oriented attitude to public services (Gordon 2002). This approach has been applied in analysing e-government reforms in Albania (Kromidha, Córdoba-Pachon 2010) by looking at different e-government projects and agencies.

However, NPM has its limitations (Dunleavy et al. 2006) regarding the current context of e-government development. First of all, the exploratory concepts of this approach can explain some the strategic motivations in e-government reforms, but not their dynamics and involvement of actors. NPM is generally structure-deterministic, with little focus on the actual actors and their involvement in achieving sustainable long term developments. Finally, the business-like approach of NPM could explain some short-term changes, but not institutionalization and sustainability in the long-run which is the main question of this study. In other words, the model can explain to a certain extent what happens in e-government, but not why and how something happens.

The business models have had a great impact on the new public management of e-government (Peinel, Jarke & Rose 2010, Olbrich, Simon 2007), but recently they have shifted towards participatory public decision-making (Kim 2008, Reddick 2011) and open innovation (Feller, Finnegan & Nilsson 2010). Other e-government models in the public

sector domain have become more focused by taking a closer look at projects (Becker, Algermissen & Niehaves 2006), their risk management (Kefallinos, Lambrou & Sykas 2009), agile configuration (Chen, Wang & Pan 2011, Kriplean et al. 2010) and investments (Becker et al. 2008a). As more stakeholders and outsourcing actors get involved in the development and maintenance of e-government systems, privacy and information security management models emerge in the literature (Dunkerley, Tejay 2009, Marković, Đorđević 2010).

Policy-making has also shifted away from the business efficiency and decentralisation of New Public Management. Information sharing (Estevez et al. 2010) and scenario-based models (Bicking, Wimmer 2011a, 2011) have emerged some of which include Web 2.0 and simulations (Charalabidis et al. 2010). Such developments have gone parallel with the development of knowledge management systems and models in e-government (Metaxiotis, Psarras 2005, Kawaguchi, Komiya 2009), acknowledging the challenges in current risk-driven environments (Kő, Gábor & Szabó 2011). The complexity of multiple overlapping projects has been followed by research on semantic models of shared knowledge management (Wimmer 2006). These approaches are extended even to user cantered models for rural development through e-government projects (Malhotra, Chariar & Das 2009). Policy intervention models in support of e-government for developing countries have also been attempted (Chauhan, Estevez & Janowski 2008) by taking a best-practice perspective.

Such previous studies, however, are different from this one that does not take for granted the applicability of best practices from developed countries without proper research on the actors and forces already in place. The socio-technical challenges that this study tries to explain go beyond the public administration, adaptation and stage models in this context.

3.3.5   THE SOCIO-TECHNICAL DIALECTICS

Significant work is done in the context of companies to analyse the duality of technology or better how people interact with technology in organisations (Orlikowski, Baroudi 1991, Orlikowski 1992, Orlikowski, Robey 1991, Walsham, Han 1993, Walsham, Waema 1994, Hirschheim, Klein 1989, Hunt 1970, Orlikowski 2008). There is an on-going debate on how to deal with the empirical application of the theory to deliver more specific results

(Orlikowski, Robey 1991, Archer 1982) to give a better understanding of human and non-human actors. Many conceptual implications can be derived from studies on the use of technology in the public sector (Pardo et al. 2004). However, none of them has a specific focus on international assistance and governance sustainability. Because of the complexity of the research question here, the choice of research approaches and methods is of great importance.

The discussion in the previous chapter and this one so far identifies two dualities: that between international assistance donors and recipients, and the one between technology and humans. Recent studies taking a socio-technical approach on e-government tend to move from a supply-driven, to a service-driven system approach (Janssen, Feenstra 2008). Emerging socio-technical studies about e-government in developing countries identify a recent trend toward empirical discussions, but lack of theoretical and methodological depth (Khan et al. 2011). Accepting public administration as a socio-technical system (Maxwell, Dawes 2009), the challenge in this study is to combine the macro duality between government and donors with the micro duality between humans and technologies. This will be attempted by means of institutions, and not only by means of empirical anecdotes and models.

As a conclusion to this part, international assistance and information technology both play an important role towards the patterns that naturally become embedded in a developing country. The goal and original contribution of this research is to study these norms, templates, routines, or in other words institutions. In order to do this, the following section continues by discussing the role of institutionalizing actors.

3.4   THEORIES OF STAKEHOLDERS AND ACTORS

The discussion of models and frameworks in the previous section gave a clear picture of the general and current debates. The validity and correctness of many e-government models, however, has been questioned before, claiming them to be *"partly descriptive, partly predictive, and partly normative"* (Coursey, Norris 2008), often revealing a number of conflicting ideas among each other. One of the biggest debates, for example, is the centralisation approach represented by the stage model versus the decentralisation

arguments presented by the New Public Management approach. The solution suggested by most of the recent models that call for open policies and decision-making remains, on the other hand, an idealistic reconciliation.

The models discussed in the previous section advocating participatory approaches do capture the trends of the moment, but lack a discussion of theoretical ideologies or rationales on which they stand. Therefore, these models could not guide a complex longitudinal study like this one and answer the research questions posed here. To advance the understanding of e-government projects and international assistance, the analysis in this section will continue with a theoretical conceptualisation of stakeholders and actors.

3.4.1   E-GOVERNMENT STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholder theory is primarily for the private sector, challenging the neoclassical economic approach by claiming that *"those firms that are managed for optimal stakeholder satisfaction thrive better than those firms that only maximize shareholder (that is, profit) interests"* (Scholl 2001). Flak and Rose (2005) advocate for stakeholders' theory in e-government in the same way as it is applied in business organisations and structures (Penttinen, Isomäki 2010). Earlier work in the same Norwegian context identifies stakeholders' salience and issues of power as important forces in their interactions (Flak, Nordheim 2006). In their more recent study, Flak et al (2008) combine descriptive stakeholder theory with dialectic process theory in a qualitative study of e-government in municipalities starting with a number of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. The research framework used by Flak et al (2008) and the study results contribute to explain the relationships between human and organisational e-government stakeholders.

The stakeholders' theme has been on the focus of e-government research. The project management perspective would suggest that e-government stakeholders need to be managed (Chigona et al. 2010) and are related to leadership (Luk 2009). On the other hand, a number of other studies focus on the idea of stakeholders' inclusiveness (Axelsson, Melin & Lindgren 2009, Cogburn 2009). In reply, the project management approach relates this stakeholders' collaboration to their knowledge exploitation (Sarantis, Charalabidis & Askounis 2009). Following the new trends of openness and collaboration,

the potential of such technologies to involve stakeholders in decision-making (Bicking, Wimmer 2011b, Dutton, Peltu 2009) is the core of such arguments. This process, however, should not underestimate the knowledge barriers mentioned earlier in research (Brown 2003) or stakeholders' resistance to change in developing countries (De' 2005).

Management barriers become especially clear among different inter-organisational stakeholders involved in e-government projects (Fedorowicz, Gogan & Culnan 2010). This is common especially among so called 'transition economies' (UNCTAD 2011) in many post-communist countries like Albania where newly created agencies emerge and try to make space for themselves in a stakeholders' environment. The contribution of this study will be to advance research in this area by looking at the impact of external interventions (international assistance) on e-government project reforms.

Stakeholders' theory does not pay much attention to information technology and different non-human actors, nor does it try to explain their role in organisational changes. Therefore, regardless of the discussion of stakeholder approaches in this part, their contribution does not go beyond that of models discussed earlier (Kraussl, Tan & Gordijn 2009). Trying to find a solution to this by bringing dialectics in, some might argue that change comes as a result of clashes between opposing stakeholders in government-to-government efforts (Flak, Nordheim & Munkvold 2008). However, applying stakeholders' theory in the public sector should have started with the very simple question about involved actors asked only lately in research: *"Who are they and what do they want?"* (Rowley 2011). Extending this question to also 'What are they?' in order to make space for the non-human e-government elements like information technologies, the Actor Network Theory discussed in the following section will give another perspective on them.

3.4.2   ACTOR NETWORK THEORY

First introduced and developed by Michel Callon (1986a, 1986b), Bruno Latour (1996, 1999, 2005) and John Law (2003, 1992) the Actor-Network Theory was intended to be a new perspective to look at associations by redefining the concept of the 'social'. Because of its openness in the idea of associations, connections and interactions between human and non-human actors alike, it has often found a place in organizational environment and technology studies. This appears to be in line with the focus of this study on-government

projects as combinations of organizational, institutional and technical elements. Explained through cases and stories, the study on the scallops' fishing in St Brieuc Bay (Callon 1986b), the electric car and status case (Callon 1987), the cumbersome hotel room keys (Latour 2000), the Concorde (Feldman 1985), the bicycle case (Pinch, Bijker 1984) or the Portuguese expansion (Law 1987) are only some of the examples. All they have in common is the role some non-human object plays in shaping behaviour and actions in certain situations of network interactions.

But what is ANT about? Law (1987) summarizes the purpose of ANT in two questions as a framework trying to explain how objects, artefacts and technical practices are stabilized and how they take the shape they do. It can be imagined from the oxymoron in the name of the theory that it deals with networks, but using a new definition of actors to enable the introduction of technology in the system. In this context ANT tries to move away from a technology deterministic approach to explain the relationship between technology and social aspects based on social constructivism or looking at the system as a metaphor (Law 1987). In order to understand Actor-Network Theory and its implications to change and power, it is necessary to look at the overview of its key concepts (Sarker, Sarker & Sidorova 2006, Aykaç et al. 2009):

> **Actor** is any element which bends space around itself, makes other elements dependent upon itself and translates its will into a language of its own. (Callon, Latour 1981)

Some examples of actors could include humans, groups of humans, documents, reports, graphical or interactive representations, as well as technical artefacts in the specific context of e-government.

> **Actor Network** is a heterogeneous network of aligned interests, including people, organizations and standards. (Walsham, Sahay 1999)

ANT can explain technology adoption or rejection in a particular context or network. It suggests that since actors are assumed to have interests, they try to convince other actors so as to create an alignment of the other actors' interests with their own interests (Callon, Latour 1981). As a consequence, Callon and Latour conclude that when this persuasive process becomes effective, it results in the creation of an actor-network. It can be noted

here that conflict is replaced in ANT by a mutually desired negotiation process between actors, networks and their different layers in a process of 'punctualisation': treating a heterogeneous network as an individual actor (Law 2003).

This approach could extend the use of ANT to multiple level networks, where the actors of one are in essence networks in themselves, consisting of many actors that in their turn are networks too. It is very important to clarify this concept in the context of international e-government assistance and to define its limitations. It is assumed that numerous actors within an organization may be involved in a different process of translation, each with its own unique characteristics and outcomes (Sarker, Sarker & Sidorova 2006, Aykaç et al. 2009) in three stages:

1. **Interessement**: The second moment of translation which involves a process of convincing other actors to accept definition of the focal actor (Callon 1986a, Callon 1986b).

2. **Enrolment:** The third moment of translation, wherein other actors in the network accept (or get aligned to) interests defined for them by the focal actor (Callon 1986a, Callon 1986b)

3. **Inscription:** A process of creation of artefacts that would ensure the protection of certain interests (Latour 1994)

Callon follows by explaining that an **Obligatory Passage Point (OPP)** is related to this central or focal actor and a situation that has to occur in order for all the actors to satisfy the interests attributed to them by this focal actor. The existence of a situation when there really is a focal actor who defines the OPP thus becoming indispensable (Callon 1986a, Callon 1986b) is something that needs to be researched in the context of international e-government assistance.

ANT in e-government studies has been very useful to analyse inter-institutional network and changes (Stanforth 2006, Heeks, Stanforth 2007). They address the value of information and communication technologies in supporting government finance reforms and management information systems. Stanforth (2006) first, and then Heeks and Stanforth (2007) describe a longitudinal analysis of a global resource-providing network in Sri Lanka, very similar to the context of international e-government assistance in Albania

studied here. They selected an e-government project from the Ministry of Finance that started in 1996 where the global network of both international and national players was evident. Their research findings include a very good analysis or the international e-government networks and their dynamics; however, they do not go beyond the organizational level. Another limitation in the context of this study is the short term focus on explaining what has happened and not analysing the future prospects or sustainability of the analysed project.

In the general context or in that of e-government, it is assumed according to ANT, actors combine technical and social elements to build networks that constituted and shaped together (Stanforth 2006). ANT in this regard attributes to technology and other actors the same importance as in the case of social actors in the network environment. The theory, however, does not elaborate on the process of negotiation or alignment of interests. To study international e-government assistance this would mean a closer look at international donors, suppliers, government, users, technology and existing norms or institutions.

An important aspect of ANT is power, summarized in the following paradox: when an actor has power, nothing happens and the actor is powerless, when an actor exercises power, others are performing the action and not the actor itself (Latour 1986). Following Latour's idea, Stanforth (2006) summarizes that *"power over something is a composition that is made by many – the primary mechanism – and attributed to one – the secondary mechanism"*. She follows by explaining that the amount of power exercised depends on the number of actors in the network, thus summarizing the consequence of a collective action, but without being able to explain what holds the collective action in place. In this context of power, information technology changes could imply certain irreversibility, the degree to which it is subsequently impossible to go back to a point where alternative possibilities exist (Walsham, Sahay, 1999: p.42). Translated in the context of this study, this would mean that such processes have been institutionalized, although ANT does not explain how this happens via e-government projects or through time.

Other uses of ANT in e-government studies are related to the current debates of digital inclusion (Teles, Joia 2011) or contemporary influences on privacy (Bonner, Chiasson 2005). The theory, however, is more a way of looking at human and non-human objects.

Claims that ANT can *"portray the nature of e-government in developing countries"* (Priyatma 2008) does not go beyond an ontology of study. The studies by Stanforth (2006) and Heeks (2007) discussed in detail before are among the only ones that associate ANT with a theoretical discussion of e-government projects.

The focus of many ANT studies has been on the conceptualisation of policy-making forces and elements. More recently however, ANT is being used in e-government studies to better understand inter-organisational information systems (Underwood, McCabe 2011) and reveal how the stability of systems can be achieved through convergence (Ruikar, Chang 2012). The same current trends of digital inclusion and collaboration identified in the previous parts on models and stakeholders are being translated into the ANT language as well.

The contribution of ANT to provide a critical theory in organisational studies has been questioned by previous works (Whittle, Spicer 2008) arguing that its focus is on describing the ontologies of actors and their performative politics, but failing to offer a reflexive epistemology. Therefore, to deal with this problem, the analysis in the following sections will continue with institutionalism as a theory that balances both ontological and epistemological elements to explain the institutionalization of internationally assisted e-government projects. The main theoretical framework of this study will emerge from the following discussion.

3.5   INSTITUTIONAL THEORIES

This section will explain how institutional theory can explain international e-government assistance in this study. Before however, it is necessary to understand the role of institutions in organisations. An inter-institutional approach of international e-government assistance would focus on actors on a macro environmental and contextual level. An intra-institutional approach on the other hand would focus on institutional aspects on a micro-organizational level between humans, technology and regulations. The first point has been associated with the bilateral and multilateral dimension of international e-government assistance and policy-making in the previous chapter. The second on the other hand is related to reforms and changes in structures and processes through projects, again in the

Chapter Two before. These two dimensions form the perceptual backbone of this study, which here will be equipped with a theoretical framework to guide the analysis later.

The two perspectives are related to debates in the old, new, and neo institutionalisms. While the involvement of actors such as international organizations or the government is important for the network, a normal question would be: Does the sustainability of the internationally assisted e-government solution depend on these actors' alignment process in the long run? A longitudinal study of e-government projects' sustainability requires a theoretical framework that could explain how changes happen and are established over time. The previously discussed e-government models, frameworks, stakeholder approaches, or ANT are limited in this direction, but institutional theories discussed in this section can better inform the research question.

3.5.1   THE CONTEXT OF INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANISATIONS

In management studies institutions are often analysed in the context of organisations. Therefore, before moving forward in this analysis, it is necessary to give two very important definitions:

> **Institutions** are multifaceted, durable, social structures, made up of symbolic elements, social activities, and material resources, exhibiting distinctive properties such as resistance to change, transmission across generations, and reproduction. (Scott 2001)

It is highlighted in this regard that "*Institutions by definition are the more enduring features of social life* [...] *giving 'solidarity' across time and space*" (Giddens 1984). On the other hand:

> **Organizations** are social arrangements that within the framework of institutions follow collective goals, control their own performance, and have separating boundaries from their environment. (Scott 2001, March, J.G., Simon H.A., 1958, Lawrence, Lorsh 1967)

This distinction between the two terms is important for this study because the institutionalization of internationally assisted e-government initiatives is expected to

happen, be managed, and channelled through organizational structures and processes. On a macro level, organizational networks of international donors and government agencies are important actors in terms of project management and sustainability of reforms.

Looking first at institutional structures, in previous research on new institutionalism, it is noted that "*organizations are structured by phenomena in their environments and tend to become isomorphic with them* [….] *by technical and exchange interdependencies*" (Meyer, Rowan 1977). This idea is adapted by many (Aiken, Hage 1968, Hawley 1950, Thompson 1967, DiMaggio, Powell 1983). In this study, this implies that in order to understand e-government changes from a certain perspective, sustainability in this case, it is necessary to study organizational and institutional transformations in their environment.

New organisational institutionalism follows the idea of isomorphism or rules that influence the way organizations are transformed and become similar to each other, even when they developed in different ways (North 1990, Meyer, Rowan 1977, DiMaggio, Powell 1983, March, Olsen 1989, Zucker 1977, Scott 1995). In this context the theory tries to explain how institutions evolve and interact thus influencing each other, organizations and society as a whole. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) themselves, for example, derive their ideas from Weber's (Weber 1958, Weber, Roth & Wittich 1968) concept of bureaucracy, the rational spirit's organizational manifestation as such a powerful means of control that, once established, the momentum of bureaucratization becomes irreversible. Having made this brief introduction, the following two sections will expand on the discussion of old and new institutionalism, and the different neoinstitutionalist perspectives, before choosing the ones applied in this study.

3.5.2   OLD AND NEW INSTITUTIONALISM

Let us go back to the main research question: **How are internationally assisted e-government projects institutionalized?** Based on the previously given definitions in Chapter Two, this is a study on the processes of embedding an idea, a policy, or some change related to international assistance with an e-government system (institutionalization) focusing on its survival and persistence (sustainability).

The literature and theoretical background on institutionalism that could explain this question (among many other options) can be divided first of all into 'old' and 'new'. The first was developed in the end of 40s and 50s being focused on local aspects (Selznick 1949, Selznick 1957) while the second started in the end of the 70s from a series of papers that reconsidered the role of the macro environment on organizations (Meyer, Rowan 1977, Meyer 1977). Both old and new institutionalisms have many things in common like, for example, the "*scepticism toward rational-actor models of organization*", the importance of the environment, and the view of institutionalization as a "*state-depended model*" (DiMaggio, Powell 1991b). However, there are a number of differences between the two approaches, as summarized in the following table:

	Old	**New**
Conflict of interest	Central	Peripheral
Source of inertia	Vested interests	Legitimacy, imperative
Structure emphasis	Informal structure	Symbolic role of formal structure
Organization embedded in	Local community	Field, sector or society
Nature of embeddedness	Co-optation	Constitutive
Locus of institutionalization	Organization	Field of society
Organizational dynamics	Change	Persistence
Basics of critique or utilitarianism	Theory of interests aggregation	Theory of action
Evidence of critique for utilitarianism	Unanticipated consequences	Unreflective activity
Key forms of cognition	Values, norms, attitudes	Classification, routines, scripts, schema
Social psychology	Socialization theory	Attribution theory
Cognitive basis of order	Commitment	Habit, practical action
Goals	Displaced	Ambiguous
Agendas	Policy relevance	Disciplinary

FIGURE 8: THE OLD AND THE NEW INSTITUTIONALISMS (DIMAGGIO, POWELL 1991B: 13)

The new institutionalism provides a better theoretical framework to explain the research question mainly because of its decentralized approach towards the institutionalization of changes. This is more in line with the complex relationships, the network of organisational elements in internationally assisted e-government projects, and its current trends identified

in the previous parts of this chapter. Furthermore the new institutionalism justifies better the organizational irrationality located in the formal structures themselves, rather than based only on the functions organizations are expected to perform (DiMaggio, Powell 1991b, Meyer, Rowan 1977, DiMaggio, Powell 1983). It is assumed here that this is the case of international assistance on e-government initiatives and their sustainability as organizational settings, but also as institutions that influence other organizations. The study of the macro-environmental impact and of the inter-organizational influences is expected to reveal how e-government initiatives are possibly being institutionalized, their sustainability, and their potential to further development.

It is important to point out from the table that the new institutionalism suggests also a clearer and more practical research methodology, given a limited time span, based on clearer and less ambiguous definitions and areas to focus. For example, it is easier to capture and research practical action, than it is to study commitments. Following the same logic, the new institutionalism gives clearer methodological indications to focus on classification, routines, scripts, schema vs. values, norms, attitude, or habit. This reasoning is in line with the cognitive turn in social sciences, and the way we think on motivation and behaviour (DiMaggio, Powell 1991b, Scott, Meyer 1991).

The pioneers of the new institutionalism have often been accused for their "*methodological individualism*" (Selznick 1996) meaning that what they try to present as 'new' i.e. the focus on myths, structure, or even isomorphism which is the same as mimesis in the 'old' approach. Selznick (1996) recognizes the valuable insights of new institutionalism, but he disagrees with drawing a clear cut between the two approaches as something that reduces the contribution of institutional theory to simply bureaucracy and social policy.

Lately there seems to be a reconciliation of both views, coming to a middle ground of recognizing the importance of both internal and external forces. This approach is found to be labelled 'neoinstitutionalism' (Greenwood, Hinings 1996), as different from the old and new institutionalisms. This converging approach brings together multiple themes (Greenwood, Hinings 1996) and elements of both old and new institutionalisms (Scott, Meyer 1994). These Neoinstitutionalist approaches, focusing on institutional change, pay

special attention to institutional discourses and power structures. Contrasted with this line of thinking, the following section will look closer at four institutionalist approaches.

3.5.3   NEOINSTITUTIONALIST PERSPECTIVES AND DEBATES

Rational Neoinstitutionalism (RNI) is the first theoretical approach that will be applied throughout this study in its methodology and analysis. It is based first on Rational Action Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) or Rational Choice Neoinstitutionalism (Hall, Taylor 1996), meaning both the same thing. RNI suggests that individual actions are rational and based on predetermined rules, laws, organizational forms and norms, with actors being stable and exogenous. While explaining RNI, DiMaggio (1998) focuses on economic rules or formal political institutions, based on rational choice in political institutions or sociology. In this context, a number of studies related to pubic choice theory (Ostrom 1991) were followed by New Public Management (Dunleavy et al. 2006, Dunleavy, Hood 1994, Lane 2000, Barzelay 2001) an approach stressing the importance of cost-efficiency and business type management in e-government systems. Rational Choice Neoinstitutionalism is directly related to *"new economics of organizations"* focused on property rights, transaction costs and rent-seeking of institutions in their operations (Moe 1984).

Some of the major critics on Rational Neoinstitutionalism have labelled it as 'voluntarist', 'intentionalist' and highly 'functionalist' meaning that actors have a fixed set of preferences, they see politics as a set of collective action dilemmas based on strategic calculus affected by their expectations about each other (Hall, Taylor 1996).

Referred to as *"New Institutional Economics"*, a similar Rational Action Neoinstitutionalist approach has been used in a study of e-government reforms, portals and integrated systems in Jordan (Ciborra, Navarra 2005). Their aim was to analyse good governance, development theory, and aid policy related to risks and challenges of e-government. Ciborra and Navarra (2005) take a case study approach to study what "*cannot be captured solely by statistical correlation and cross-sectoral comparisons*". What they found out was that standardized e-government solutions are a difficult and risky path that development aid policies are following. Ciborra and Navarra (2005) gave suggestive evidence that the e-government views *"put forward by international development agencies*

might not be conducive to rapid late development". This direction for future research is going to be explored and advanced in this thesis, not from an economic, but from a management perspective by looking at international assistance, project management, and governance sustainability. Because of the research context of international e-government assistance in a developing country with a similar informal culture like Albania, Ciborra's and Navarra's (2005) research paper is the closest study to this one.

Talking about the limitations in their research Ciborra and Navarra (2005) mention the fact that they didn't pay sufficient attention to the role of citizens and local authorities. As a consequence, their findings were limited to the analysis of e-government on a high organizational level only. This study expands the research on internationally assisted e-government projects also towards end-users, as it will be explained in the methodological and empirical chapters later. From a New Institutional Economics perspective on the other hand, institutional actors were considered to be rational, acting based on the enforcement (transition) costs and the growth-effecting rents and rights (Ciborra, Navarra 2005). This limitation in their theoretical framework could not be ignored, regardless of the focus of some of their interviews on visions, strategies, models, challenges, organizational impacts and cultural factors in adopting e-government solutions.

Adopting RNI in this study will mean that different agents are expected to react rationally and positively as growth enhancing institutions (North 1990). This positive effect is increased if there is efficient top-down coordination, leading also to a more stable system (Hall, Taylor 1996). In this context, the network of international assistance leading to a sustainable e-government system is supposed to evolve as assistance itself according to a rational strategy. Resistance to changes and growth-related institutions such as e-government reforms, however, cannot be fully explained by this rational approach. This limitation of RAN calls for some consideration of social aspects of institutions.

Social Neoinstitutionalism (SNI), often referred to as Social-Constructivist (DiMaggio 1998), Sociological (Hall, Taylor 1996), or Normative (Lowndes 2002, Peters 1998, Peters 2005), deals with the socially constructed patterns, institutionalized norms, culture and values influencing actors and agencies. Nielsen (2001) summarizes DiMaggio's opinion on this concept as a combination of new institutionalism in sociology and organization theory

(DiMaggio, Powell 1991b), and new institutionalism in political science (March, Olsen 1989).

From a critical realist perspective (Archer et al. 1998), it is argued that social neoinstitutionalists do an analytical separation of institutions and individual actions, but at the same time they try to explain relationships between them based on a socio-cultural approach of relationships. System symbols, scripts, cognition and moral norms are said to provide the framework that guides human action and institutional development (Scott, Meyer 1994). In this case it is assumed that new institutional practices are adapted not only following rational strategic decisions, but because it *"enhances the social legitimacy of the organization and its participants"* through shared cognitive maps, and "*embodying a sense of appropriate institutional practices*" (Hall, Taylor 1996).

As far as this research is concerned, there is no evidence of Social Neoinstitutionalism being specifically used to analyse internationally assisted or general e-government projects. The closest approach to SNI used in a theoretical analysis of neoinstitutionalism related to e-government (Yang 2003). The Actor-Centred Institutionalism (ACI) mentioned there (Yang 2003) generally admits that *"the argument that technology is socially constructed has to be considered as the starting point and not the result of social theorizing about technology"* (Werle 1998). ACI, however, provides a useful link in the theoretical framework between inter-institutional and intra-institutional forces, trying to combine concepts from both Actor-Network Theory and Neoinstitutionalism.

Because of the novelty of e-government reforms in many countries, the reasons for failures cannot be attributed only to culture, but more to the cognitive perceptions of changes, and new public administration. Culture plays an important role on institutionalization (Zucker 1977) and study of what allows or inhibits reforms, but in the e-government context this is limited to the initial dynamics. As a consequence, SNI might offer useful insights to understand the general context of the country, but is limited in explaining the cognitive engagement of decision-makers and users during and after the assisted e-government projects.

Historical Institutionalism (HI) as defined in most of the literature or Mediated-Conflict approach as referred to by DiMaggio (1998), focuses on the study of stability, historical

development and changes of institutionally shaped conflicts. Nielsen (2001) summarizes its origins from *"historical institutionalism in political science"* (Steinmo, Thelen & Longstreth 1992, Thelen 1999) and *"historical and comparative sociology"* (Evans, Rueschemeyer & Skocpol 1985), also combined with what they call *"old institutionalism in sociology"* (DiMaggio, Powell 1991b). To explain this, Hall and Taylor (1996) define historical institutionalism as a structural-functionalist approach with more emphasis on the first. In this context they explain relationships between institutions and individuals in broad terms, recognizing the asymmetries of power and path dependence, combining a calculus and cultural approach. HI thus tries to explain present institutional arrangements and predict their future based on past experiences, culture and already established norms.

Most of the critics on HI come from qualitative oriented scholars who reject the idea of rationality emphasizing the importance of random situations and outcomes (Steinmo, Thelen & Longstreth 1992), especially related to epistemological issues in contract to quantitative oriented scholars. The theoretical debate here is on the path dependency. In other words, the discussion is whether causation implied by HI, can be justified over simple correlation between past history and future developments. Another critical argument on HI is towards its originality as a standalone approach or a simple combination of rational and social Neoinstitutionalism (Hay, Wincott 1998).

Clearly there is a general common agreement that HI provides a certain middle ground position in relationship to the other two previous forms of Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio, Powell 1991b, Hall, Taylor 1996, Hay, Wincott 1998, Nielsen 2001), combining past rational choice strategic decisions, structures, norms, and social elements in shaping the present development of institutions and actors. In the context of this study this implies that the institutionalization of sustainability and change could be explained and designed based on past experiences with international assistance, e-government best practices, local culture, reform trends, and strategic environment forces.

Discursive Institutionalism (DI) (Schmidt 2008) that will be the second theoretical framework applied in this study has emerged to deal with some of the criticism and limitations on different forms of Neoinstitutionalism. This is otherwise known in the literature also as Constructivist Institutionalism (CI) (Hay 2006) which gives a very similar

approach. DI uses the role of ideas and discourse among institutional forces to explain how institutions happen. Being aligned with discourse ethics (Habermas 1993), the main argument supplied by DI is that institutional dynamics are guided by the discussion of cognitive and normative ideas on a political, programme, and philosophical level (Schmidt 2008). In this context, DI provides for negotiation actors a "*more dynamic approach to institutional change than the older three new institutionalisms*" (Schmidt 2008). According to Hay (2006) on the other hand, CI attempts to explain the extent to which established ideas become codified, understood and implemented between institutions, individuals and groups.

DI is consistent with other current works focusing on multiple competing logics and heterogeneous elements of institutionalization, combining coordination of diversity with the concept of isomorphism (Friedland, Alford 1991, Lounsbury 2007, Lounsbury 2001). However, being relatively new and not thoroughly discussed in empirical studies makes DI an interesting ground to explore, and possibly advance through this study. The original contribution of this research could be on extending the theoretical understanding of institutional discourse in projects and their networks of actors. On the other hand, DI does not come with a clearly defined methodology of its own so the discussion in the following two methodological chapters will contribute in this direction.

To conclude in this part, using a combination of RNI and DI on both a theoretical and methodological level, this study of two e-government projects should advance the comparative case study approach in research from an institutionalist perspective. The following section will expand on how these two perspectives are combined to build one institutional framework and methodology for this study.

3.6   TOWARDS AN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR THIS STUDY

The institutional framework that will guide the rest of this study, its methodology and interpretation of findings, is based on mainstream concepts of Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008). Chapter One and the introduction introduced the discourse between change and stability in e-government reforms to justify the research question. Three study areas were identified and critically

analysed in Chapter Two: international assistance, e-government projects, and governance sustainability. They set the macro-environment where institutions discussed in this chapter evolve and operate. Based on all this discussion, the following chart gives a general picture of the theoretical framework designed to guide this study:
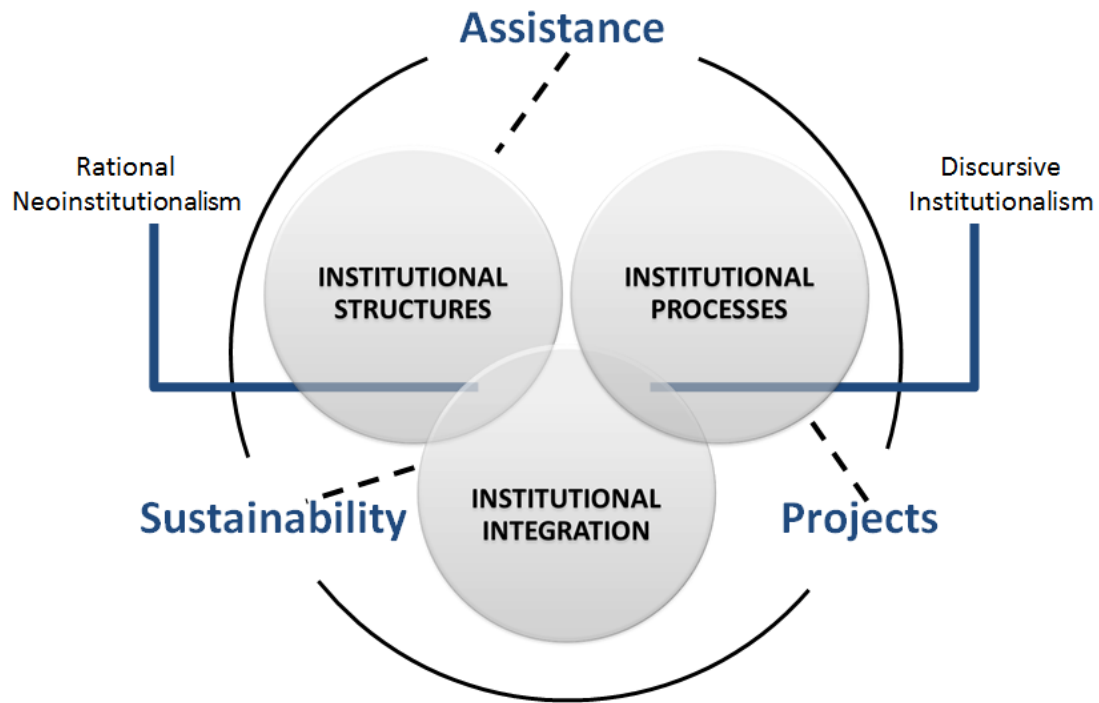
FIGURE 9: THE INSTITUTIONALIST FRAMEWORK OF THIS STUDY

This diagram was not like this from the beginning, but was finalised only toward the end of this study, during the analysis. Although it could very well fit into the final contributions to theory, it is first presented here because it summarised the discussion in this chapter well and it helps towards an easier understanding of the following ones.

The external circle introduces the macro-institutional context in which this study and its research questions are based. However, because of its focus on management, most of the institutional dynamics relevant for this study are expected to happen in the micro-environment of institutional structures, processes, and their integration. From the previous discussions in this section, there is a perceived conceptual relationship between the macro and micro-institutional dimensions in the figure, indicated by the dotted lines. These relationships between institutional structures and assistance, institutional processes and

projects, and institutional integration and sustainability, were refined during the analysis of the research data discussed in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight. What is important here is that they follow a policy-making logic (Stone, Maxwell & Keating 2001) according to which structural changes influence processes, which in turn can prompt integration and sustainable institutionalization. This policy-making model (Stone, Maxwell & Keating 2001) is consistent with the Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) guiding this study. Its purpose is to bring the theoretical ideas closer to their application in the methodology, field research, and empirical analysis discussed in the following chapters.

The following section will give a critical justification of the theoretical choice in this framework. The next one will try to critically explain the conceptual connections that exist between the different elements of this study, leading thus to the following methodological chapter. There are many other elements that could have been considered to study institutional discourses in internationally assisted e-government projects, but I believe the areas represented in this theoretical framework, introduced in the previous diagram, are sufficient to give a clear picture and answer the research question.

3.6.1   CRITICALLY JUSTIFYING THE THEORETICAL CHOICE

Like every theory, Neoinstitutionalism has its areas where there is no clear consensus, leading to some of its limitations. Following this institutional logic, the combination of Rational Neoinstitutionalism and Discursive Institutionalism in this study is not expected to be an exception. Indeed, it is claimed that "*the beginning of wisdom in approaching institutional theory is to recognize that there is not one but several variants*" (Scott 1987).

One of the biggest challenges for institutional theory, in general, is to explain how institutions themselves are formed and changed (DiMaggio, Powell 1991b). This is often referred to as the *'institutional contradiction'*, where DiMaggio and Powell identify two groups of authors: those that justify developments as coming from within the institutional framework (Greenwood, Hinings 1996, Jepperson 1991, Zucker 1988), and those that see the genesis of change in non-institutional processes (Friedland, Alford 1991). The first of these perspectives is along the lines of Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998), and

the second along those of Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008). The differences around the two chosen frameworks for this study, however, are seen as complementary rather than contradictory, assuming that what one cannot explain, the other will. As DiMaggio and Powell (1991) point out in their introduction, this approach has much face validity to explain the conflicts between democracy and elite institutional models, but also between change and stability as in this study.

Another reason for bringing Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) together, is to be able to explain e-government reforms and change. According to Jepperson (1991) four different situations related to change can be institutional formation, institutional development, deinstitutionalization, and reinstitutionalization. More difficult than identifying them is to explain why and how these institutional changes happen, focusing on patterns, templates, and multiple case studies (Greenwood, Hinings 1996). The work in the direction to identify archetypal patterns is done in two areas: one related to configurational research of structures and systems (Mintzberg 1980, Drazin, Ven 1985), and the other to a neo-institutionalist focus on values and ideas, using interpretive schemes to analyse general organizational patterns (Ranson, Hinings & Greenwood 1980, Bartunek 1984).

A limitation of neoinstitutionalism is related to power, or more to its silence towards it (Brint, Karabel 1991). The work on power from a neoinstitutionalist approach is generally limited to case studies (Brint, Karabel 1991, Galaskiewicz, Burt 1991, DiMaggio 1986) that do not provide a detailed analysis of power creation, transfer, exercise, and transformation. In other words, it is due to its disconnection from actors and actions to focus on environmental and contextual forces, that institutionalism provides a limited view of power. This is the reason why using Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) to explain the integration of institutional structures, and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) to explain the integration of institutional processes could reveal a lot on the issue of power. This study will address this gap by considering directly the role of institutionalizing actors in e-government projects.

On the topic of power, this study is going to share some light on its dynamics with internationally assisted e-government projects. Without discarding but rather trying to

complement Neoinstitutionalism, the aim is to investigate the role of power as politics in the whole process of adoption and institutionalization. Regardless of the previous literature in this area, some in the context of institutions, for example, on the exercise of power (Selznick 1949), power dimensions (Lukes 2005), or a complex strategic situation in a society (Foucault, Gordon 1980, Foucault 1982), new or neoinstitutionalist studies have not been able to cover this subject sufficiently.

Efficiency is another controversial area of the new institutionalism in organisational studies. This subject is touched in the sense that institutions can make organizations operate in not necessarily the most efficient way to conform to the environment (DiMaggio, Powell 1991b). Following this institutional logic, consistent with both Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008), this study replaces the discussion of efficiency with that of governance sustainability. This study will try to discover if this is enough to ensure the sustainability of e-government reforms and projects' outcomes in general.

3.6.2   FROM INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES TO ASSISTANCE, PROJECTS, AND SUSTAINABILITY

The research problem in this study is how to study the institutionalization of e-government sustainability as a holistic system. To address this theoretical issue, it is necessary to focus on the role of institutional integration.

Thinking of strong institutional structures, in this study international assistance, with all its advantages and disadvantages as explained in Chapter Two, is often related to the national and strategic level of policies for a country. The embeddedness of international donors in the international environment empowers them to influence reforms in the recipient's context. The problem with institutional change, in this context, is the paradox of associating institutions and their representing structures with stability, while change, being the opposite, is difficult to be positioned in a consistent and meaningful way informed by the theory. A crucial contribution here is given by Schmidt (2008) with Discursive Institutionalism and Hay (2006) in the same direction. They point to ideas, actors, and discourse as the mechanisms where institutions are created and evolve. This connects, in

this study, the role of institutional structures with strategic actors such as the donors, the government, and the systems' suppliers.

From a project management perspective, the principles and standard guidelines in the Project Management Body of Knowledge (Project Management Institute 2009) are nothing but established institutions in this domain. Projects, on the other hand, are temporary and often unique endeavours, exactly the opposite of institutions which are closer to patterns and routines. Therefore, combining project management and institutionalism is not easy. However, the previously introduced framework on institutional structures and processes appears to be relevant also in the project management context of e-government reforms. Institutional structures associated to international assistance can lead to the project stage of e-government reforms. During the implementation process that follows, it would be interesting to investigate the institutional processes of project stages of initiation, planning, execution, monitoring and controlling, and finally closing (Project Management Institute 2009). Luna-Reyes and Gil-Garcia (2011) suggest institutional theory and system dynamics together to understand e-government phenomena. The engine of such coexistence, however, is the nature and longitude of project interactions on which systems and relationships build on. By identifying the common grounds between project management and institutionalism, this study will try to apply them by comparing a bilateral and a multilateral e-government assistance project to each other.

In the context of sustainability, this study has to focus for a moment on the evaluation of institutions, either positive or negative. Jepperson (1991: 149) briefly touches on the idea that institutions are not necessarily related to legitimacy. He explains that illegitimate elements such as crime, corruption, or fraud can also become institutionalized, even though they are illegitimate. This dimension has not been sufficiently addressed in the literature, and from a constructivist perspective neither do I intend to quantify or classify institutional development. However, my intention is to generate some constructs of meaning in the research methodology introduced in the following chapter, which could identify and explain institutional dynamics of e-government projects as units of analysis.

An assumption is made here that the institutional debates emerging from conflicting forces of change are expressed in the institutional communication of actors. The institutional

control of networks or environments can possibly protect organizations from instability in this case (Meyer, Rowan 1977, Terreberry 1968, Emery, Trist 1965). The focus of this research, however, will be more on the institutional integration of information systems and services that become embedded in the society.

3.6.3   THE INSTITUTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE ON TECHNOLOGY IN THIS STUDY

Technology is what seems to bring all the parts of this study together. This important element is also reinforced by previous studies that examine the institutionalization of technical specifications and technology in organizations (Orlikowski, Robey 1991, Orlikowski 1992, Colyvas 2007, Iacono, Kling 1988). In this study, on an inter-organisational and micro level, structures and processes appear to be integrated together in information technology systems in the public sector. International assistance, e-government projects, and the concerns about governance sustainability, add another layer to the analysis of information technology.

The institutionalizing role of information technology in e-government projects has only been touched upon by previous studies. Talking about the institutionalization of three e-government projects, Jane Fountain (2001), in her book, *"Building the Virtual State",* suggested the Technology Enactment Framework. She believed that "*the embeddedness of government actors in cognitive, cultural, social, and institutional structures influences the design, perceptions, and uses of the Internet and related IT*" (Fountain 2001: 88). Fountain's approach here tries to bring together information technology projects and institutional patterns by focusing on the role of actors. This study is trying to extend this perspective on internationally assisted e-government actors, by looking more closely at their roles before, during, and after the projects.

One of the limitations of Fountain's (2001) approach is that she does not explain sustainability, but only the implementation of e-government projects. Luna-Reyes and Gil-Garcia (2011) on the other hand use Fountain's perspective on institutionalism and e-government, but they are also interested on the successful deployment of e-government, rather than on its stability through time. This study will build on these works, but focus

also on the sustainability and stability of e-government reforms in the context of a developing country.

The temporary nature of information technology projects is a theme that comes up often in recent research in contract with the long-term institutional goals that some actors might have (Misuraca, Viscusi 2010). In this sense, in the world today almost all countries are developing countries in terms of information technology and e-government, because of the novelty of such systems in many aspects. A similar argument is made linking, or better, having difficulties explaining the role of innovation (Jun, Weare 2011) or specifically information technology (Philippidou et al. 2008) projects on the institutionalization of changes. These approaches and studies, however, often remain in the level of development economics discarded earlier, and not that of management studies like this one.

In this study, information technologies are expected to be, not only grounds for international assistance, but also platforms where actors' relationships and contrasting forces develop. It is because of these reasons that a careful study and analysis at such projects is relevant and important. The first issue to address is the role of international assistance and technology in public administration institutional development. The second, parallel to the first but looking from the opposite direction of governance sustainability, is examining the role of institutional developments on international e-government assistance itself and its continuity.

3.7 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the theoretical models and frameworks that could guide this research. The dynamics of change, stability, information technology, and public administration reforms were jointly addressed. Many e-government models of development stages, development economics, public administration, or socio-technical dialectics were discussed to summarise some of the old and current trends in this field of research. Their critical analysis suggested that most of the problems with these frameworks are related to their limited ability to pay adequate attention to actors and networks in complex institutional and contextual environments. The review of e-government models and stakeholders helped to ontologically explain some current trends, but lacked the

epistemological depth of a theory to address the research question. Therefore, it was decided to look at institutions and institutional theory in order to explain the complex issues of international assistance on e-government projects and their sustainability.

Among many studies on e-government, a few (Fountain 2001, Flak, Nordheim & Munkvold 2008, Stanforth 2006, Heeks, Stanforth 2007, Ciborra, Navarra 2005) that make use of theoretical frameworks were discussed in more detail. Their authors are well known in the field of e-government studies and these research papers have been thoroughly discussed in academic debates. Based on their critical review, and that of many other sources, neoinstitutionalism appears to provide a satisfactory initial theory that could explain the institutionalization of internationally assisted e-government reforms.

Among many institutionalist and neoinstitutionalist approaches, Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) were selected to guide this study theoretically and methodologically. Internationally assisted e-government initiatives, on the other hand, provide a good context to explore and advance the potential of such theoretical and methodological combination because of their inter-organizational and inter-institutional nature. A conceptual discussion towards the end of this chapter argued that institutional structures are related to international assistance on a strategic level. Institutional processes, on the other hand, are more related to e-government projects. The most challenging part remains the integration of institutional structures and processes into sustainable governance systems. These ideas were summarised in the institutional framework of this study presented in the last part of this chapter, with a diagram. Its purpose was to bring together the theoretical combination of Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) and to make it applicable in research practice. The methodological implications of the institutional framework of this study are discussed further in the next chapter where a more detailed version of it is developed.

4   RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

4.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about different methodological paradigms, justifying a critical interpretivist case study approach and how it relates to the institutional theory discussed earlier. Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) were selected to guide this study theoretically and methodologically. The limitations of this combination in explaining the institutional integration of projects into sustainable reforms is expected to suggest new directions for original research contributions.

Being a critical observer and interpreter, the researcher can interact, but not interfere with the object of study while collecting the data and analysing them. In this context, the following section will explain in more detail how the conceptualization of institutional theories discussed, so far, will be applied in practice in the critical interpretivist methodology of this case study research. Institutional theory will provide the basic analytical framework in this study while its possible limitations will give grounds for its theoretical and methodological advancements.

4.2   CHOOSING A RESEARCH PARADIGM

The research paradigm is the researcher's view of the world. According to Kuhn (1996: 146) it forms *"the entire constellation of belief"*. A paradigm also implies a choice of methodology (Guba, Lincoln 1988: 114). In academic research the possible paradigms could be positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, or constructivism (Guba, Lincoln 1994). They are often presented differently, for example, as positivism, realism, interpretivism, and pragmatism (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009) or post-positivist, social constructivist, advocacy, and pragmatic worldviews (Creswell 2009). The general idea, however, remains the same, that there is a continuum, or rather a set of research perspectives, from totally objective (positivism), to totally subjective (pragmatism). The following diagram gives a graphical presentation of the discussions that follow in the next parts, and concludes with the selection of critical interpretivism as the research paradigm in this study:
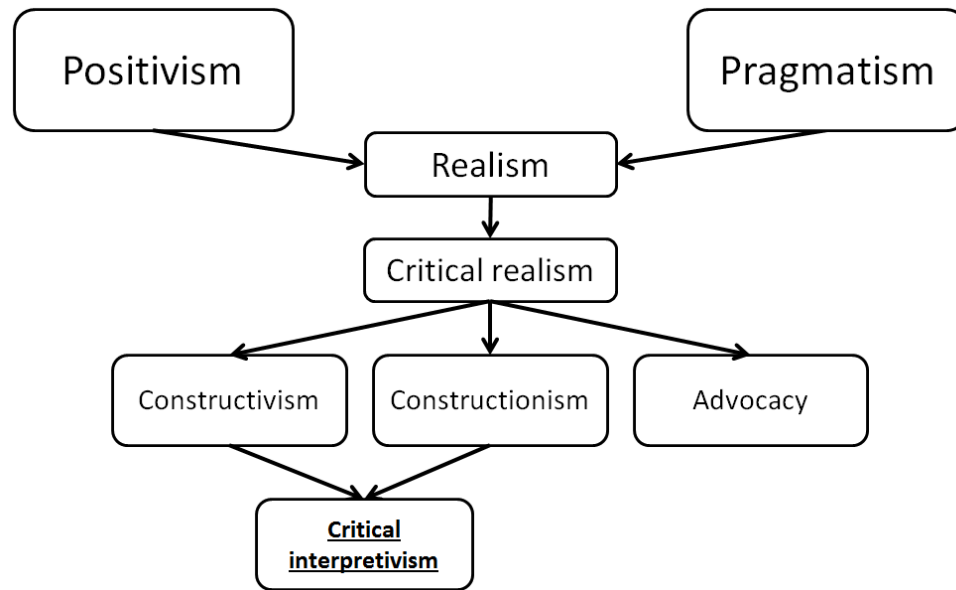
FIGURE 10: CHOOSING A RESEARCH PARADIGM

Reading the diagram representing the structure of this section from top-down, firstly the two extreme approaches are discussed, providing arguments for not using them in this study. However, they lead towards realism and critical realism as a middle-ground. The limitations of realist approaches to address the research question in this study point at three different but similar approaches: constructivism, constructionism, and advocacy. After a critical discussion of them that sets the boundaries of this research, it was finally concluded to adapt a critical interpretivist approach. The arguments and discussion in support of this decision continues in the following sections.

4.2.1   AWAY FROM POSITIVISM, PRAGMATISM AND REALISM

Positivism in the context of this study can be excluded because based on own perspectives and other related research (Fountain 2001, Flak, Nordheim & Munkvold 2008, Heeks, Stanforth 2007, Ciborra, Navarra 2005), e-government as a complex field of theory and practice is rarely perceived as a clearly defined reality that can be objectively analysed and understood. Furthermore, a positivist paradigm would be limited answering the 'How?' questions in this study. On the opposite side, the assumptions and explanations suggested by institutional approaches in this study undermine the pragmatic view of researchers' full freedom of choice to explore and explain the subject of study, so pragmatism can be as

well excluded. Having discarded the two extreme paradigms here, positivism and pragmatism, it is time to look at options in the middle of the continuum.

First of all, it is necessary to distinguish between dogmatic and critical realism. As Kwan and Tsang (2001) point out, both approaches imply that *"theories can be true or false"*, depending on a progressive movement of scientific research *"towards a true account of phenomena"*. According to them dogmatic realists associate current theories with an (almost) accurate representation of reality, leaving not much space for critical analysis. Critical realists on the other hand, according to Kwan and Tsang (2001) state *that "reality exists independently of our minds";* therefore observations and methods could all be fallible.

Current critical realism is based on a philosophy of science described as transcendental realism, associated with the work of Roy Bhaskar (Archer et al. 1998). Created by others as a term, critical realism focuses on the need to observe not only the subject of study, but at the same time to remain alert of the generative mechanisms and hidden variables that produce the study outcomes.

In contrast to positivist approaches that use straightforward empirical analysis of the given subjects, critical realism deals with the research mechanism itself, its validity and replicability to study different subjects or events. Often obscure and intentionally complex, Bhaskar's initial or dialectical critical realism, regardless of its interesting approach to research and knowledge, has rarely been applied in empirical studies. Based on previous works and contributions (Archer et al. 1998, Fleetwood 1999, Tsoukas 1989, Tsang, Kwan 1999), Kwan and Tsang (2001) concluded about critical realism that it is about critical testing of theories, assuming universal laws of nature and society need to be carried out continuously.

The institutionalist approach adopted earlier in this research would not be compatible with critical realism either. From a theoretical perspective, it is argued that *"there is no intrinsic difference between behavioural regularities and institutions"*, since institutions themselves *"are functions of behaviour in collective choice processes"* (Diermeier, Krehbiel 2003). Suggesting institutionalism not only as a theory, but as a methodology, Diermeier and Krehbiel (2003) conclude that *"institutions are best interpreted as theoretical constructs"*,

implying that the ontological features of institutional realities are based on study models created by a theory's explanatory power. However, the critical consideration of methods could increase the validity of findings when exploring new areas like this research on international e-government assistance. A refinement of research paradigms in the following section is necessary before this.

4.2.2   BETWEEN CONSTRUCTIVISM AND INTERPRETIVISM

Constructivism is originally attributed to Jean Piaget (1950, 1967b, 1967a, 1980) as a theory of learning, suggests that knowledge is constructed based on our own perceptions and influenced by who we are. Applying this idea on social sciences, constructivists perceive reality *"as a construction of the researcher"* (Mir, Watson 2001). Bhaskar (2008) suggested in critical realism that replication of empirical tests is essential to establishing their reality and understanding. Constructivists, on the other hand, replace the issue of replication by introducing the concept of theory over-determination (Mir, Watson 2001). In order to explain the world around, theories from a constructivist approach can *"be based on a few factors"* and *"do not necessarily have a lineal causal relationship to the phenomena under study"* (Mir, Watson 2001) serving more as 'entry points' into discussions (Resnick, Wolff 1987). In this study, this entry point is from an institutionalist perspective, not only as a theory, but also as a research paradigm and methodology (Diermeier, Krehbiel 2003). The interpretation of findings and the constructs that could emerge at that latter stage, however, could advance the theory and its methodological implications into new grounds.

There is a difference between constructivism, (already discussed) and constructionism compared in a number of articles (Ackermann 2001, Jonassen, Myers & McKillop 1996). As a theory of learning (Piaget 1980, Fosnot, Perry 1996, Inhelder, Piaget 1967), but also as a research approach in social sciences (Mir, Watson 2001), constructivism can be used to study the knowledge transfer and production based on experiences from the environment and our own ideas. Constructionism (Papert 1980) on the other hand deals with the art of learning, or 'learning to learn', as well as *"the significance of making things in learning"* (Ackermann 2001). Social constructionism in this context is related to social realities, identities, and knowledge consciously created and maintained in interactions with

others, and as a result of cultural, social, historical, and linguistic influences (Cunliffe 2008).

Reflexivity is directly related to the positioning of the researcher in the study and his *"insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality"* (Pollner 1991). In constructivism the researcher can be positioned as a fixed observer, constructing knowledge and meaning based on experiences and own perceptions. In constructionism the researcher can not only reflect on the acquired knowledge, but also on the process of acquiring it, developing himself and his involvement along with the research. From the theoretical perspective, this is a movement from the social construction of reality (Berger, Luckmann 1966) to neoinstitutionalism and what this theory can explain (Meyer 1992). Methodologically in this study, the researcher is supposed to capture this institutional change, reflect on his own perceptions, but also capture the process of reflection from e-government actors in this study, reflecting on it too. In this context of international politics, Alexander Wendt (1999), for example, analyses even pure realist concepts like 'power politics' as socially constructed. This means that significant aspects of an agent and agency relationship are socially constructed and historically contingent, rather than necessary consequences of the nature of international politics (Jackson, Nexon 2003).

The institutionalization of reality remains, after all, a manifestation of our social construction more than of *"forces beyond our control and understanding"* (Mir, Watson 2001). This could influence a future vision of reality, or specifically in this study, the sustainability of internationally assisted e-government reforms. Designing an institutionalist research methodology to make use of the theoretical explanations, but also to allow new constructs to emerge from the findings, is a challenge of great importance towards the original contribution of this study. Before doing so, the following table summarizes and compares some of the main points and differences between realism and constructivism discussed so far:

	Realism	Constructivism
Nature of observed reality	Partial, but immutable	Socially constructed
Role of manager	Reactor, information processor	Actor, generator of contexts
Nature of strategic choice	Boundedly rational response to contingencies	Ideological actions of sub-organizational interest groups
Organizational identity	Overt, singular	Multiple, fragmented
Theories of measurement	Replication as a key to accuracy	Context as the key to perspective

FIGURE 11: REALISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM CONTRASTED (MIR, WATSON 2001)

From the table and in principle, a constructivist methodology suggests that we construct new knowledge and understanding of the world based on our experiences, following a process of accommodation and assimilation (Piaget 1950, 1967b, 1967a, 1980). However, it is argued (Checkel 1998) that constructivists still need to specify more clearly what actors, structures, agents, and causal mechanisms bring about change.

An alternative perspective could be that of advocacy (Fay 1987, Heron, Reason 1997, Kemmis, Wilkinson 1998, Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith 1993), where the researcher participates by passing and influencing knowledge between research subjects. It was argued that constructivism and constructionism *"did not go far enough"* for an action agenda to help *"marginalized people"* (Creswell 2009) or promoters of sustainable e-government policies in this study. Again, advocacy could first happen between international organizations and the government, each trying to impose their opinion to the other. The researcher in this context could not only capture and analyse this discourse, but actually try to influence it through his research fieldwork participation and finals research outcomes. Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) in this case should be able to explain also the development and role of researcher's own ideas into the system. However, the application of advocacy as a theoretical and methodological approach goes beyond the scope of this study which is not to develop policies and advocate them, but explore and interpret e-government institutionalization processes. Following this discussion, a simple summary of constructivism, constructionism and advocacy is given in the table below:

	Constructivism	**Constructionism**	**Advocacy**
Focus	Perception	Learning	Participation
Researcher	Fixed observer	Evolving observer	Advocate
Outcome	Evaluation of research case	Analysis of research case and self	Research case influenced agenda

FIGURE 12: CONSTRUCTIVISM, CONSTRUCTIONISM AND ADVOCACY

An interpretivist approach is similar to constructivism, constructionism and even advocacy following the need to *"examine the detailed relationship between the technology and its social and cultural context, something which is hard to access effectively through quantitative data"* (Walsham, Robey & Sahay 2007). Interpretivism emerges as a *"natural science of the social"*, while constructivism as an approach that considers *"knowledge and truth as created, not discovered by mind"* (Schwandt 1994). Although apparently different, interpretivism and constructivism have a lot of similarities with each other. However, their similarities and differences could not be clearly understood without a discussion of constructivism (Mir, Watson 2001) and critical realism (Kwan, Tsang 2001) first.

Much of the literature on information systems is based on case studies and claimed to be generally interpretivist (Walsham 1995, 2006), therefore this approach deserves more attention in the context of research paradigms for this study. Some interpretive research on ICT organisational studies make use of neoinstitutionalism as a framework chosen also here to explain irrationalities originating from the organizational and cultural systems (Avgerou 2000). The significance of context in information systems and organizational change (Avgerou 2001) is also important in this regards.

The problem in some cases is not the lack of theoretical conceptualization as identified in most e-government research cases (Heeks, Bailur 2007), but the lack of connection between the theory and the empirical study. Avgerou (2000), for example, starts with a detailed theoretical analysis of neoinstitutionalism in every context, from information society to IT and organizational change. However, her case study on the Pemex, a Mexican oil corporation, follows as a simple description of what happened in terms of IT and change over time, but not of why such changes have taken place as it could have been explained by her neoinstitutionalism. Making a heavy use of theoretical discourses, but

failing to fully connect and use it with the research methodology and findings, could be a major problem.

Interpretivism is sometimes claimed to lack criticism and debates (Tushnet 1983, Szmigin, Foxall 2000, Cecez-Kecmanovic, Klein & Brooke 2008), being at the same time incompatible with positivisms (Ricciardi 2010). To address these issues Walsham (2006), a pioneer of interpretive information systems' research, suggests the use of mixed methods or even purely quantitative studies to avoid the descriptive narrative an interpretivist approach can produce. The methodological contributions of this study are in this direction. Mixed methods could be applied also to measure some of *"broad parameters and context of IS"* in developing countries (Walsham, Robey & Sahay 2007). Another suggestion is to conduct some action research (Baskerville 1999) similar to advocacy (Fay 1987, Heron, Reason 1997, Kemmis, Wilkinson 1998, Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith 1993) where the contribution of the researcher can be more directly influential to the society (Walsham, Robey & Sahay 2007). Because of the exploratory nature of the research question in this study, this is unlikely to be an action research. However, a critical interpretivist review is possible (Walsham 2005) by reflecting on the process of research knowledge creation, translation and transfer throughout a rigorous analysis of data. This would be adapted here, showing a higher degree of research involvement through mixed methods and triangulations beyond a simple interpretation of theory and practice.

4.3   RESEARCH PRINCIPLES

This section is important to connect the research question with the institutionalist theoretical framework and the interpretivist methodological paradigm. The discussion of some research principles of validity and ethics in this section should guide also the research strategy and fieldwork discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

4.3.1   VALIDITY PRINCIPLES

The methodology of this research is based on a case study approach. Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) provide the theoretical framework to explain the findings, but not to validate the research methodology. To handle this problem, this study considers the four most commonly used

principles to evaluate case study research. According to Yin (2009: 40-45) and other case study literature (Kidder, Judd & Smith 1986) the ones that can be applied in this study are the following:

- **Construct validity:** Applicable in the case study composition and data collection, related to the use of multiple sources of evidence, and based on an established chain of relations between the data and review of the case study report. Its purpose is to identify a correct framework for the subject being studied.

- **Internal validity:** Applicable during the data analysis is related to pattern matching, building of explanations, addressing rival explanations and the use of logical models. Its purpose is to identify and establish causal relationships.

- **External validity:** Applicable during the research design and related to the use of theoretical or literal replications in single or multiple case studies. Its purpose is to identify the study domain and generalise its findings and contribution.

- **Reliability:** Applicable during the data collection and related to the use of case study protocol and data management. Its purpose is to provide a clear framework of study operations and data collection procedures that can be repeated and generate the same results.

Yin's (2009) concepts are based on the conventional *"set of four criteria for establishing the rigour of any individual inquiry"* (Pickard, Dixon 2004). In this context, according to Pickard (2004) they are based on the works of Lincoln & Guba (1985), Dervin (1997), Schwandt & Halpen (1988), and others in constructivist inquiry. In this same context, the criteria of trustworthiness based on credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba 1990) has evolved from the validity, reliability and generalizability triangle (Jansick 1994: 215).

Credibility in interpretivist studies is established by engagement and interaction with research participants, their observation, and triangulation of techniques to assure checking and approval. The rich picture generated should allow the reader to decide on the transferability (not generalization) of findings in another context. The research results depend on the external inquiry audit of the research journal, data, and materials used to

generate the findings. In order to limit the researcher's bias it is necessary to acknowledge and limit the transfer of any personal tacit knowledge that would alter meaning.

These principles are designed to increase the trustworthiness of this research and put the reader in a position of better understanding towards the research mechanism and practicality of findings. In this context, before starting the field work, a research plan should consider not only the theoretical frameworks and methods to address the research question, but also the practicalities of data management and their ethical implications.

4.3.2   RESEARCH ETHICS

This interpretivist study of internationally assisted e-government projects using mixed methods, as it will be explained in the following chapter, considers research ethics to increase its trustworthiness. Having to contact many people during the interviews, surveys and observation, it is important to pay some attention to their privacy and confidentially rights. In this context, the ethical statement for this research has been approved by the School of Management in Royal Holloway University of London on the 17th of September 2010 based on the following points.

First of all, a clear overview of the purpose of the study was made available to all participants in the research. My contacts and affiliation with Royal Holloway, University of London were clearly stated. In the case of interviews, I asked for the participants' consent, informing and letting them decide on the use of communication and recording tools and technological devices. I also explained them that they can feel free to express their views, change them, stop the recording or leave the interview process at any time. Furthermore the participants were explained that everything discussed is in total confidence and solely for research purposes. I also decided not to use the names of participants in my analysis, but limit the references to a general description of their jobs. One copy of documents, interviews, questionnaires, or observation records was kept in my personal computer and another on encrypted web space with satisfactory levels of information security.

My fieldwork was guided by the research ethical regulations in Royal Holloway University of London as well as data protection acts and confidentiality regulations. A serious attempt

was made to analyse and present this study in an impartial manner that could not knowingly lead to any legal action, be deliberately related to any political position or defamation of character for the parties involved.

4.4   TOWARDS AN INSTITUTIONALIST CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

This section is related to the institutional framework for this study, presented in the last part of the previous chapter. To design a research methodology, first a multiple case study approach and the boundaries of this study are justified by defining the units and sub-units of analysis. The proposed frameworks will follow Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) into a critical interpretivist journey of understanding the development of internationally assisted e-government institutions in a sustainable way. In this context, the methodological gaps and limitations from the theory and literature will be filled with my own constructs and understanding. The cross-case synthesis as an analytical technique, specifically designed for multiple case studies (Yin 2009: Ch. 5) like this one, could be combined with a general and loose logic model suggested by the theoretical propositions to strengthen the findings of study. A reporting style that would best suit the research questions, theoretical propositions, and methodology so far would be based on the discussion of cross-conceptual themes of institutional dynamics identified in the case studies as presented in the following diagram:
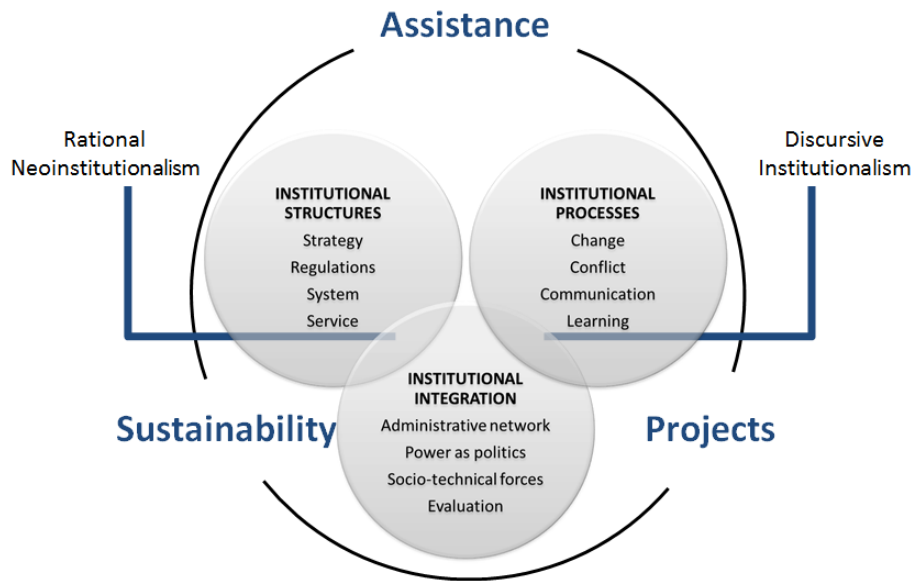
FIGURE 13: THE THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THIS STUDY

This diagram is a developed version from the one presented in the last part of Chapter Three. It was not predesigned before the fieldwork, but constructed and finalised only during the analysis, after much iteration of going back and forth to revise this methodology chapter. The different elements constituting the sub-unit of analysis in this framework that might appear very complex now, are explained more in the third session of this part. The process of how these different themes and sub-units of analysis that form the structure of the empirical Chapters Six, Seven and Eight were identified and selected, is explained in the coding session of the research strategy part in the following chapter. The reason this framework is presented here is to serve as an initial map that summarised the discussion that follows in those parts.

The three inner circles representing the micro case study dimension are informed by the theory. Their structure will guide the discussion of the two project cases in Chapters Six and Seven representing bilateral and multilateral e-government initiatives. The outer circle is informed by the research question and its sub-questions. Its three elements: assistance, projects, and sustainability represent the macro cross-case dimension discussed in Chapter Eight. The structure of units and sub-units of analysis in all levels and sublevels is touched upon in this part. How it was developed is explained further in the next chapter about the research strategy, coding, and visualisation for analysis.

This framework represents a theoretical and methodological mechanism to interpret the research findings. Its purpose is to give some structure and allow generalisations based on the critical interpretation and discussion of new constructs from the research evidence. The following sections here continue by explaining more about its background and structure.

4.4.1   QUALIFYING THE NATURE OF INSTITUTIONS IN THIS RESEARCH

The scope in this section is to identify where to place the focus in the methodology and fieldwork, by discussing what institutions are. Some selected sources were carefully chosen to extract definitions of institutions that are common and usable with both Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008). Here, I do not intend to come up with a unique definition of institutionalization, or, consequently, of stable and sustainable governance, but to select and organise the definitions of institutions that can guide this research.

Long before such a vast literature on institutional theory, *"the only idea common to all usages of the term 'institution' is that of some sort of establishment of relative permanence of a distinctly social sort"* (Hughes 1936: 180). The essence of institutions is related to something durable as the notion of governance sustainability in this research. A very important contribution in defining institutions, institutional effects, and institutionalism is given by Ronald Jepperson (1991) from the new institutionalist school who states that:

> Institutions are organized, established procedures represented as the constituent rules of society (p. 143) while institutionalization denotes a social property or state. *"Institutions should not be specifically identified as they often are, with either cultural elements or a type of environmental effect"* (Jepperson 1991: 144).

Jepperson (1991: 145) continues by explaining that *"institutions represent a social order or pattern that has attained a certain state or property; institutionalization denotes the process of such attainment"*. Terms such as routine, sustenance, simultaneous empowerment and control, packaged social technology, legitimacy, context, formal organization, regimes, culture, institutional change, as well as the taken-for-grantedness of all positive, negative, or no-evaluation patterns appear often related to the main issues. His consideration of institutional formation, development, deinstitutionalization, and reinstitutionalization (p. 152) is very important in my context of e-government as a newly created institution. With this in mind, let us look at some earlier definitions from the new institutionalism in organisational analysis.

> *Institutions inevitably involve normative obligations but often enter into social life primarily as facts which must be taken into account by actors. Institutionalization involves the processes by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rule-like status in social thought and action.*
>
> (Meyer, Rowan 1977)

The work of Meyer and Rowan (1977) on formal structures as myth and ceremony is often considered one of the initial building blocks of the new-institutionalism. Their conceptual paper addresses legitimacy, rationalization, professions, bureaucratization, formal structure, state, isomorphism, stabilization, conformity, rituals, and rules. They introduce the idea of decoupling between structure and activity in organisations to reduce conflicts

and loss of legitimacy. Isomorphism in this case is explained as the result of coercive, normative, and mimetic forces (DiMaggio, Powell 1983). This approach pays due attention to bureaucratization, rationalization, homogenisation as an effect of isomorphism, legitimacy, professionalization, education, modeling, technological uncertainty, and structuration of field.

The views of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) remain holistic, considering both macro and micro elements of institutional environments together. Lynne Zucker (1977), on the other hand, addresses micro-institutionalization and cultural persistence, with a strict focus on the individual. She does not provide her own definition of institutions, however, terms like persistence, transmission, maintenance, resistance to change, norms, and continuity appear often related to the institutional context, culture, and the micro environment. It starts becoming evident at this point that similar concepts are being associated with institutions in different works. In a critical appraisal of different forms of new institutionalism, Vivien Lowndes (1996) provides a long baseline definition:

> *(a) **Institution is a middle-level (or 'meso') concept.** Institutions are devised by individuals, but in turn constrain their action. They are part of the broad social fabric, but also the medium through which day-to-day decisions and actions are taken. Institutions shape human action, imposing constraints whilst also providing opportunities.*
>
> *(b) **Institutions have formal and informal aspects**. Institutions involve formal rules or laws, but also informal norms and customs. Unlike formal institutions, informal institutions are not consciously designed nor neatly specified, but are part of habitual action. Institutions may be expressed in organizational form, but also relate to processes - the way things are done.*
>
> *(c) **Institutions have legitimacy and show stability over time**. Institutions have legitimacy beyond the preferences of individual actors. They are valued in themselves and not simply for their immediate purposes and outputs. Institutions may gain their legitimacy because of their relative stability over time, or because of their link with a 'sense of place'.* (Lowndes 1996: 182)

Believing that this definition is a good summary of previous ones, it was given here in full to avoid any biased interpretation. However, two things which are very important in this

study remain unaddressed. The first is related to how formal institutions are designed (point b above). The second is institutional change (point a). To address these issues it is necessary to consider the discursive or constructivist school of neoinstitutionalism which provide a set of definitions for institutions, not from organizational studies, but from the politics and public administration perspective. In this context, James March and Johan Olsen provide a series or working papers and publications (1995, 2004, 1989, 2006, 1998, 1996, 1984, 1983). According to them:

> ***An institution*** *is a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances.* (March, Olsen 2006)

Regardless of the major similarities with other definitions of institutions related to *"values, norms, interests, identities and beliefs"* (March, Olsen 1989: 17), there are two terms that deserve particular attention here: '*relatively'* and '*external circumstances'*. The explanation given by March and Olsen is that *"institutions are also reinforced by third parties in enforcing rules and sanctioning non-compliance"* (March, Olsen 2006). This implies that institutions can be designed, especially in a political context, and that institutional factors influence actors and preferred solutions in collective public choice issues (Dunleavy et al. 2006, Ostrom 1991, Dunleavy 1991, Shepsle 1989). The theoretical propositions to study these problems based on the discussion, so far, are as follows:

- **Institutions are what they create which is:** routines, patterns, archetypes, templates, regimes, taken-for-grantedness, established procedures.

- **Institutionalization consists of processes such as:** modeling, stabilization, conformity, isomorphism, homogenisation, resistance to change, continuity, sustenance, persistence, self-evaluation, simultaneous empowerment, and control.

- **Institutions and institutionalization are directly and strongly related to, but not necessarily the same as:** rules, norms, values, beliefs, obligations, legitimacy, ceremony, rule-like status, rationalization, decoupling, organisational structures, resilience to individual preferences, culture.

Each list could go on, but considering the large amount of synonyms, the chances that new terms would bring new ideas are limited.

The previously reviewed literature on definitions of institutions positions them in generally two categories, which are formal or informal, conscious or not conscious, rules or norms, laws or customs (Lowndes 1996), rational or social (Hall, Taylor 1996), macro or micro (DiMaggio, Powell 1991a: 15 - 27). This dimension is about institutional structures and processes based on the approach of March and Olsen (2006). In this context, the combined use of Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) for institutional structures and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) for institutional processes is expected to enrich the critical discussion and understanding of institutions in this research. To relate the theoretical concept-tools discussed in this section to the research questions, the following section explains the case study approach taken in this study.

4.4.2 THE CASE STUDY APPROACH

This study takes a case study approach because the main question **"How are internationally assisted e-government projects institutionalized?"** forces attention onto interpretations and explanations of an unexplored field, such as international e-government assistance. To address this generally qualitative question, the construction of a research methodology would be based on the propositions of institutionalism discussed in the previous chapter, both as a theory and as a research paradigm. Most of the existing research reviewed previously (Fountain 2001, Flak, Nordheim & Munkvold 2008, Heeks, Stanforth 2007, Ciborra, Navarra 2005), are similar to this research in the context of e-government projects, stakeholders, networks, and institutionalism. In all these works, case study analysis was considered as the most appropriate, associated with the research questions 'How?' or 'Why?' (Yin 2009). The same is true even for this research; its main question stated before and the following sub-questions:

1. How are internationally assisted e-government projects managed?
2. Is international assistance generating sustainable e-government development?

The research questions and the neoinstitutionalist perspective suggest an exploratory study that attempts the development of new constructs and meaning in a generally unexplored

and developing area. In this perspective, case study analysis is a complex research mechanism that generates rich explanations and information that can be combined into new knowledge. However, not only the research question is important, but also whether the research requires control over studied events and if it focuses on contemporary cases (Yin 2009). Answering 'No' to the first one and 'Yes' to the second, again, qualifies this research for case study analysis. However, the focus in this research remains on the institutionalization of international e-government assistance.

In the country context, Albania is the main case to be studied. Ciborra and Navarra (2005), for example, take a similar macro-approach about the role of international aid on e-government policies in Jordan, with the aforementioned country as the main unit of analysis. This single case, however, would have been very complex to analyse how e-government is being institutionalized from a management perspective. A more refined and focused unit of analysis could help with the complexity of the problem, by representing it in a model-like format, still remaining representative and credible in terms of research and findings. As discussed in the previous part, most institutional studies on e-government are based on case studies with specific projects as the units of analysis. Jane Fountain (2001), for example, chooses The International Trade Data system, The U.S. Business Advisor, and some projects related to *"user-as-developer"* in the U.S. army as her main units of analysis. This study will follow the same path by selecting two internationally assisted e-government projects in Albania.

The first case study is a project on the electronic system of business registration**.** The agency responsible for this is the National Registration Center (NRC), created as a new organisation but depending on the Albanian Ministry of Finance. NRC is responsible for the registration of every business in the Republic of Albania, for keeping their personal records, and finally, managing any change according to a one-stop-shop. Furthermore, the systems are related to the electronic system of taxation, the E-Procurement Agency, the National Licensing Center, and other agencies or e-government systems that regulate business activities in Albania. Most of the bilateral international assistance for the development of ESBR has been given by the United States of America, as for all the other

business related e-government systems mentioned here, part of an assistance programme and portfolio.

The second case study is a project on the electronic national register of civil status. The agency responsible for this is the existing General Directorate of the Civil Status (GDCS), within the Albanian Ministry of Interior on a central government level. This directorate works in close co-operation with local units of civil status in different municipalities, dependant on the local government level. The GDCS is responsible for the civil status records of citizens that include their identity and address information. Most of the multilateral assistance for this electronic register has been given by the European Union.

A cross-case comparison is expected to provide a more reliable answer to the research question. Their boundaries will be defined by what happened in terms of institutional structures, processes, and integration related to international assistance, e-government projects, and their governance sustainability. A single case would not have been justified here, because none of the two projects is recognised to be typical and representative enough (Yin 2009) for both bilateral and multilateral assistance and newly created or reformed agencies. The selected two project cases, on the other hand, provide sufficient richness to study the institutionalization of e-government in both these dimensions. A multiple case approach, due to its comparative nature, provides more compelling (Yin 2009) and robust (Herriott, Firestone 1983) evidence.

In summary, the current research will be a multiple case study of two internationally assisted e-government projects related to the electronic registries businesses and citizens in Albania. The structure of the three empirical chapters follow the same logic: Chapters Six and Seven are each based on the single case studies, while Chapter Eight provides their cross-case comparison. The following section will expand on the conceptual structure of the empirical chapters, and how this is related to the sub-units of analysis identified in the two case studies.

4.4.3   SUB-UNITS OF ANALYSIS IN A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

This research has many embedded sub-units of analysis and cannot follow a holistic multiple case study perspective. As Yin (2009: 50) points out *"the holistic design is*

advantageous when no logical sub-units can be identified or when the relevant theory underlying the case study is itself of a holistic nature". This is not the case for the complex e-government network projects chosen as main units of analysis. The study of institutions can be performed by looking at different elements along the structure - process dimension where Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) meet each other. The field research should yield insights on institutions, or better, on what they generate in the forms of routines, patterns, archetypes, templates, regimes, taken-for-grantedness, or established procedures. These insights could contribute to address the question of how international e-government assistance is being institutionalized.

The methodological selection of sub-units of analysis to study the institutionalization of internationally assisted e-government projects, starts with the policy-making logic (Stone, Maxwell & Keating 2001) according to which structural changes influence behaviour, and processes which, in turn, can prompt to integration and sustainable institutionalization. This policy-making framework (Stone, Maxwell & Keating 2001) is in line with Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008), bringing some structure to the institutionalization logic of both theoretical frameworks for study purposes.

In the first part of institutional structures and assistance from Figure 13, strategies, systems, regulations, and services emerged during the coding and analysis process explained in the next chapter as sub-units of analysis. This followed the logic of Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998). The analysis of international assistance in this context had to focus on its nature and recipients analysed in Chapter Eight. Both structures and assistance were related to e-government policies, strategies, agreements, laws, manuals, directives, and formal rules.

The institutional processes during the projects that are going to be analysed are change, conflict, communication, and learning. These, on the other hand, were informed by Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008), but again emerged as such during the coding and later analysis process explained in the next chapter. The intention here was to understand how interactions related to the new agencies, reforms, rules, and information

technology systems are shaped during the project stages, both before, and after. This is the second set of sub-units of analysis.

The third and final set of sub-units of analysis concerns institutional integration and governance sustainability. On one side, this relates to administrative networks, power as politics, socio-technical forces, and evaluation, and, on the other, to the ethics of governance, development, and use of e-government. This structure was informed by the different elements of socio-technical interactions, users' perceptions, resistance, or adaptation identified during coding and analysis.

A more detailed explanation of how these sub-units of analysis were constructed based on the fieldwork, coding and analysis, is given in the research strategy section at the beginning of Chapter Five. These three groups of sub-units of analysis are expected to connect the theoretical conceptualisation with the fieldwork methodology and analysis to the understanding of how internationally assisted e-government projects are institutionalized.

4.4.4   GENERALISATION FROM AN INTERPRETIVIST CASE STUDY RESEARCH

As a multiple case study, this research has the potential to generate some theoretical constructs and generalisations (Eisenhardt 1989, Eisenhardt, Graebner 2007). This is possible also within an interpretivist paradigm in information systems research by *"achieving convincing explanations that are strongly linked to both the research themes and data collected in the field"* (Carroll, Swatman 2000). In this study this will be achieved through replication logic (Yin 2009) between the cases, as explained in the research strategy part in the beginning of the next chapter. The generalisations and theoretical constructs in the context of institutional theory that can emerge from this interpretivist study will be supported and discussed in Chapter Eight.

The scope here is not only to identify the institutions emerging as a result of international e-government assistance, but also to study how they are developed. Understanding and meaning will depend on the contextual settings in which the research evidence is produced (Dey 1993: 110). The research methodology will try to address them both, separately, and integrated to each other in each of the cases, constructing connections and identifying areas

where generalisations are possible during the analysis. However, it is necessary to distinguish here the difference between the methodological and conceptual perception of sub-units of analysis as shown in the following chart:
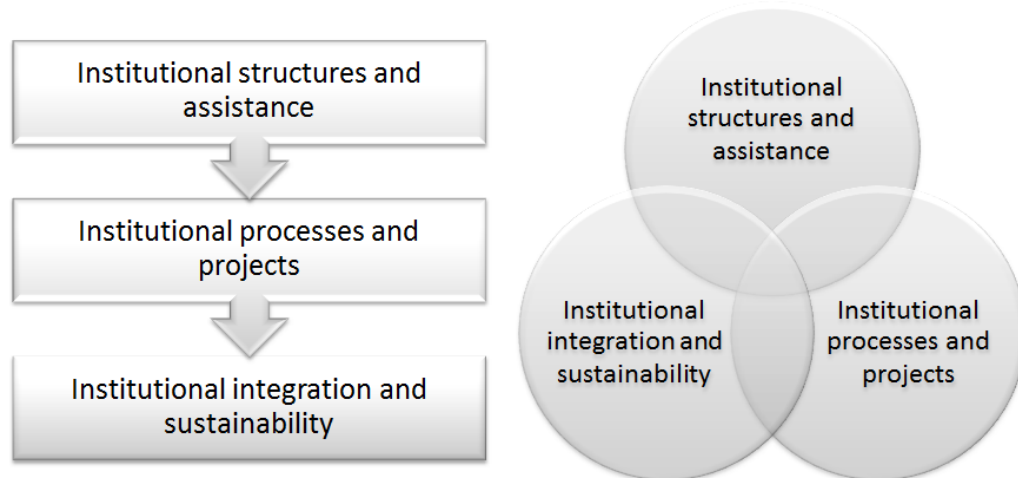
FIGURE 14: METHODOLOGICAL VS. CONCEPTUAL SUB-UNITS OF ANALYSIS

This chart is directly related to the research framework of this study presented in the introduction of this latter part of Chapter Four. The main idea this chart is trying to convey is that the analysis and interpretation of units and sub-units of analysis is linear, one after the other, while in reality, they are intertwined. Being aware of this fact is important when discussing complex issues such as institutional integration, but also when trying to generalise from this study in the final conclusions.

An analysis of more than two cases would have provided a stronger ground for strong generalisations and new theories (Yin 2009). However, this study, informed by two institutional frameworks, should be able to feed back on them with some new constructs and ideas. To achieve this, the focus of the analysis will be on institutionalization processes of modelling, stabilization, conformity, isomorphism, homogenisation, resistance to change, continuity, sustenance, persistence, simultaneous empowerment, and control evidenced in the fieldwork. The methodological framework is expected to guide the collection, management, and analysis of evidence while the interpretivist stance to give meanings to the data.

4.5 CONCLUSIONS

This section was intended to design a research methodology that would allow the identification and development of institutions in internationally assisted e-government projects. A critical interpretivist approach (Walsham 2005) will guide the nature of discussion in this study based on reflections on a rigorous analysis of data. This additionally means that insights and suggestions can be given in the context of sustainability.

Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) will guide this study theoretically and methodologically. In terms of methodology, and to facilitate their application in the field research and analysis, this study makes use of the policy development logic (Stone, Maxwell & Keating 2001) aligning institutional design, implementation, and finally, evaluation as sub-unit themes of analysis. The limitations of the theoretical and methodological framework in explaining the institutional integration of projects into sustainable reforms should highlight new directions for original contributions.

This study is based on a literal replication consisting of two cases of internationally assisted e-government projects. In this context, it follows a rigorous common framework of validity, research ethics, and guiding principles that is consistent with the theory, case-study approach, and the ethical regulations of Royal Holloway University of London.

Different sub-units of analysis could contribute differently in the discussion. In this context, the empirical discussion of the research findings will follow more a comparative logic of critical analysis, rather than a chronological description of case study events as has often occurred in previous research. The methodology developed here is dependent on the theoretical propositions as suggested in such complex case studies (Yin 2009). As a general contribution, the theoretical and methodological framework proposed here could be applied to any other project case or environment. Other such applications can support or challenge the findings of this study. In any case, the development of a framework informed by institutional theory for understanding and analysing complex e-government projects like those where international assistance is involved, is important.

5   RESEARCH STRATEGY, METHODS AND FIELDWORK FOR DATA ANALYSIS

5.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the qualitative and quantitative methods and techniques used in this study, presents the research design for the fieldwork, and explains how the research evidence is managed. It builds on the interpretivist case study approach and on the institutionalist theoretical and methodological framework discussed in the previous chapter. The qualitative nature of this study is based on a careful selection of research methods (Denzin, Lincoln 1994, 2011, Flick 2009) and analysis (Miles, Huberman 1994). Case study research (Yin 2009), however, requires a combination of methods (Creswell 2009), so this study will discuss and make use of documentary review, interviews, survey questionnaires, and observations. The following diagram introduces the methods used in this study, the relationships between them and with the theoretical frameworks:
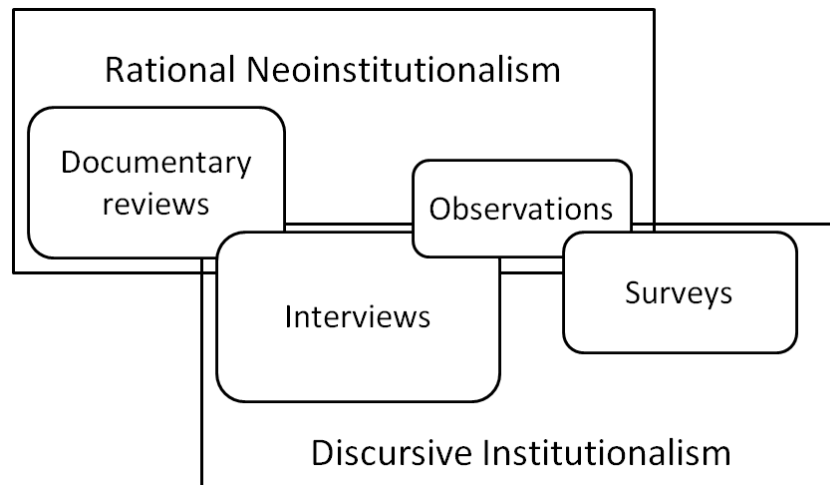
FIGURE 15: RESEARCH METHODS AND INSTITUTIONAL THEORIES

The diagram shows how the methods used in this study are related and build on each other. International e-government assistance is a very complex area of study, so the use of multiple research methods is justified to explore the institutional dynamics of projects and sustainability. The size of the boxes in this diagram shows the importance of each method in this study, while their position from left to right shows the order in which they were used.   Documentary   reviews   and   observations   were   informed   by   Rational

Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) to explore the formal and informal institutional structures. Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008), on the other hand, suggested focusing on discourses with the interviewees and respondents to learn more about their views. As the two theories have an overlap, so do the methods with each other. There were cases where the analysis of a piece of evidence: for example, a newspaper article was informed by both theoretical perspectives. In other cases more than one method was used to study the same thing, for example, change. The following sections in this chapter explain in more detail how this was planned, applied in the field research, and used for analysis.

Preparing for fieldwork involves three challenges: the interactive part of contacting respondents, the documentation of research data, and, finally, the cross-case study comparability. A research plan based on the theoretical perspectives guides the fieldwork approach. However, the context of a developing country with high level of informality, like Albania, where this study takes place, demands a relatively high level of flexibility in the field research.

Finally, the preparation and analysis of the research evidence would have been limited without the use of qualitative and quantitative research software and tools. Data management and coding was made easier through the use of electronic aids, although the organisation and interpretation of the research evidence remains the sole responsibility of the researcher. The final part of this chapter explains how the ontology of research evidence is related to the epistemology of this study, through coding, interpretation, and conceptualisation.

The problem is that both case study projects are relatively new and currently evolving, therefore, it is necessary to work based on a number of principles that will assure the research validity. The first is the use of multiple sources of evidence for the sake of triangulation or in other words the review of converging lines of inquiry (Yin 2009). There are four types of triangulation among data sources, different evaluators, perspectives of the same data set or methods (Patton 2002). In this study, conducted by a single researcher, data and methodological triangulations will be used extensively. The second requirement is the creation of a case study database of field evidence and investigator's report (Yin 2009).

This will be generated from the field research data based on the logic suggested by the theoretical propositions. The investigator's comments will follow the same field evidence structure and be strongly related to it to assure an informed, structured, reliable, and easy-to-follow study. The third principle is related to the chain of evidence; to be able to track back and forth the connection between the research question, theoretical proposition, methodology, evidence, analysis, and conclusions (Yin 2009). How this research logic, guided by theoretical and methodological frameworks, of this study is applied in practice is explained in the following sections.

5.2   RESEARCH STRATEGY

The research strategy of this study was guided by the institutional theoretical and methodological framework introduced in the last parts of the two previous chapters. The mind-set that I had when I started this research was not the same as the one I had when I finished it. The same was true for the process of collecting the data and then interpreting them. The three years of this research were divided between the literature review during the first one, the field research during the second, and the analysis during the third. To minimise the research bias between my initial perception and the final one, and also to preserve the consistency of the thesis to be able to generalise from its findings, I had to go back and forth along its different parts until it was finalised. In this context this section explains the activity-based parallel case study approach and the coding process that made possible the analysis and findings in the latter chapters.

5.2.1   ACTIVITY-BASED PARALLEL CASE STUDY APPROACH

By activity-based parallel case study approach, I mean that both case studies were dealt with in the field simultaneously and the research activities conducted were adjusted to mirror each other. The timing of the projects is the first reason for justifying this choice. The two projects started around 2007-2009, were implemented in about 2 years and then, at the time of the research in 2010-2011, were handed over to the Albanian government. The study validity here is based on its replication in two related and, to a certain extent, similar projects of e-government assistance, rather than on a sampling logic (Yin 2009: 54). This is analogous to multiple experiments (Hersen, Barlow 1976) as long as *"(a)*

predicts similar results (a literal replication) or (b) predicts contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons (a theoretical replication)". This study is based primarily on a literal replication consisting of two cases (rather than 6-10 cases for a typical theoretical replication), as suggested by Yin (2009: 54). Based on some preliminary research for this study, both chosen projects have a lot of similarities in their registry nature such as their basic role for other e-government systems, the involvement of international assistance, the similar time of their development (which is within the last 4-6 years), and the possible stronger integration of these systems with each other in the future. However, a theoretical framework and a number of propositions have already been discussed previously to apply or even generate theoretical constructs from matching or contradicting findings.

The main reason for choosing this strategy was the slightly volatile political situation during the time of this research in Albania that could have triggered unpredictable events for the two e-government projects. The opposition party had been out of the parliament for the last two years, not recognizing the result of the last central elections. This period includes June 2010, the time when the first field contacts were made. One year later, when the first stage of the field research was conducted, the country had just come out of local elections with the results for the capital being highly disputed, and yet, without a certified mayor for about two months. Both projects involve government agencies which could not remain unaffected by this situation. More specifically, the front offices and direct services of the electronic register of citizens, and that of business services, are directly related to local authorities and often coexist within their premises. In a situation of political instability when changes could occur unexpectedly, it was decided to conduct a parallel research for both projects at the same time. This approach was expected to identify if external forces and changes happening at the same time would affect the institutionalization of e-government in each case.

The parallel research presents a number of methodological issues related to data collection, processing, analysis, and potential bias in analysis and reporting. To minimize some of these problems, instead of a whole case methodology replication, an activity-based research replication was applied. This means a continuous attempt to replicate specific research activities such as interviews, found materials, observations or analysis performed for one of the two cases, to the other one on a short-term basis. The purpose of this

approach was to embed in the research methodology the flexibility required in a highly informal environment, and yet, assure an appropriate level of research mirroring rigor for validity in both case studies. While the experiences from both cases could bias the perception of each other, the reflection and research learning process evidenced in the research diary was supposed to minimize it during the field research.

During the analysis and reporting, the task is simpler as the discussion of both individual projects is supposed to follow the same structure for both case studies, informed by the theoretical framework and this same activity-based field research methodology. These parallel lines of enquiry focus on specific data types and sources across the two projects. The strengths and limitations of such a methodology applied in the context of this research are expected to emerge during the analysis, including a critical discussion of potential biases while interpreting the individual case studies.

5.2.2 CODING BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Coding was the process that connected the theoretical and methodological implications of this study to the field research evidence from the two projects, their analysis, and findings. The idea of coding originates from grounded theory (Glaser, Strauss & Strutzel 1968, Strauss, Corbin 1990, Strauss, Corbin 1994) to capture, highlight, and analyse emerging ideas, issues, and theoretical concepts. Initially, coding is perceived as an inductive process suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990) where initial data is collected, written up, and reviewed to generate a growing list of categories and labels (Miles, Huberman 1994: 58). In addition, Miles and Huberman (1994: 58-62) highlight the importance of continuous coding, recoding, reviewing, and structuring of concepts and ideas in different emerging layers, to achieve a saturation of regularities and categories suggested by Strauss (1987), Lincoln and Guba (1985). Achieving this stage means that *"the analysis itself appears to have run its course"* (Miles, Huberman 1994: 62).

To facilitate the coding process, ATLAS.ti was used as the code-and-retrieve (Richards, Richards 1994) software package for this study. The features of software packages to code, retrieve, and display text segments for analysis have increasingly improved over manual methods since the first software tools were analysed (Tesch 1990). Therefore there is little justification for going back.

The coding process was first informed by the definition of institutions given in the last part of the previous chapter, and by the two theories: Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998), and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008). In this context, the first predefined codes informed by the research question were 'international assistance', 'projects', and 'institutionalization'. The second set of predefined codes informed by Rational Neoinstitutionalism were 'strategy', 'rules', and 'system'. Finally the predefined codes informed by Discursive Institutionalism were 'change', 'communication', and 'conflict'. From the beginning, this loose structure of coding was intended to structure the research, but not to limit its potential for new findings and contributions to the theory. Later, during the coding process, many other codes were created around the previously identified concepts or around new ones, forming even codes' families. The following screenshot from the analysis of the very first interview for the first case study project, illustrates how coding happened in practice:
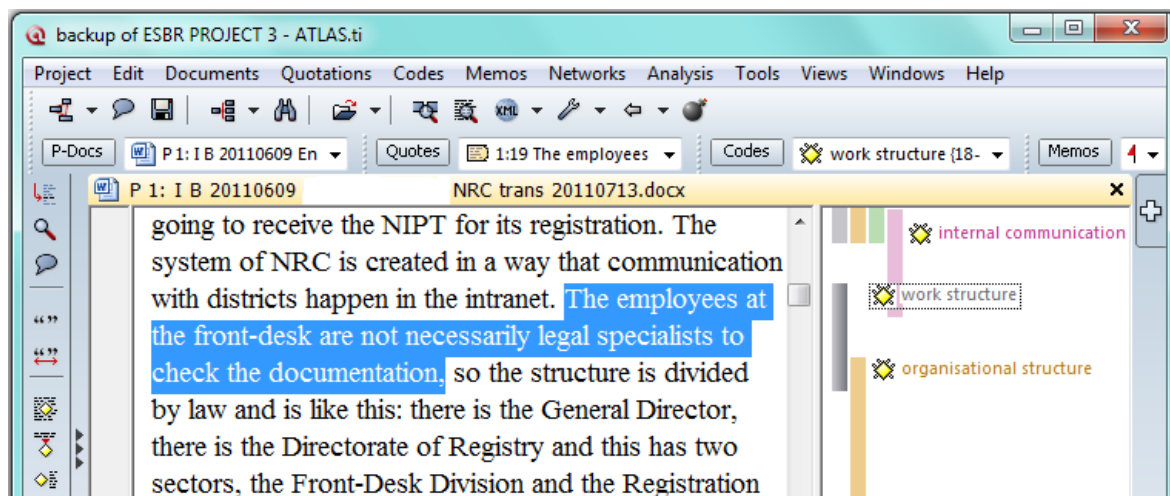
FIGURE 16: CODING IN PRACTICE

The highlighted text was coded as 'work structure', an element of the 'structure' coding family informed by Rational Neoinstitutionalism. Many other codes were also identified in this family, such as, 'organisational structure' which can be seen in the picture, related to the part that follows the highlighted text. 'Internal communication' above was related to the 'communication' family informed by Discursive Institutionalism. The codes were grouped into families and otherwise networked maps as named in ATLAS.ti by the

researcher for visualisation, conceptualisation, and analysis. An example of this is given in the last part of this chapter.

Sometimes, the same codes appeared close to each other, or the same text was connected in full or partially to two or more of them. When the same codes appeared often together, this indicated a connection between them and their conceptual groups. From the previous screenshot, for example, 'work structure' and 'organisational structure' appear very close together and with some overlap. The connection between them is obvious.

Obviously the codes were similar in structure but not the same for the two case study projects and their comparative analysis. This allowed a flexible and critical interpretation that allowed the research evidence to speak. Some codes were specific for each case. For example, 'innovation' in the case of National Registration Center was related to this newly created agency, while in the case of the National Register of Civil Status to the new services only as the agency, the General Directorate of Civil Status was the same as before.

Codes and coding themes emerged and were related to each other to form coding networks. This happened during the research and analysis, sometimes, even when they were not related to any theoretical framework or the research question before. An example of this concerns limitations. Some of the codes in this group included: 'limited access', 'limited capability', 'limited time', 'limited trust', or 'limited authority'. These codes, and, additionally, the whole group, appeared to be related to local capabilities being limited, and resistance to change as a consequence. The conceptual and logical networks that were formed combining codes, in this way, guided the structure of the three empirical chapters that follow.

In this study, coding started with the interviews of two middle-managers responsible for the respective electronic registries of businesses and citizens. The reason for this choice was that middle managers were considered to have some knowledge on strategic, implementation, service, and evaluation processes across the two projects. On the other hand, middle managers could give an overall internal perspective, covering most of the key aspects and thus providing a solid basis for starting the analysis. They were followed by the interviews with the general directors from the government project agencies, to continue with their counterparts on the donors' side. This stage expands on the strategic and

implementation level introduced already by the middle managers. The coding of strategies, legal documents, manuals, and reports was used to corroborate the material taken in the interviews. Interviews and then observations were used for the same purpose of corroboration and triangulation in the case studies. The order of data analysis for coding is given in the following diagram according to the different research methods used to collect them:

Case study analysis Chapters 6 and 7	Cross-case analysis Chapter 8
Interviews	Observations
Documents	Surveys
Surveys	Documents
Observations	Interviews
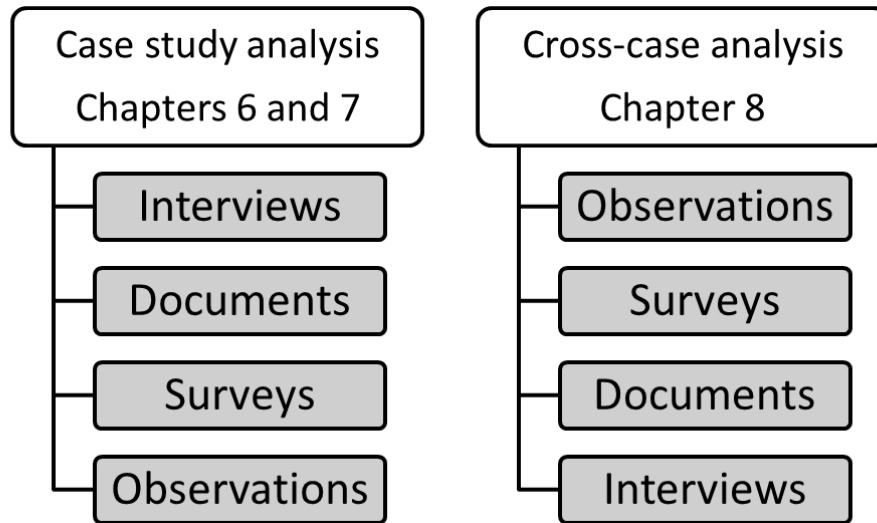
FIGURE 17: THE ORDER OF CODING RESEARCH DATA

The cross-case discussion in Chapter Eight, as shown by this diagram, starts with the observations and survey answers where Chapters Six and Seven finished. The discussion in the last empirical chapter (Eight) intends to generalise some of the research findings on assistance, projects, and sustainability, based on the institutional structures, processes, and integration discussed earlier. Documents and interviews are finally compared for each of the cases to give a fresh perspective from different angle before drawing any conclusion. While most of the research evidence was internal to the projects, external reports and news were the consequent coded materials from organisational parties. Their supposedly independent views were assumed to give a perspective from not directly involved parties. This critical use of methods was intended to investigate if the reverse logic of triangulation will generate results that are consistent with the case studies. More on the use of research methods for the complex study of international e-government assistance follows next.

5.3   RESEARCH METHODS

The evidence in case studies can be found in many ways and come from a number of sources. Therefore, the selection of research methods is very important. They will provide the 'glasses' through which the unit of analysis will be seen, thus directly influencing the construction of meaning and knowledge. The research question, the theoretical propositions, and the multiple case study approach with embedded sub-units of analysis suggest a portfolio of methods. The most important ones in this research are discussed in the following sections. The following diagram ranks the research methods used in this study according to their importance:
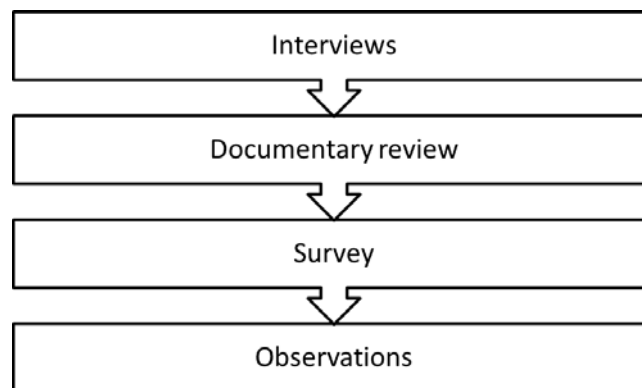
FIGURE 18: RESEARCH METHODS' RANKING ACCORDING TO THEIR IMPORTANCE

The following sections discuss each of them separately according to this order of importance, explaining their purpose and use in this research following the theoretical propositions and the research strategy discussed earlier.

5.3.1   SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Interviews are the most important source of evidence in this study. Unlike the review of documents and archival records, research interviews are produced as evidence for the sake of the research, requiring the direct and often flexible involvement of the researcher (Rubin, Rubin 2005). They are targeted and insightful, but at the same time subject to questioning or answering bias, inaccuracies from poor recalling, and reflexivity of answers led by the questions (Yin 2009: 102). As a consequence, more detailed and specific results are expected to be obtained with the risk of research bias being higher than in other methods that require a more passive involvement of the researcher.

Interviews can be in-depth discussions, possibly taking place in multiple settings and including facts and opinions from an informant interviewee (Yin 2009: 107). Interviews can be focused (Merton, Lowenthal & Kendall 1990), meaning short, open ended and apparently naive, following a structure from the case study protocol and designed to corroborate already established facts (Yin 2009: 107). Such conversation based interviews could be better when the interviewee is expected to be more in control of his time and information released.

Based on the theoretical and methodological propositions of Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008), the semi-structured interviews in this study focus on the following seven theme-questions:

1. What has changed in the design and strategy-making process considering the past, present, and future?
2. How would you evaluate the role of international assistance and its impact on the e-government initiative?
3. How would you comment on the organizational structure, division of tasks, power and responsibilities in the e-government initiative?
4. What do you think of the technology being used, its fitness to the designed purpose, ease of use, interoperability with other systems, and potential?
5. How would you comment on the channels and methods of communication at an internal, inter-organizational, and external level with end-users?
6. What are the elements and structures of control and evaluation?
7. What is the impact of the offered services and the changes they are expected to bring in the society?

Questions 3, 4 and 6 are informed by the Rational New Institutionalism and its focus on management structures, efficiency and accepted patterns of work. Questions 2, 5 and 7 try to evidence and analyse some of the different debates, ideas and actors in this analysis based on Discursive Institutionalism. Question 1 is informed by both approaches. The aim was to start the interviews with a discussion about change, a challenging topic in institutional analysis, looking at both predefined designs and strategy-making discourses.

Following the theoretical and methodological framework of this study, questions 1 and 2 are related to the strategic role of international assistance, questions 3, 4 and 5 to e-

government project management and questions 6 and 7 to the institutional sustainability and adaptation of reforms. The following table gives more information on their nature:

Sub-unit of analysis	Nature of interview questions
Institutional structures and assistance	The role of agencies and actors in strategic decisions and policies
Institutional processes and projects	Operational issues, hierarchical discourses, communication issues
Institutional integration and sustainability	Future plans for developments, evaluation and durability of reforms

FIGURE 19: SUB-UNITS OF ANALYSIS AND INTERVIEWS

The knowledge and obviously the answers of the respondents varied depending on their role and level of expertise, but a uniform set of open questions was intended to give a rich picture, and identify institutional dynamics. The theoretical propositions in this study suggested a minimal involvement of the researcher to avoid any bias, change, or reflexivity on the to-be-analysed research evidence.

5.3.2   DOCUMENTARY REVIEW

Documentary review including the analysis of archived materials is usually associated with evidence in a written format, but not excluding audio-visual, formal or informal materials of public or personal nature. This is a well-known method in qualitative research (Flick 2009, Bowen 2009, Silverman 2009, Merriam 2009). Just to mention a few examples, documents or archival records can be letters, emails, agendas, announcements, proposals, studies, media reports, agreements, laws, manuals, records, surveys etc. The purpose of using documentary and archival review is, among others, to corroborate evidence and make inferences (Yin 2009: 105). In this study however, they are used also to understand the initial vision and objectives documented in national strategies, laws, and regulations from the start of the two case study projects.

Archival records and documents are generally more precise than primary records (Yin 2009: 102), offering also some quantitative data unbiased by the research and broad in coverage. Considering the broad variety of sources in documentary and archival review, in

order to avoid any access or reporting bias (from the government of Albania or the donors in their reports in this case), a careful selection is necessary. The documents and archival records to study the institutionalization of e-government in Albania and the role of international organisations will be divided in two groups: strategic, related to central policies and vision, and operational, related to more specific laws, regulations, and reports. This selection will be based on the connection between the research question, theoretical propositions and units of analysis, but also on their availability.

The selection of documents and archival records should follow the same research protocol and methodology for both projects as suggested in multiple case studies (Yin 2009) to allow their comparability and generalisation. Starting with strategic materials, the review will be focused on the identification of procedures being established as direct evidence of institutions. The source of information and focus shifts from strategic to operational documents and archival records as given in the following table:

Sub-unit of analysis	Nature of documents or archival records
Institutional structures and assistance	National strategies, policy documents
Institutional processes and projects	Project agreements, laws, regulations, manuals
Institutional integration and sustainability	Project reports, evaluations, and media coverage

FIGURE 20: SUB-UNITS OF ANALYSIS AND DOCUMENTARY REVIEW

The analysis of written documents should be able to explain the initial design of the organizational structures, the information technology requirements, specifications on human resources, and communication patterns within the project agencies and externally. This limitation in collecting research evidence from documents and archival records will be compensated by the other primary research methods.

5.3.3   SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRES

Case study and survey questionnaires can be integrated together in information systems' research (Yin 2009, Gable 1994), combining thus both qualitative and quantitative

approaches (Kaplan, Duchon 1988). This method could help to collect some primary quantitative information that in this research was used to corroborate the evidence from the documentary review and direct semi-structured interviews. Choosing the survey questions will depend on the reliability and availability of information from other sources, the theoretical propositions, and the connections between methods and sources.

The scope of surveys in this study was to validate and understand better some of the insights gathered from the face-to-face interviews and documentary reviews. Their nature for each of the sub-units of analysis is summarised in the following table:

Sub-unit of analysis	Nature of survey questions to end-users
Institutional structures and assistance	The general perception of international assistance and government policies
Institutional processes and projects	The general perception of e-government projects and their services
Institutional integration and sustainability	The level of satisfaction and adaptability with the new systems and services

FIGURE 21: SUB-UNITS OF ANALYSIS AND SURVEY QUESTIONS

 The quantitative survey data remain of secondary importance in this mainly qualitative study because of the interpretivist and institutionalist approach. Although this study makes use of mixed methods, findings from the survey questionnaires are presented and discussed more through descriptive rather than inferential statistics. However, they are of great importance to validate some of the findings of interviews and documentary reviews, and to their generalisation in building theoretical constructs from the cross-case study analysis (Eisenhardt 1989) in Chapter Eight.

5.3.4   ON-SITE OBSERVATIONS

The final research method used in this study consisted of on-site observations to National Registration Center and Civil Status front-offices. Observations are another ethnographic method of research, similar to interviews (Runeson, Höst 2009). In this study they are used to gather information and evidence about the two case studies by noticing, recording and trying to understand processes when they take place in the field. Participatory observations

are more insightful into interpersonal behaviours as the researcher actively interacts with the unit of analysis. Direct observations on the other hand are more passive and contextual, with time consumption, selectivity, and research bias as the main problems (Yin 2009: 102).

Unless observations are clearly designed, rigorously planned, and well connected to the research framework, questions and other sources of evidence, they could undermine the case study research. Observations could be used for qualitative and quantitative purposes in the context of individuals, communication patterns, and the use of information technology. However, the study of physical artefacts such as a technological device, a work of art, or a cultural artefact have been deemed to have less potential relevance in typical case studies, due to their limited availability (Yin 2009). Field observations are related to all sub-units of analysis in this study, but their purpose is limited to corroborating the research evidence gathered through the other methods.

Because of the limitations in time to conduct an extensive anthropological research on the institutionalization of e-government assistance, observations are secondary in this study. Furthermore, because of the limited access to the back-offices of the National Registration Center and General Directorate of Civil Status, the observations were limited to their respective front-offices which are open to the public. In both cases the aim and nature of the observations is summarised in the following table:

Sub-unit of analysis	Nature of observations
Institutional structures and assistance	Corroborate institutional evidence discovered previously
Institutional processes and projects	Identify institutionalized practices from verbal and non-verbal communications
Institutional integration and sustainability	Monitor interactions with the new e-government institutional artefacts

FIGURE 22: SUB-UNITS OF ANALYSIS AND OBSERVATIONS

No participatory observations were part of this research because, as discussed in the previous chapter, the study and analysis are not based on advocacy, but rather on critical

interpretations. The most important aim in conducting direct observations is to reveal the institutionalizing power of the new e-government initiatives, and possibly capture some attitudes towards their international assistance.

Using such a variety of mixed methods in a multiple case study research, the difficulty is to manage this evidence in a clear, consistent and replicable way. This challenge starts with the fieldwork and could directly impact the findings. The following section will discuss in more detail how this problem was addressed in this study.

5.4   THE FIELDWORK STRATEGY

Two are the main expected challenges during the fieldwork: The first is accessing the case study documents and the individuals. The second is distinguishing between genuine and 'politically correct' responses. This second one could occur with high-level officials holding important positions whose busy agendas and political positions might impose a busy schedule and a certain approach to the problems. While these limitations could be recorded as institutions on their own if routinely experienced, they need to be first identified. In this context, the fieldwork strategy will make the following use of methods as listed in the diagram:
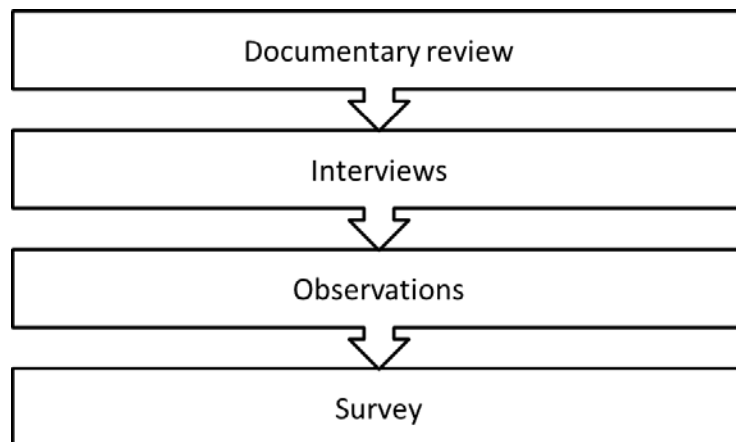
FIGURE 23: RESEARCH METHODS' RANKING ACCORDING TO THEIR USE

The fieldwork started first with the documentary review, to have a general understanding of the research problems and plan where to focus. The interviews were next, following a snowball strategy of starting with the two project agencies, and continuing with the donors and other stakeholders. The site observations that followed were intended to examine and cross-check some of the documentary review and interview outcomes. This was before the online surveys with end-users that were conducted last.

Although these methods are presented here as following each other, in practice they were often conducted at the same period of time, keeping this plan as a general guidance. How the reviewed documents, interviewed individuals, observation sites, and survey respondents were contacted and accessed, is discussed in the following sections.

5.4.1   SELECTING AND REVIEWING DOCUMENTS

The preliminary documentary review for this study started with the review of some international strategic documents and agreements that influenced the e-government assistance and reforms in Albania. One of the first such strategic documents, for and by the European Union, was the European Commission's (2002) *"e-Europe 2005 action plan: An information society for all"*. In 2002, the Stability Pact brought together Albania and the other countries from the South Eastern Europe like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro now), Macedonia, and Moldova. Together they developed the *"eSEEurope Agenda for the Development of the Information Society"* (Stability Pact 2002), a visionary document with commonly agreed goals. Albania and the other countries agreed to develop a proper environment for the Information Society for all through joined and harmonized regional co-operation. These documents gave a general understanding of the role of the state in e-government policy-making in Albania.

Another set of documents were related to the implementation level, consisting of laws, manuals, but also promotional materials, leaflets, reports, newsletters, and even newspaper articles. 74 secondary documents were carefully reviewed for the National Registration Center and 51 for the National Register of Civil Status. Many others were considered, especially related to media coverage and news articles, but due to their lower importance or connections with the two case studies were not mentioned here. The specific points to consider in the reviewed documents that define the boundaries of the case study projects are discussed in the following section 5.4. Preparing and Managing the Data. Their selection and interpretation was guided by the theory for each of the two case studies.

5.4.2   CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

The interviews started in September 2010 with the help of personal friends of the researcher working for the National Registration Center, the General Directorate of Civil Status or who knew someone else working there or for the donor organisations. The first

semi-structured interviews were conducted at this time with the two respective donor representatives for the two projects. This was very important because in June 2011 when the rest of the interviews took place, the internationally assisted projects were closed and all representatives working for them had left the country. The other interviews with government officials took place in September 2010, May-June 2011 and August-September 2011. They were made possible only through personal connections in the government agencies. However, the consistency and replicability was preserved between the two case studies. A middle manager, the director and a number of employees were interviewed in both of them, giving different perspectives on the projects from different organisational level.

Outside the National Registration Center and the General Directorate of Civil Status, interviews were conducted with respective project coordinators from the donors and representatives of implementing companies. Such interviews were initially planned with the most senior leaders of organizations to receive their view of the big picture and agree on other persons to address for interviews. According to the informal culture of the country, no interview could be planned in advance, but was arranged on the spot each day, after a number of phone calls to fix the place and time. Popping in the office and asking to speak to the related people was a normal practice which was applied successfully in many cases. However, with the representatives of donors and those of the Department of Strategy and Donor Coordination near the Council of Ministers, formal interview requests were sent and followed by these institutions.

For the first case study on the National Registration Center and the electronic business register project, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives and employees from the government, donor organisations and implementing companies. Another 3 conversations took place through emails. For the second project on the national register of the civil status, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives and employees of the government, donor organisation, and implementing companies. In this case study, a focus group was also organised with employees from two civil status local units. 5 other interviews with government officials and independent representatives from the civil society were relevant for both case studies. Their scope was the general strategic and policy making of e-government reforms, their implementation and

institutionalization in the context of international assistance. All these interviews were recorded whenever allowed by the interviewees (about 85% of the cases), transcribed and analysed through coding, as explained in the last part of this chapter.

The interviews were mainly used to clarify how the internationally assisted e-government projects developed and were institutionalized, making sense also of the evidence from other sources. Most of them were translated from Albanian by the researcher; however, a serious attempt was made to keep their sentence structure and selection of words as said, to preserve their originality even at the cost of linguistic accuracy.

5.4.3   ACCESSING OBSERVATION SITES

For the first case study, the National Registration Center for businesses, four front-offices were visited. The first was the head office in Tirana, the capital city with 726,547 inhabitants in October 2011 (INSTAT 2011), processing most of the applications in Albania. The second was the National Registration Center front-office affiliated to the Albanian Chamber of Commerce in Tirana. The two other offices were in two major cities, one in Durres with 205,849 inhabitants and the other in Elbasan with 128,232 inhabitants in October 2011 (INSTAT 2011). These are the three larger cities with more than 1/3 of the total population, and more than half of the registered business in Albania. These observations took place in May-June and August-September 2011.

During this same period 7 local Civil Status Units were visited and observed in Tirana for the second case study, 2 in Durres, and 1 in Elbasan. To have a complete observation experience, I also interacted with the front-offices of business registration and civil status. For the first, I asked in the head office front office of the National Registration Center about some registration procedures on a personal business I owned. For the second, I asked and received a family certificate in my local Civil Status Unit. While I visited these and the other sites mentioned before, I took a few pictures from outside as this was not allowed inside the premises.

These observations were important to understand the situation in the field and prepare the ground for the online surveys to end-end-users. Secondly, they helped to reflect and have a better understanding of many interview and survey responses during the analysis.

5.4.4   CONDUCTING THE SURVEYS

In this research, two pilot surveys were conducted in September 2011, one for each case study. The observations on the two projects' front offices served as a preliminary study of the survey population and environment. They had structured multiple choice questions, but also the option to give free opinions to open questions. The pilot surveys were distributed to 25,000 Albanian email addresses of businesses and citizens using an e-marketing commercial service. From this pilot survey 109 replies were received from business representatives on the first case study and 271 replies were received from citizens on the second case study.

After the pilot, changes and correction were made to the survey and a final one about both cases was distributed in September 2011 to another 75,000 Albanian e-mail addresses. 771 replies were received in this case. Some typos were corrected and some unnecessary questions were removed like, for example, the question on the price of the business registration service, or of the civil status documents, which were fixed and out of discussion.

The main change in the final survey was removing 'Other' as a an option to give open opinions to many questions. At the same time, all the multiple-choice questions that before allowed multiple selections were transformed to single-selection ones. The reason for this change was to first refine the results of the study, but also to see how respondents would react to limited options for expression in the case of quantitative methods widely used in e-government donors' reports. To finalize this goals, evaluation questions which had the three options of 'better', 'same', and 'worse', in the pilot study were limited to only 'better' and 'worse', removing the neutral choice.

A very interesting outcome of the online surveys was the large amount of direct emails received separately from them. These provided a lot of open feedback on different issues of importance for the end-users that I might have not been able to include and represent in the survey questions. Furthermore, it increased the richness of the quantitative survey responses with more qualitative opinions. The reflections on the fieldwork ad methods were written in the researcher's diary discussed next.

5.4.5   RESEARCH DIARY AND CONTACTS

A contacts list and diary were both kept during the fieldwork, as two parallel documents generated along the research. The purpose of keeping a research diary was to generate a history of the research process that would provide material for reflection, generate some data, and develop the research skills (Hughes 1996, Nadin, Cassell 2006). A contacts' list was developed along the diary, because every interaction with donor agencies or government offices involved some personal contacts. Considering both formal or informal communication as valuable for this research on institutionalized practices, the contacts' list followed the same chronological order as the diary, rather than an alphabetical or project-based order.

While a great importance was dedicated to interview contacts, reflecting on the actual process of accessing and conducting them, it was decided to include in both the diary and contacts' list some information on the 'gatekeepers' to the main sources of information with whom formal interviews were recorded.

The recording of information followed a fours step process namely preparation, contact, reflection and recording. The preparation stage simply consisted of recording a planned or previously agreed visit to an organization, meeting, or observation venue in the mobile phone calendar, together with address and contact details. The contact stage consisted of written notes taken in the field in written, using video, or audio recordings. The reflection stage was the time that elapsed until the mobile phone data was synchronized with the PC and the field notes turned into meaningful paragraphs and sentences in the electronic form of contacts' list and research diary. The content of these materials is discussed in the case studies' chapters and their comparative analysis.

5.5   PREPARING AND MANAGING THE DATA

Preparing the data is the intermediate process between fieldwork and analysis. Planning this stage means to decide how to organize the research materials so that their identification, retrieval, and classification would be easy for analysis. With the guiding theoretical framework in mind, this process should assure the replicability and validity of research for both case studies and their generalisation. To deal with these issues, a set of

guidelines was prepared, using also simple software aids as described in the following sections.

5.5.1   DATA SORTING

In the beginning it was decided to have a standard indexing format with acronyms to add to each data record before their original name that would help for easy data sorting, access and analysis. More specifically, each document file, no matter whether primary or secondary evidence, had to start with one of the acronyms from the following table referring to **'Type'**:

NR	Code	Name	Description
1.	**E**	External	External contribution including research from other sources but funded by project donors
2.	**I**	Interview	Interviews and personal communication including emails
3.	**L**	Legal	Legal including local, EU and some directives on legislation
4.	**M**	Manual	Manuals and trainings including project materials and educational syllabus for education programmes
5.	**N**	News	News media including websites and other forms of digital one-way communication tools
6.	**O**	Observation	Observation including photos, field notes, memos, field videos
7.	**Q**	Questionnaire	A survey questionnaire managed either via email or face-to-face
8.	**R**	Report	Reports of different forms produced either by the parties directly involved in the projects, not external
9.	**S**	Strategy	Strategic document including organizational charts, project agreements and some diagrams

FIGURE 24: DATA SORTING TABLE

The table had to undergo many changes and revisions during the sorting and analysis process, to provide an inclusive and representative list of document categories, neither very long and detailed, nor too short and general. The acronyms are listed alphabetically. Another option could have been to list them based on the theoretical and methodological framework of this study presented in Chapters Three and Four. This predetermined generalization however, could have biased the perception of data, not allowing a fresh

view during their analysis and possible generalisations. Furthermore it wouldn't have been compatible with the general alphabetical ranking rule in most computer data storage systems.

Initially the two case-studies were kept separately to facilitate their cross-case analysis at a later stage yet being able to identify which data material was related to each project, the following sorting acronyms were included in the file names to categorize the **'Project'**:

> B – Electronic system of business registration
> C – National register of civil status

In the file name this was immediately followed by the 'Date' as YYYYMMDD, using 0 whenever the information was not available. The year-month-day number format allows easy chronological sorting in the computer that would not recognize the date included the file name for sorting purposes, but considers it as a number. This was the date of the document, whenever this was mentioned in it, even when it consisted only of the year, in which case the month and day were added as 0 for consistency purposes. Whenever the document had no date in it, this was the time when the document was last modified. To summarize, a typical name for an evidence file would be for example:
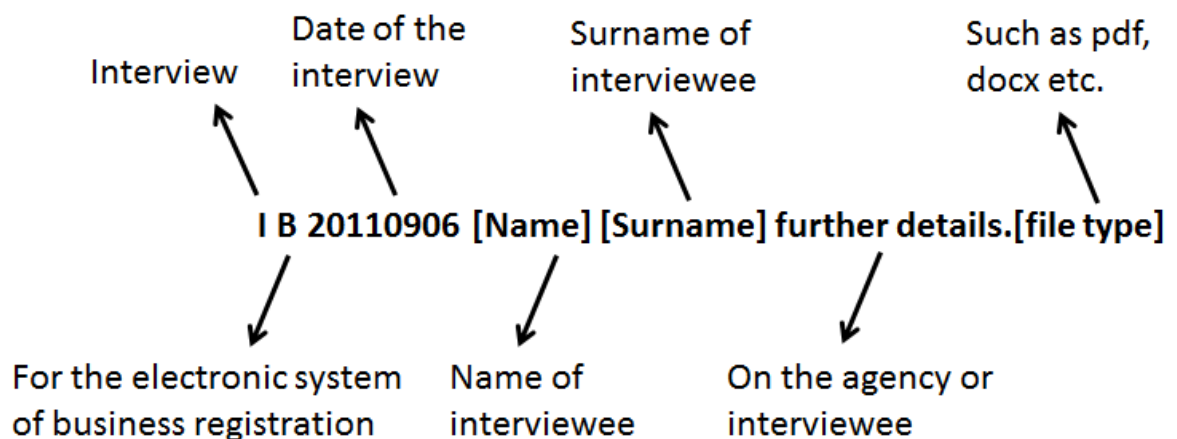
FIGURE 25: RESEARCH EVIDENCE SORTING MODEL

All the discussion in this section was about information embedded into the names of the research evidence files. On the other hand, a few reflections and comments were included in the transcriptions in italics, adding the date and time when they were made. Most of

these comments were later embedded in the research analysis and discussion in the following chapters. To keep track and manage the multitude of research evidence from different sources and methods, some computer aids were used, as described in the following section.

5.5.2   RESEARCH SOFTWARE AND COMPUTER AIDS

The use of software and computer aids in research is very important when faced with a large amount of different types of data and materials. However, the software is not what guided the study, but the research question and the conceptual framework discussed earlier in Chapters Three and Four. Their purpose is to facilitate data management and analysis, but also to contribute towards the research replicability by framing it through specific software, and not only through conceptual systems. Provided a high level of critical reflection and awareness on the impact of computer aids is applied in the study, they could be powerful tools for the research analysis and its validity on the following levels.

The data management software for this mainly qualitative study is ATLAS.ti, versions 6.2 and 7. The choice followed a careful review of different well known qualitative software packages. Furthermore, Lewins and Silver have written a number of working papers (2006, 2009) and a book (2007) that to guide the process of selecting a software package. However, a decision was made only after attending a conference for this purpose, organised by by the Surrey University Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Networking Project (CAQDAS). ATLAS.ti was considered to have a better, bigger and more customizable working space with more drag-and-drop functions compared to NVivo and Max QDA. Furthermore, the quantity of data in this research was not that large compared to the amount required by QDA Miner to be used in full. Among these major options, ATLAS.ti appeared to offer the best solution not only because it is a light and fast functional software, also because of its unique features in survey auto-processing and native PDF files' support, both important functions required in this research.

Doing a literature review and collecting data started with searching for information online. This is a two-fold process, with one side focussed on the data, and the other focused on the tools to actually search. In this context, regardless of the possible bias Google could have in its results, the choice of this one as the default search engine becomes obvious

considering the level of the other choices such as Yahoo or Bing. However, as a day without a search engine is becoming unimaginable, online searching remains not only more enjoyable (Chen, Jeon & Kim 2010), but also more useful in collecting the research data in this study. On the other hand ATLAS.ti was used also for the analysis of some literature review sources. An example of this was given already in the section following the introduction of Chapter Three.

For the survey on the other hand, Google Forms, Survey Monkeys, Qualtrics or Kwik Surveys were the considered options. Even in this case, Google Forms distributed through a Gmail account specifically created for this purpose gained priority over the other options because of its already accepted reliability and familiarity for the researcher and potential respondents.

The use of hardware electronic aids on the other hand consisted first of all of a personal laptop computer where all software packages, online tools and data were hosted, processed and analysed. An audio recorder for audio primary data was chosen based on online reviews considering its compatibility with the computer and ATLAS.ti file format requirements. Finally, a simple point-and-shoot camera of satisfactory quality was used for taking pictures and record short videos during observations.

This was planned to be an exploratory study with mainly qualitative data, however, to deal with a reasonable amount of quantitative data, Microsoft Excel or SPSS give more than satisfactory, generally accepted, solutions for projects of such scale. The review and selection of all these packages was based on online reviews from users, followed by practical trials of open-source packages or demo versions.

5.6   ANALYSING AND REPORTING

The final part of this methodological chapter should be about analysing and reporting, as implied in many books on research methods (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009, Creswell 2009, Yin 2009, Bryman 2012). This process generally refers to a conceptual framework extended over the data by selecting important information that would help the researcher to deal with their complexity, retrieval and analysis (Miles, Huberman 1994: 55-57). The analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the survey questionnaire and

observations is also considered in this part. The following sections explain how coding is related interpretation and reporting in this study.

5.6.1   VISUALISING FOR INTERPRETATION

Mapping and visualising ideas and concepts is the first step of interpreting the evidence in this research. For this it was decided to use conceptual maps organised in visual diagrams. As suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), this method can help the interpretivist analysis and its theoretical conceptualisation.

Commonly used software such as Microsoft Power Point, Word or Draw can help to start building conceptual maps and diagrams that help thinking. For more complicated diagrams, a large variety of commercial and open-source mind mapping tools were also considered, such as XMind, MindGenius, FreeMind, VYM (View Your Mind), Compendium, VUE (Visualize Understanding Environment), MindJet, C-Map, and many others, which basically do the same thing: help organising ideas. However, they all need the qualitative input from the user to draw the conceptual maps, but are good to brainstorm and summarize ideas at any stage of research.

There are also a number of online resources such as IBM Many Eyes or word tag mapping tools that could visualise, and summarize text or numbers into an analytical-friendly format. However, they can't be used for this research because in all those cases the data would be public, something not allowed by the ethical statement and research principles. Therefore, such needs would have to be filled within the capabilities of the computer based software packages already mentioned here. In this context, ATLAT.ti network views offered a satisfactory option applied in this research. An example of how coded data could appear in the ATLAS.ti network view for further interpretation and conceptualisation is given in the following picture:
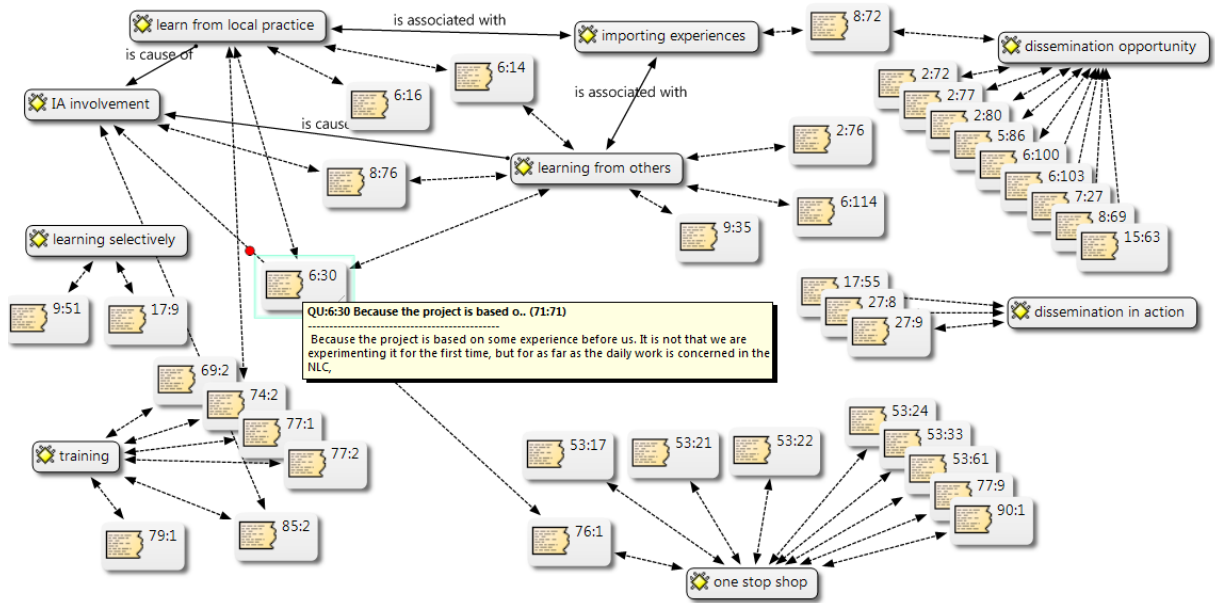
FIGURE 26: A NETWORK VIEW OF THE 'LEARNING' SUB-UNIT OF ANALYSIS (1ST CASE STUDY)

This figure shows a network map of codes, their logical relationships and quotations around the main concept of 'learning' for the first case on the electronic register of business registration. Such networks were built from coding around every sub-unit of analysis, following the research strategy explained earlier in this chapter, and each constituting the sub-chapters of the three following chapters. Their purpose was to help the analysis by having a visual representation of concepts, relationships, and research evidence from quotations.

From an interpretivist perspective and a neoinstitutionalist approach, it would be wrong to assume that any of the software and computer aids used to manage such network views could and would have performed any interpretation. However, if used with care and accounted for their possible bias in the research, they can be a powerful help in dealing with complex and multiple data types. However, the construction of frameworks, ideas and conclusions remains a task for the researcher, and coding discussed in the research strategy part earlier, is the primary element of this process.

5.6.2   REPORTING

Reporting a multiple case study research like this one requires a high degree of rigor and detail. The theoretical and methodological framework discussed previously at the end of

Chapter Three and Four will serve as the backbone of the following three chapters structured according to the following diagram:
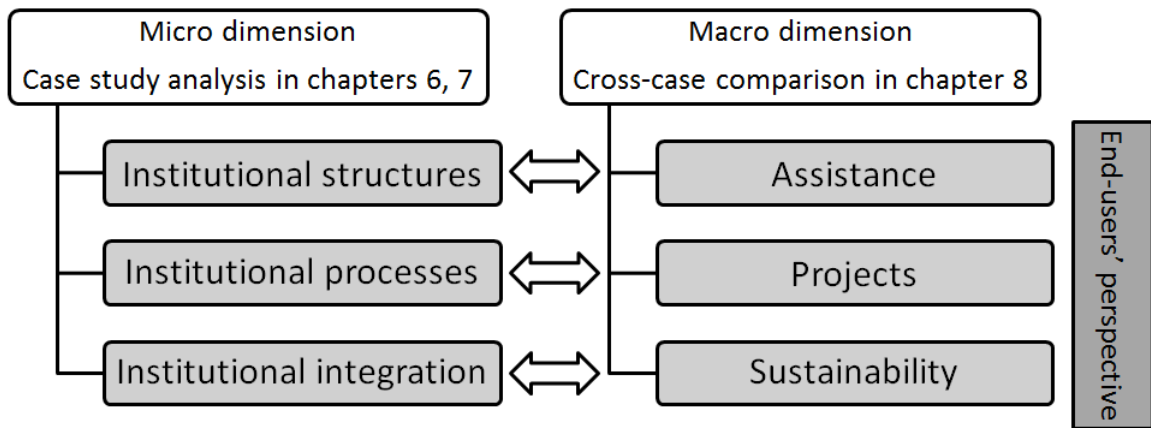
FIGURE 27: THE REPORTING STRUCTURE OF EMPIRICAL CHAPTERS

At the same time, this reporting structure follows the research strategy discussed in the beginning of this chapter. An addition to these earlier discussions here is the end-users' perspective to be considered along with the interpretivist stance of the researcher in Chapter Eight. The reason for considering different views and perspectives is to preserve a good level of critical analysis and triangulation of interpretations. To avoid making this interpretivist study descriptive, it is necessary to take a critical approach in its analysis and reporting (Walsham 2005). To achieve this, the narrative in the following chapters will let the data and evidence speak more than the researcher, identifying also conflicts and contradictions for discussion.

Again, this reporting structure was not predefined, but emerged naturally during the analysis of the data. These subchapter categories and their parts were the result of much iteration during the coding and analysis process. This reporting framework is introduced here, only because it is related to the research design, serving as a guiding map for the following sections.

While institutionalization is about isomorphism and conformity, the originality of this research depends on the 'inexplicable' by the theory, so the reporting format should allow adequate space to discuss such cases. To have consistency and at the same time preserve the original value of the study, the review of the manuscript will go through much

iteration. Such attempts will include among others reviews by peers, presentations to academic audiences and publications to referred journals of related materials.

To summarize, reporting on the research includes the internal visualisation of the research material for reflection while working with it and the external presentation of the study to third parties. Both activities are a combination of perceptual and actual visualisation where the link between the world, the researcher, and the reader from an interpretivist perspective is created through rich description and pictures. In this case, the flow and presentation of information is expected to bring to a common sense these three possibly different realities, thus making the choice of visualising tools an important final decision in this part. Because of the involvement of third parties in this process, a critical review of institutionalized visualisation and presentation formats is required to help an efficient, rich, and undistorted transmission.

5.7 CONCLUSIONS

Managing and analysing a big and complex amount of data in a multiple case study research like this one on international e-government assistance is not easy. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter was to provide some structure for collecting and analysing the research evidence based on the theoretical and methodological implications discussed earlier, to answer the research question.

The research strategy is based on an activity-based parallel case study approach. This means that both case study projects for this research were studied at the same time, following a rolling replicability of the fieldwork and analysis. This was justified by the fact that the two projects were developed at the same time so their study should have followed the same trend. The coding strategy for this critical interpretivist study was first based on some institutional definitions and concepts suggested by Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008). However, the coding themes and networks of inter-related ideas were developed along the research as complementary or new concepts emerged as important. This was a very interactive process of going back and forth between the theory, methodology, and the research evidence.

This study is based on documentary review, semi-structured interviews, surveys, and on-site observations as the main methods of research. Reports, international agreements on e-government projects, legal framework, and other documents will be considered as secondary data. A number of visits in Albania of around three weeks each were planned for conducting the primary research. Multiple interviews, meetings, and observations are expected to build a relationship with government officials, representatives of international organizations and stakeholders. This fulfils the requirement of multiple case study research for triangulation and consideration of different methods for gathering rich information. Finding conflicting evidence using multiple research methods can be challenging, but at the same time will contribute towards a critical discussion and better analysis.

To manage mixed methods effectively, the fieldwork research requires a good degree of preparation for a complex case study environment. The informal context of a developing country like Albania, on the other hand, requires a high degree of flexibility and contingency management by the researcher on the site. Some research software and computer aids will be used for storing and managing the research evidence, but their use will be only instrumental. The analysis, discussion, and reporting will be done in full by the critical interpretivist researcher. This is a two stage process of first coding and then visualising research concepts for interpretation and further discussions. A clear and critical approach at this level demands a careful review and going through many reviews.

The outcome of the processes explained here follows in the next empirical chapters. Their structure is the structure of coding that emerged in the analysis. The institutional structures, processes, and integration in the context of assistance, projects, and sustainability will be all critically discussed following their different sub-units of analysis.

6   THE ELECTRONIC SYSTEM OF BUSINESS REGISTRATION

6.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about the first case study: the electronic system of business registration and the project creating the National Registration Center. After an introduction on the post-communist Albania, its structure is based institutional structures, processes and integration, informed by the theoretical and methodological framework of this study (Figures 13 and 14). What is presented here is the critical analysis of the research evidence collected from several sources with different research methods, and according to the coding process explained in the previous chapter.

6.1.1   POST-COMMUNISM AND THE SPIRIT OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

After about 50 years of communist isolation, Albania emerged as a market economy in the beginning of the 90s. The interpretations in this introduction are those of the author who lived among the changes and reforms from communism to present times. The slogan *"We want Albania like all Europe!"* used by the students that led the protests against the communist system, expresses the country's vision towards international integration. To achieve this goal, new structures had to be developed or invented along with new governance models. A brief analysis from USAID's report, the international donor agency that made possible the assistance for the business registration reforms analysed in this chapter, summarizes the situation as follows:

> *"Since its communist regime collapsed in 1991, Albania has withstood many tests, including a descent into near-anarchy in the late 1990s. Yet the country has made unmistakable advances toward the consolidation of a free market democracy and moved decisively in the direction of integration with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)."*

This evaluation of Albania presented by one of the donor organisations in this case study is not always positive. From the same document and source, the paragraph continues as follows:

"Even with NATO and EU membership on the horizon though, Albania confronts acute challenges to democratic governance and market reforms -- ranging from an inefficient, corrupt public administration, to serious weakness in the rule of law -- challenges that hinder development and may affect Albania's Euro-Atlantic prospects."

In order to better understand this statement from an international donor and partner, it is necessary to explain four conditions that shaped the post-communist developments in Albania, based on the perception, understanding, and experience of the researcher in this study.

Lack of market economy experiences: The post-communist governing elite was born, educated and shaped in the communist party, irrespective of apparent surface changes in a multi-party system. For example, Fatos Nano, a former communist party leader was the leader of the Socialist Party, the newly reformed communist Labour Party of Albania from its creation in early 90s until 2006. Sali Berisha on the other hand, a former doctor in the communist party elite medical clinic remains the absolute leader of the Democratic Party currently in power. In an individual level, many market economy practices were adapted through the reformed education system, emigration experiences, and international partnerships in Albania. However, putting newly acquired experiences and skills in practice for a young graduated workforce or young entrepreneurs was difficult for two reasons: The first was the continuous brain-drain process, where the most qualified, experienced, or entrepreneurial human capital looked for opportunities elsewhere and left the country. The second was the dominant control of post-communist elites in certain political and business positions, who could undermine free market competitiveness in the areas they still controlled. The generally accepted solution in this case was to look for, and accept, international assistance and partnerships as a source of advanced knowledge, experience, and most importantly financial support for a vision of global integration. The fluctuations between manipulation and appropriation of international norms (Elbasani 2004) in this context remain clear indicators of a country still in transition.

Selective adaptation of Western practices: Once (during communism) considered as the worst enemies of proletariat and society, the United Kingdom, United States of America,

Germany, or the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization suddenly became and remain the role-models in Albania (Gallup Balkan Monitor 2010). This quick paradigm shift in perception, but yet very slow in cultural adaptation and every-day practices, had multiple effects not only in Albania, but in the whole post-communist Eastern Europe. Informality and family bonds still persist as established values due to a strong blend of informal cultural norms, and embedded communist work practices. Accustomed to work as much as they can and take as much as they want (when available) during communism, many adapted the vision of a western free market environment based on the limited local business knowledge, often misunderstanding it as an environment with no norms and rules. The positive light of economic benefits under which Western countries were seen outshined their problems, hard work, and rule of law in a democratic society, being locally adopted into informal corruptive practices which flourished in the absence of a strong legal system, bringing fast economic benefits to some.

Call for radical change: The post-communist democratic revolution in Albania between 1991 and 1997 was followed by a number of radical legal and institutional reforms (Luarasi 1997). During these early stages many things related to the communist system were suddenly seen as bad and exactly the opposite was often automatically accepted as the best alternative to follow. The worst of all in this process was the wrong perception that unlike communism, democracy meant a society without rules and law enforcement, or worse, one where everyone could create his or her own rules while the official ones were still being revised during the transition. At a higher level, selective applications of inconsistent or inexistent laws found one of their first applications when many ex-communist party members were sentenced and imprisoned, soon after the regime change. Then, the rage towards the past didn't spare even factories and state companies in working conditions which were not business efficient in their current status, destroying them down simply because they were built and 'belonged to the past'. When simple changes in organization structures and production processes could have turned them into profitable enterprises, the radical route of starting everything anew was adopted. Two factors fuelled this approach: The first was the cheerful support from the Western market economies for the political changes. The second was the overoptimistic belief that after the recent communist aftermath, everything could only be better and easier. This rejection of past and

the created gap that couldn't be filled so quickly with a reinvented new future stimulated even more the spiral of looking for increasingly quicker solutions.

Expectations of quick developments: The eye-opening experience that Albania was not the 'flourished garden' that the communist regime had made people believe in their long lasting isolation, was shocking in the beginning. The immediate reaction from the people was a strong urge to catch up with time and development. Some of the remaining communist leaders made a failed attempt to slow this process down before being completely taken down from power, but trust had already been lost, and so had people's patience. The result was a hectic and daring search for quick solutions often labelled as 'the therapy of shock' from ethnographic studies of the country (De Waal 2005: 4). Crowds of people force-entering western countries' embassies in Albania, taking cargo ships to travel to Italy, or going to Greece and other European countries as illegal emigrants are only some of the examples of out-flowing human capital in the 1992-1996 period and beyond. In the country the spirit of capitalism and entrepreneurship was equalized to risk taking abilities rather than to any other business or professional skill. The result was normal families investing all their savings into a number of pyramid scheme companies that flourished in 1996 and collapsed badly in 1997 together with the government of that time. Until then, these families were living without having to work, but only with the interests. Lessons were learned by the individuals, but the dictatorial communist norm that 'governments shouldn't be questioned' could not be completely shaken for a better and more transparent public accountability of leadership.

A number of lessons about post-communist need for stabilisation were learned from countries like Albania (Åslund et al. 1996); however, none of them is related to international e-government assistance. Local radio and television channels, mobile phones, broadband internet solutions, and increasingly better information technology infrastructure are growing fast in Albania, so their institutionalizing role on policies and reforms cannot be ignored. Their initial development was adopted slowly, but they had an immediate impact on public transparency, accountability, and the establishment of a new culture of debate and discussion. After 2000 the government became more aware not only of the demand for information and communication technologies, but also of their potential for more efficient public services including business registration.

6.1.2   BUSINESS REGISTRATION PAST AND PRESENT IN ALBANIA

Business registration has been a time consuming and expensive process in Albania since the creation of market economy in 1991. The system was based on a legal process in the courts that involved multiple visits to government offices. Businesses had to appoint lawyers and public notaries as legal representatives to prepare incorporation documents and follow the court registration procedures. Once business registration was approved and filed in the court, the business could start to operate, but had a limited time to register with the Central Tax Authority, local authorities, Work Inspectorate, chambers of commerce, Institute of Social and Health Insurance, or any other office regarding additional business licenses and permits. The new electronic system of business registration and the new National Registration Center centralised the application for most of these services in one agency. This e-government solution was promoted by the government and the donor as imported best practices to increase transparency as explained in the project report by Millennium Challenge Corporation funded by USAID:

> *"In moving toward e-government solutions, Albania is following the example of governments throughout Europe and the world. E-government systems offer time and cost savings to government and private users while increasing transparency, accountability, reliability, and access."*

The previous system of business registration was slow and costly, with a high level of informality to by-pass bureaucratic procedures, and to a certain extent save a lot of time by paying something more. This was an important problem the new system was trying to solve, as an executive director in the National Registration Center explains:

> *"They were used for 17 years in a row with their way of doing things, with money under table, with connections, with "Please, pass it man because this is my friend, my cousin!" etc., [...] born by a laid-backness, laziness and need to accommodate the need of a friend, although it was not very lawful."*

The same source adds right after this that *"This stopped immediately with the creation of the National Registration Center"* the one-stop-shop agency where businesses could register electronically within 24 hours. Certainly the creation of the centre had an

important impact on the business environment in Albania, not only for local companies, but also for foreign investors. This change tends to be proudly reflected on the donor's report following the conclusions of the project to create the National Registration Center as follows:

> *"Two years ago, business registration was an expensive, time-consuming process that involved multiple court petitions and trips to government offices. Today, registration requires only one application, processed within 24 hours at a cost of about one U.S. dollar."* (USAID 2008)

Beyond the success story this project represents, was this change really as easy as expressed here, or there is still an on-going discourse between old and new norms and practices? More important, how did this change took place, and how are the new norms and practices being institutionalized? The following sections look in much more detail at institutional structure, processes, and integration related to the new system of electronic business registration.

To give a clear account, it is important to distinguish two stages during the life cycle the electronic system of business registration in Albania: The Project Stage follows the initiation, planning, executing, control and closing processes (Project Management Institute 2009:19), characterised by a strong involvement of the international donor until the system was handed-over to the government. The Institutional Stage, starting with the project, and lasting indefinitely after it. The discussion is about how some initially embedded project practices persist and how some others change or disappear in the e-government environment. Both stages are taken into account in each of the following sections informed by the theoretical framework of this study (Figures 13 and 14) to give an in-depth picture of how internationally assisted e-government institutions develop.

6.2   INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

The goal of this first section is to give an overview of how different institutional structures were developed and operate. The analysis is based on the conceptual framework of this study discussed in Chapters Three and Four and on the research strategy and coding for the sub-units of analysis discussed in Chapter Five. The source of evidence consisted of

interviews with directors, managers and strategic representatives, but also of a number of strategic documents, laws, regulations, or donor reports. This information is later contrasted with end-users perspectives from the survey conducted after the interviews. The structural framework discussed in this section is necessary to introduce the project and prepare the background for discussing processes and integration later. The analysis starts with the strategy, discussed in the next section.

6.2.1   STRATEGY

The need for a new business registration system in Albania was first articulated in the government programmes of 2005 and 2009. More specifically its purpose was summarized in the Cross Cutting Strategy on Information Society 2008 - 2013 as follows:

> *"Business registration is now achieved at the national Center for the registration of Business and considerable improvement has been made regarding the time of business registration reducing it from 42 days to 1 day. This center started its activity in September 2007 by offering:*
>
> *1. "One-stop-shop" solutions for business registration*
>
> *2. Electronic registration*
>
> *3. Electronic Commercial Register*
>
> *4. Potential registration across Albania (on-going)*
>
> *5. Fulfilment of international standards for business registration*
>
> *6. Many benefits and assistance for businesses."*

A representative of the National Agency of Information Society, who has been involved since the beginning with the strategy-making process, explains the ideology behind the creation of the centre as follows:

> *"The creation of NRC originates in the objectives set in the business strategy, because when we talk about information society, this is something horizontal. The information and communication technology is like a floor based on which all the other sectors are built and developed to change the way of offering the services, the way of behaving in governance and finally which helps towards increased transparency, increased efficiency."*

Defining the strategic goals, as well as a strategy-making process, was not carried out only by the Albanian government, but with support from international organizations. The United Nations Agency for Development, together with Open Society Foundation and the involvement of two other organizations, allocated a budget of $317,654 to design the National ICT Strategy in Albania during 2002-2003 (UNDP Europe and CIS 2011). This was the first and most important step towards e-government developments, where clear goals were set about the development of IT infrastructure and policy changes.

The first National ICT Strategy set the pattern of co-operation between international partners and government authorities in this sector (Kromidha, Córdoba-Pachon 2010). This norm persisted also with the creation of NRC with assistance from the U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID) and Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). They were part of the strategic decision to create NRC as a separate agency where business registration had to change from a legal to an administrative process. The strategic goals from the government were to make the business registration process faster, more efficient and less costly, as well as the country more attractive for foreign investments. Furthermore, as a representative of the Donor Coordination Agency for the government explains, it is important for such projects to become self-sustainable:

> *"We often have cases as the example of NRC or other institutions which are created with the support of donors. It is evident that it accounts in one of the objectives and predictions that after the project is over, to be self-sustainable. "*

The donors' priorities on the other hand focused on handling the problem of corruption in public administration structures, which obviously was more of a problem for foreign investors than for Albanian companies created and already operating within the system. Strategic consensus and alignment of goals was not difficult in this case, as in essence they were not contradicting each other. Strategic structures could be built, strategic change could take place, and the co-operation between the government and international partners was used strategically towards an initially sceptical public. Furthermore, international partners provided the funding for the new system, the IT infrastructure, refurbishment of the building, its equipment, furniture, staff trainings, communication, and marketing campaigns, so in other words, the project was managed by them. This was clearly a very good opportunity for the government, especially in the case of strategically important and

successful projects like NRC, as a representative of the Council of Ministers explains in an interview:

> "*NRC including NLC, the Procurement Agency is the initiatives on which the government has been very highly regarded internationally. They are major as initiatives, and truly they are the best projects because they are not simply projects that lost time and lost some funds. Here we have achieved to make a difference even in the region by creating these institutions. So they are major priorities. The political will can't be put into dispute in this case, whoever comes in the government.*"

When the business registration project was designed, the government took care of the strategic supervision of deadlines, also making sure the necessary legal changes passed smoothly through the parliament and other state structures. Building the system was the first strategic priority and the donors helped at this stage with vision, project management, and funding. Then the system was handed over to the government. This was the real test whether the strategic decisions about the system taken between the government and the donor would be accepted by the users. An important aspect of this institutionalization is related to normative forces (DiMaggio, Powell 1983) such as regulations and laws, but also to a bottom-up demand from the business users themselves. The following section touches upon this issue.

6.2.2   LAWS AND REGULATIONS

The legal changes for the new system of business registration in Albania followed the identification of strategic objectives and the agreement for international assistance from USAID and MCC. Once the decision was made to turn business registration into an administrative process away from the courts and have a separate agency for this, a group of Albanian lawyers and specialist was hired by the donor with the agreement of the government. One of these lawyers during the interview explains this process as follows:

> "*The Institute for Contemporary Studies in one hand created a team to look at macro aspects, economic analysis, political choices etc., etc., and we were attached as legal consultants regarding specific problems and technical solutions for the new project.*"

Their main task was to conduct research with interest groups, and design the new law for the National Registration Center. Another separate group was also created to suggest changes that had to be made to existing laws, to be consistent with the new NRC. Both groups were coordinated by the project manager appointed by the donor agency. The same source as before explains that it is USAID's policy to outsource important tasks to more than one actor, but the first was the most important one, concluding as follows about the successful legal coordination at this planning stage:

> *"A comparison was also made with Albanian problems, so we made a real study to come up with the law. To my opinion, this has been the reason why it worked, because a tailor made study was made for Albania."*

There is a rise in local experts in the legal areas wanting to take ownership of specific issues they feel confident about now. This institutional discourse between external influences, and an already experienced and mature critical generation of local specialists, would not have occurred a few years ago in Albania. International assistance on the other hand is shifting its focus towards higher levels of governance, policy making and project coordination. The two institutional forces are brought together by higher legal obligations and regulations that the country has to fulfil like, for example, in the context of the European Union. A representative of the Information and Communication Technology Ministry explains the role of such directives in this process:

> *"All these reforms, a great part of them, are directives of European Union. Every step taken by the Albanian government is part of integration process with the European Union. So every directive there is being translated as an Albanian law and implemented. This is also part of it. They have had their effect."*

However, certain scepticism still exists in the country towards the adaptation of such directives in Albania. This is how a lawyer working for the creation of NRC explains this situation:

> *"Many laws in Albania are made based on foreign consultants' models, where he brings his country's model, because that is what he knows and it is approved. It could be very developed in terms of EU principles, but it doesn't work."*

On an operational level, legal and regulatory problems started to emerge when the NRC was opened and started to offer its services. Some of the reasons were users asking for services they were entitled to, but which the system could not perform from the beginning or needed manual intervention like, for example, the joining or split of companies. The new Law Nr. 9901 date 14.04.2008 *"On Traders and Commercial Companies"*, for example, followed the Law Nr. 9723 date 03.05.2007 *"On the creation of the National Registration Center"*. The two laws were not fully consistent about the division, transfer of ownership procedures. While the first law on commercial companies would entitle businesses to certain registration services, the information system designed according to the initial NRC law would not be ready to handle them.

Assistance for this project was over at this point in time, so the government had to handle the problem of legal adjustment or system upgrade on its own. This new responsibility to take legal and operational decisions by the government only when the system was handed over was not handled easily. Because of conflicting forces within its structures, one of the sharpest discourses remains the clarification of functions NRC should or should not perform. Here is one example or how this problem is explained by a legal business representative:

> *"The NRC's public servant has some judicial training, but often they make comments based only on one law and forget the other part of the laws. So if you start checking in detail the application, you need to consider all the laws, it is not up to you to select which law to apply. The most important thing is that they don't have this competence, so they have overcome their competences, formally."*

The conflict here is the position of NRC to continuously standardize procedures, and interpret the laws according to its single perspective, seeking for efficiency and legitimacy. These practices, however, were qualified as irregular by legal and other business representatives who look at it as practice carried forward from the bad old system, something NRC was supposed to completely abolish with its very creation. Certain practices have persisted and a reason could be that there are a number of specialists in NRC, including here the Head of Registration who used to work in the court where businesses were registered previously. Whether it is more beneficial or not to import such

an institutional knowledge, together with its risk of undermining the very purpose of the centre, remains a good debate question. The current situation shows that a number of routines have been established, and a number of institutions are emerging as a result of this debate and discourse. To understand this process better, it is necessary to look at how the system was developed and evolves.

6.2.3   SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT

Once the new law for NRC was in the right track, the most important and difficult part was building the electronic system and embedding in it all the legal elements and regulations mentioned in the previous section. Representatives from the legal experts' group and the outsourcing company that designed the software confirm that they worked closely with each other on this. A lawyer involved in this process explains as follows:

> *"We have worked parallel. Parallel to our group that was dealing with the legal side, there was the group of ITs that were involved with the systems' design. How to say, the system itself is designed parallel with the law. We have had a lot, almost every 2-3 days we had meetings with ITs and we discussed, we drafted some part of the law, sent it to ITs to look at it, to understand how they could implement it. They asked questions, wanted clarifications, and we have discussed the workflow of the system in details. "*

Most of the experts working on both sides were Albanian. Their consultation meetings and communication were closely monitored by the donor and the government. The focus was on the replacement of the old system with a new one, embedding the legal changes into the electronic system. Its functions were designed and implemented in accordance with the purpose of the agency, to serve as a one-stop-shop for business registration. To make this happen, clear roles had to be defined for different actors. The government had to make sure legal changes were smooth and well-coordinated within the time schedule. Lawyers who designed the law and certain regulations had to explain it, and translated it into simplified requirements for the IT experts.

IKubInfo, the local software company involved with the project worked together with two foreign partners from USA, Chemonics and Alfa XP who helped with the technology, but

it designed the system's workflow itself, together with the lawyers. This was a learning process for all parties while the donor maintained its control through careful management of funds and supervision of project deliverables. However, with time, local authorities started to develop their independence on the system, as a registrar working for the National Licensing Center created after the NRC by the same donor, USAID, explains:

> *"If there will be, let's say, in the future little problems regarding the electronic system, USAID's presence is not necessary because they are small details which an agency in Albania can solve without any problem."*

As the system started to operate or as new changes were introduced, emerging problems had to be dealt with locally. In the beginning, problems were related to unclear processes and practice. Most of them were clarified early through testing of the system, consultations, legal interpretations, and standardisation of procedures. A persistent problem remains the limited ability of NRC to meet the high demand for information from users on its website. One of the representatives of IKubInfo, the Albanian company that made and maintains the system, explains:

> *"NRC's portal started with 80 requests per day and now there are times when there are 3-4 thousand requests per day, and we had to increase the capacity a lot."*

Some business records are public and should be available on the NRC's website. The problem with the system not being able to handle the high quantity of demands and traffic in this case is financial. The international assistance on this project is over now and the current revenue model of NRC charging 100 LEK (around 0.6 GBP) for every transaction is sustainable only to cover its operating costs, but not to allow many developments on the system, including expanding the website traffic capacity. There are some ideas to increase service fees to allow a self-generated stream of income from NRC itself to allow its information system's development. This, however, remains more a political issue, difficult because of the dissatisfaction it could create among businesses and finally voters. Possible solutions to provide sustainable resources and management for the development of the system are related to NRC, the newly created agency itself, discussed in the following section.

6.2.4   AGENCY AND LEADERSHIP

The National Registration Center was designed since the beginning to be a separate agency depending on the Ministry of Economy to carry out the new administrative process of business registration in Albania. The new law regulating its purpose and activity and the system that was developed, equipped NRC to start having a life of its own. Gaining legitimacy was not an easy process, considering the degree of change this centre was expected to bring, such as reducing business registration time, costs, and especially the corruption level and informality embedded in the old system. The strategic decision was made to appoint as the head of NRC someone who had a long business and managerial experience abroad, specifically in USA, as he explains when he compares the service in both countries:

> *"Because this process, called one-stop-shop is so automated electronically and with so many legal obligations, necessarily you have to do it like this according to the law, it does not exist, I am telling you, based on my personal experience in United States of America, it is slower there."*

He was familiar with the changes the new agency was trying to implement, and most importantly detached from the informality and personal networks operating within the old system in Albania. Not surprisingly, to assure a good relationship with the government and the donor at the early stages, the appointed General Director who is originally an Albanian citizen came from United States, the country from where the assistance for this project came through USAID.

Trying to legitimate the centre and its new services, the General Director and leadership of NRC had to face two conflicting interests: On one side there were the foreign experiences and best practices the one-stop-shop centre was trying to mimic, while on the other there were limitations in local capabilities, finances, and adaptation of change. The autocratic management approach and top-down efficiency-based decisions could achieve some quick results. This approach was intended by the government that gave a certain independence and full support to the centre and its leadership about business registration, as the Director explains about his appointment:

"Fortunately, the minister of economy of that time, Genc Ruli who nominated me, was a very smart man. He told me openly "Mr, you will not have any intervention by me in your work". Such a vision from him, I came from the United States of America. I had been here only for 4 months when I accepted this work and I came from America for this job. Besides everything that he is a smart man, he brought someone who didn't know anyone in Albania. I don't care if you, accounting expert are my friend or cousin because I don't know you at all."

The political support was important for NRC's legitimacy to pass the message that things have changed. However, the legal framework, the system, its staff, and leadership were hardly perfect from the beginning. Local managers were hired in leading positions from the previous registration system at the courts to bring-in their knowledge. The new local staff had to be trained. The NRC law set the foundations for its management and operations, but the leadership of the Centre and its General Director had to accept the need for consultation meetings and a more democratic management when it came to problem solving. For this they took a contingency approach as the head of registration explains:

"So, at different times different problems come up. We, during these three years have been working on different things. The first, when first the law on commercial companies came out, the whole law is taken point by point. In endless meetings with all the staff the specific procedures in extreme detail have been specified of every point of the law."

The contingency management approach that naturally evolved from conflicts between internal and external forces in NRC, suggested to the leadership that standardising procedures and legal interpretations through consultations could be the solution. Jointly accepted practices, once agreed by the majority of stakeholders and embedded into rules, laws and the system, would institutionalise the agency and its functions. This consultation process could be extended externally also to end-users, to address the issue of services NRC was supposed to offer without passing its competences, as a lawyer summarizes below:

"In terms of documents, if a check had to be made, I would prefer to be made by the court. The project in itself wanted to remove this completely. Specifically one of

the points in the project was to reduce at minimum the human intervention, so they can have an automated process."

The problem here is the same as with the old system, the involvement of humans in checking the documents, and the potential this has to bring back corruption and informality. The very purpose of NRC was to reduce this through automation, monitoring, and controlling through the electronic system. Nevertheless, an increase in human resources has been asked since the beginning to meet the demand from an increasing number of businesses. As a solution, recently the government is planning to introduce electronic signatures that would allow more online transactions for businesses and their representatives to be done by intermediaries at a distance.

The main constrains NRC as a newly created agency faces are related to the level of detachment it wants to achieve from the past, and the resources needed to do so. However, the new electronic system can be considered successfully institutionalized, and this is a good start for NRC. Users, who initially resisted, also recognised the benefits of its services, as it will be explained in the following section.

6.2.5   SERVICE

The service offered by the National Centre of Registration was based on the one-stop-shop idea. Rather than having to go in each government agency to register for tax, national insurance, or licensing purposes, each business could now come to the new centre, present their documents, and receive the registration certificate within one day. The documents were scanned from originals and their electronic copies were sent to respective other agencies by NRC itself, as specified in the law. The objective was to offer a standard service with the help of an information system, according to the legal requirements. However, this process went through much iteration since the opening of the centre, to achieve its current institutionalized status. The director of the centre calls it a *"trial and error"* process:

"This is called a trial and error. You make an effort, see a problem, fix it here, see that is fine, go further to fix something else, maybe it will be wrong, change the

method, it comes out well. Until you can achieve, I would say, until near perfection. This period has been like this."

Standardisation and centralisation of services played the most important part in this process. This focus is first of all evident in NRC's attempt to simplify legal interpretations, and embed them into manuals for its employees who could in turn apply them easily. Two manuals were designed with the staff of NRC to simplify their work:

1. The steps an application follows in the service windows of NRC
2. The phases for considering a case in the registration unit in NRC

Both documents are very concise and consist of easy-to-follow steps for the officers. This policy should have standardized the supply of the service, but also the demand requirements from the public getting used to it. A number of trainings were carried out for the staff for this purpose, and the front-desk officers were the ones who were expected to be actively involved in educating the public about the new services.

The core of standardization process, however, was the register's unit in the back-office, where every business case was passed by the front-desk and checked by specialists before taking a decision. The debate mentioned earlier, whether they had the right to judge on the documents submitted or not, made NRC to centralize this process inside the head office. This was similar to a bank, as a representative of IKubInfo, the company that made the system explains:

> *"The system was centralised. NRC was created with the idea of an electronic system in mind. It is like a bank. You go to withdraw money from a bank, and wherever is the branch of that bank, it needs to connect to the centre to see if there is money in your account. NRC also had this in mind. Regardless of where the branches were, it was opened with 10-12 branches, everything was in the centre. So the front desk officers were all over, but the registrars, were in the centre, those that took the decisions."*

By doing so, the goal was to control it closely and make sure the service was as standardized as possible. The electronic system was also centralized, as both the information technology departments and the serves were all in the head offices. Both

simplification and centralization were planned to have a direct impact on the increased efficiency of the system, both in terms of the 24 hours' time policy for responses specified by law to speed-up business registration processes, and the symbolic 100 LEK (around 0.6 GBP) cost for businesses for every transaction.

However, not all procedures and services were standardized in all NRC front-offices. Especially in the beginning, many procedures were unclear or uncovered by the law. Most of them emerged from practice, based on complaints from the clients or front-desk officers. NRC was proactive to address them and provide standardized solutions. On the other hand, there were continuous problems with staff trainings, as the director of NRC explains:

> *"But as I mentioned, addressing all the different needs or different problems that might be in the law, or needs for improvement and development of the system etc. etc., or the need for additional staff, trainings of staff etc. etc., these, of course require their own time."*

Not only time, but communication was also an important issue, between NRC's head office and the other offices affiliated to city halls or chambers of commerce in different cities. Furthermore, mistakes in processing cases could have negative consequences. A business representative and user of NRC makes the following statement on this issue:

> *"Not seldom it happens that many mistakes are made by the employees dealing with the extract or entry of business data. These mistakes are fatal; they could lead to fines... for which later no employee takes responsibility."*

The lack of accountability problem mentioned here has a negative impact on the institutionalization and trust of the news services. The result could be resistance to adapt the new rules, going back to continuously trying with old practices of informality and corruption, to overcome such problems. These problems remain related to human interactions and the related capability of NRC to offer its services. The 24 hour policy does not allow NRC to accept more cases than it could process, because of limited registrars to check the cases.

In times of increased demand flows from businesses, the centre had to reject applications, or come up with excuses that the electronic system was down. This practice created a lot of

discomfort for businesses who could be penalized for not being able to finalize a transaction on time. At the same time, it spread a sense of distrust that the new electronic system in place was not reliable, when in fact the problem was the limited service capacity. More on the institutional processes that shaped the business registration system in this context and the adaptation of its services is explained in the following section.

6.3   INSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES

Until now, the focus has been on the electronic business registration reform and its institutional structures. This section focusses on institutional processes that happen along the institutional structures discussed earlier. Change, conflict, communication, and learning are the themes and sub-chapters of analysis in this section, emerging from the coding and analysis. Each part here considers the project and post-project stages related to the design, implementation and institutionalization of the internationally assisted business registration reform in Albania.

6.3.1   CHANGE

Changes in the business registration system in Albania started based on needs. Just to give an example, a business lawyer involved with the creation of NRC summarizes as follows:

> *"The need emerged because to register a business in Albania it took about 30 days at the court, approximately another 30 days at the tax authority, some other days, on average 10-15 days in the City Hall, Chamber of Commerce, Employment Office, Social Insurance, so, I don't want to mention numbers, don't take it exactly, but it was very long, with many costs, and didn't justify it."*

There are many such statements giving some historical background by positioning both old and new system parallel to each other, to highlight better the benefits of the latter, and the negative aspects of the former. These ideas gained legitimacy by being embedded into the government programmes and national strategies on e-government and ICTs after 2002, the time of e-European (European Commission 2002) and e-South-East European initiatives (Stability Pact 2002). The tipping point for this reform was reached only in 2006 when the government of Albania signed an agreement with Millennium Challenge Corporation and

United States Agency for International Development. These two donor organisations from the United States of America were going to financially and technically support a complete reform in public services for businesses in Albania. The first step of this change was the National Registration Center.

The detachment from the past is a key aspect when considering how business registration changed from a legal process in the courts, into an administrative one in the newly created NRC. Nothing shows this better than this statement from one of the donor representatives and managers of the project:

> *"None wants to go back to the old way of doing things, if the new way works better!"*

The process of detachment from the past, and that of replacing the past with a new system, is expected to happen simultaneously in the case of NRC and business registration. However, some old institutions and structures continue to persist in registration processes even now. End-users still see the shadow of old unfair practices, and the daily press does not miss the chance to highlight these issues, like for example in the following passage taken from an article titled *"Business 'lashes' government":*

> *"The Albanian business thinks that corruption is one of the main factors that impede their development. [...] the indicators of war against corruption and informal economy are not to be praised as much as the Prime Minister pretends. On the contrary, other sources with evident credibility and integrity indicate that corruption is a phenomenon that continues to be one of the main factors that are penalizing the Albanian economy"* (Gazeta Shqip (Albanian Newspaper) 19.08.2011)

Although the passage doesn't mention the e-government and other information technology reforms, it highlights that the problems are first with the system and second with the credibility of information from government sources about success. Remembering the past seems to take place often in the light of present and future developments.

The internationally assisted strategy of the new business registration process started to gain acceptance with legal changes. Meanwhile, as the system was being developed, changes

were being promoted to the public through advertisement campaigns. NRC's independence as a new agency, and its visible detachment from the past, made its acceptance easier. USAID's involvement with a number of other projects to modernize the General Tax Directorate, create the National Agency for Information Society, establish the Public Procurement Agency, and later the National Licensing Center added to their credibility and acceptance of changes. The main issues, however, remain with the government as the following statement from a news release states:

> *"When the website of the National Registration Center does not work, it makes it impossible for businesses and the media to obtain information. [...] This comes at a time when Prime Minister Berisha propagates the great initiative "Albania in the Internet age".*

Observations and an online survey showed that demand recognises the positive changes, but in general still tolerates the level of unreliability of the system. Resistance to change in this case appears more as a tolerance to not change. Old practices are very clearly described in interviews, observations, documents, or survey. Although they are often presented under a negative light, the fact that they are remembered so clearly shows that some of them potentially persist, becoming an obstacle for the new reform. The following statement from an interview with one of NRC's directors shows these tensions in the early stages of project:

> *"We faced an unprecedented resistance from the interest groups, especially the lawyers and accounting experts. They tried with complaints to ministers, prime ministers, vice ministers..."*

Such conflicts are not visible anymore now after 4 years, considering NRC's generally accepted success and its already established practices. However, the fact that some interest groups, like those related to non-profit organisations, could escape from being included in the system, creates fractures in the system by doubting its full legitimacy and implementation. One of the project managers explain the situation with non-profit organisations and their resistance to change as follows:

"We faced a lot of pressure from these groups, including international organisations that were operating as non-profit organisations in Albania. Therefore, it was decided to leave outside the activity of NRC non-profit organisations, which had to follow the court route and then register with the Tax Office. They were not included in the activity of NRC and it was ok so, as the first objective of the centre was related to businesses"

What is interesting here is that it was a number of international organisations as well operating in Albania, promoting rule of law, democracy, and anti-corruption measures that resisted being part of this system that was supposed to tackle these exact problems, undermining the project's legitimacy against the principles they advertise. Resistance to change in this case was more about rejecting the level of control from the government of Albania towards these international sources of funding. Being not for profit and similar to the ones that funded the business registration project itself, their inclusion in NRC's activity was seen of no great importance by the government. The businesses, however, might have not agreed to this double standard. This could create doubts about the motives of the system, and result on only surface change acceptance in some cases. Some of these persisting problems are summarised by a critical daily newspaper as follows:

"Business registration procedures have remained disturbed, where delays and corruption are the norm, creating different obstacles without any reason" (SOT Newspaper 2008)

This opinion, however, is not typical. The survey conducted for this research shows a positive attitude and acceptance level from the users who are generally much happier with the new services. However, resisting forces including this quotation emerge in different forms and for different reasons, especially political ones. Intentionally created problems are added to naturally emerging implementation and operational problems. Their impact and how they are handled is discussed in the following section.

6.3.2   CONFLICT

The first set of problems with the National Registration Center and its electronic register was related to what the system was supposed and then designed to solve. Conflicts

between different stakeholders during the planning stage were predicted; therefore the donor supervised this process closely being in charge of the project management. The government of Albania supervised the initiation and planning stages closely but passively, trusting the donor and its appointed experts with the legal framework, the system, and the agency premises. It is possible to say with confidence that there was no resistance or conflict with any of the stakeholder groups at these earlier strategic stages.

The conflict of interests between the old system and the new one became more evident once the project was completed and the NRC started to operate. Functional conflicts were related to how the new system worked in comparison with the old one. Regarding the technology, most of the problems were handled swiftly and efficiently, as long as there was a clear idea of what caused a problem or system failure, and as long as there was funding for such operations. The more serious conflicts were related to the operational design of services, and the institutional changes they introduced which had to be adapted by both NRC employees and users. One of front-desk officers summarizes these confusing or problematic situations as follows:

> *"Although you could be willing to help, you can't, because you are at the bottom. Some stages are necessary to achieve the end result or to help people. [...] Meanwhile you have problems and you are told 'It is not approved yet', 'There is some technical problem' or 'I don't have an answer yet'. For the subject this is stress, because it created problems for his work."*

It is clear that there is willingness to help and find solutions from the front desk officer, as there is an already established degree of patience from the users to accept such situations by taking the stress on themselves. The new electronic registration system, however, has introduces a number of new procedures, rigid steps and bureaucracy that technology makes sure is followed with very limited tolerance.

Blaming the IT system, even when it is working fine, rather than its very operational design, appears to be the short-term way out of the problem, used by both the officer and users, although not happily. Clearly the workflow embedded into the information system and a number of standard procedures to be followed have their own limitations.

Power conflicts on the other hand were related to who was going to control the new system as it will be discussed also in the institutional integration part in this chapter. The impact was caused by the move from the courts to NRC as a new agency, changing from a legal to an administrative process. Obviously in this case, business lawyers opposed the most. The problem was the authoritarian style applied by NRC considered here as on overuse of the power given by the government and legitimacy offered by the donor. The result was the conflict with certain interest groups. Especially lawyers up to date fail to see NRC as a partner, but more as a source of potential conflict to be careful in dealing with.

However, in the end, businesses and lawyers accept NRC's authority not to lose time and money in courts, although they do not take its self-attributed power for granted, nor do they embed its norms as fully valid. This is shown in the following statement by a business lawyer:

> *"NRC [...] does a subjective evaluation of the act [...] something which is not among its competences, but which at the end of the day it happens and there is nothing you can do. [...] I mean you have what to do because you can complain in the court etc., start a procedure, but for economic reasons the businesses have the tendency to accept to do those changes simply to get done."* (Business lawyer)

The donor played an important intermediary and supervisory role in this process. After all, the system was able to deliver the expected positive solutions, which in turn helped with the reconciliation of conflicting stakeholders and forces. More specifically, as reported by the donor, the government, but also by the users in different surveys, corruption and bureaucracy were reduced with the new system. However, some problems were more deeply embedded in the Albanian informal society which didn't change much.

The patterns and institutions found embedded in the culture are influenced by the project, but at the same time have a great impact on it. Because of this, it is still early to notice complete results from the electronic business registration system. How conflicts and problems are handled on the other hand will influence how the system is used, improved, and finally institutionalised. These iterations are explained further through the discussion of communication and learning in the following two sections.

6.3.3   COMMUNICATION

Communication is deeply related to conflict and problem handing discussed in the previous section. A key role in this context is played by the international assistance as an intermediary and initiator of the electronic business registration project. It was USAID and MCC that brought together the government of Albania, Chemonics and IKubInfo for the IT system, consultants, lawyers, accountants, businesses, civil society and other international organisations to design, build, and contribute to the system.

The communication strategy was initially envisaged by the donor-government co-operation agreement, a document strongly influenced by the former who provided the funding for the project. This agreed strategy was discussed in private between the government and the donor and only a very limited amount of this communication was accessible for this research. However, the interviews with two project managers and some involved lawyers demonstrated that the donor coordinated many communication channels between the local stakeholders. One of USAID's top project managers describes this process as follows:

> *"We used a change management approach with working groups whenever we could, taking on problems one at a time and trying to get user buyer-in in the institutions as soon and as much as possible. We also involved civil society groups in monitoring and advocacy in order to increase public awareness and exert pressure on the government to implement the reforms."*

Both top-down communication techniques on high-level decisions and bottom-up consultation meetings were used by the donor and the government. When the project was handed over to the government, the donor supervised it for one more year, but afterwards the agency and government was in charge. What shaped communication at this later stage was the legal framework and already established inter-organisational relations during the project stage. On the users' level, public communication played an important role as described by one of NRC's managers:

> *"The awareness is there. The media for me is the first that gave the news that NRC is operating this way. From this point, regardless of the communication leaflets,*

our front-desk officers have had endless meetings on how to raise awareness on the subjects."

The public relations and communications strategy was based on publicity through media channels, but also personal contacts with front-desk officers. Internal communication in NRC on the other hand was regulated by standardised communication protocols and manuals between front-desk and register's unit. Many of them were embedded into NRC's IT system itself through policies such as the 24 hours reply time to registration requests for example.

Most of the misunderstanding and communication problems between NRC and certain interest groups form the end-users that still persist today, emerged after the donors' assistance project ended. At this point NRC tried to impose its unilateral approach to problems. For the new locally managed agency and its leadership, to gain their own legitimacy, more top-down communication from NRC replaced consultation meetings. The Centre's management felt it had the experience to make certain decisions, and now had also the power to demonstrate this leadership. This approach created a climate where communication and discourse was not taking place anymore. This in turn undermined further developments, their acceptance, and strengthened unilateral positions by sacrificing the unity of the system as a whole. A lawyer describes unilateral decisions taken by NRC's leadership as follows:

"There are also the arbitrary decision, the 'imperial' decision that [name omitted, referring to the Director] takes"

NRC's director mentioned in this previous statement on the other hand describes the communication conflict as follows:

"So the communication has been from the beginning tense, with a lot of complaints from these interest groups, but which, when they noticed that there is no other way, and the intervention didn't work in the general directorate of NRC, together with the other directors I have here, they wanted or not, they made it according to the law."

The problem now is that this distant behaviour is already institutionalized to the extent that NRC's invitations to these groups for consultation meetings do not receive any response anymore. Nevertheless, they go on with their plan as described by one of NRC's executives:

> *"...before two-three months I made such a request, about discussing ideas for many changes that we want to apply to the law, either corrections of existing articles or additions to the articles, and not only to the organic law of NRC, but also of the law of commercial companies and the law of tax procedures, because these are the three main laws we work with. I have sent calls and requests to the Chamber of Lawyers: no answer. We have the changes, we have sent them to the ministry, the answer is taken and I will continue to bring them to the parliament because these are the needs of the business"*

Apparently the lawyers don't trust NRC's good will to listen to them; however, an informal communication channel is kept open between conflicting parties who have to work together. Lawyers that assisted the creation of NRC from the beginning continue to operate with it. Besides their formal activities, they know personally some of the managers and executives of NRC and even meet with them informally to discuss different issues.

People on the other hand do not file formal complaint, but they would rather raise their voice in public, in the local media, with each other, or even in the front-desk premises. These institutionalized communication practices combine the elements of the new electronic system with those of the local informal culture and personal relationships. Its sustainability seems to be assured not by the dominating power of specific stakeholders, but by their ability for reconciliation.

6.3.4   LEARNING

The learning process that followed the creation of the National Registration Center from the beginning is interesting and dynamic. First of all, its core idea of a one-stop-shop enriched the Albanian language with this English expression as a successful best practice and solution, adapted from other countries. The donor organisations of the project, USAID and MCC, describe this in their project report as follows:

"A number of governments worldwide have established fast, inexpensive, and easy business registration procedures in an effort to increase business start-ups and investment. Albania opted for the 'one-stop shop' concept for business registration as the best available approach, given the state of technology in Albania at the time."

However, no specific other country was taken as a direct example to be replicated in the case of electronic business registration in Albania. Instead, the donor and the government set up a team of experts who could analyse lessons learned from different best practices of one-stop-shop business registration systems, import, and adapt them to local needs. This is how one of these experts, a lawyer, explains this process in an interview:

"We did also a comparison of best regional and global examples, how best performance is considered based on Doing Business, and how is the regional best performance considered. What is the international best practice and what is the regional one. A comparison was also made with Albanian problems, so we made a real study to come up with the law. "

The donor gave ownership to the local experts on the deliverables of the project, and this is considered as a success here, however, there is little evidence of the donor giving ownership of the project coordination and funding to local authorities. This could have been a strategic decision of control by the donor, to make sure everything was coordinated according to their plan. However, there was little learning from the Albanian authorities on management skills for such projects. The fact that the Electronic Procurement Agency, National Agency of Information Society, National Licensing Center, and the other following projects that were part of the same Millennium Challenge Threshold programme were also managed by the donor, demonstrates this clearly.

A different learning stage, this time based on practice, started for NRC after the project was handed over to the government. The legal framework and the trainings to the staff provided by the donor were certainly not sufficient to deal with all unpredictable situations at work, once the Centre started operating. Front-desk officers and registrars identified cases when a higher-level coordination was needed. NRC's management itself learned from such bottom-up information and they had to be proactive, developing contingency

management plans and integrated change. As a result, local practices were embedded into information guidelines for the public, manuals for NRC, and even legal or strategic changes in higher levels. Interestingly this process of learning by experience is documented by the donor and not NRC in its bimonthly newsletters of May-June 2008 as follows:

> *"In May, the National Registration Center (NRC) held a project-supported advanced training for its staff to reinforce knowledge of business registration laws and regulations, as well as work through various case studies that are open to interpretation. The training also dealt with the impact of the new company law and the tax procedure law, combined with role-play simulations using the current NRC business registration system."*

This passage speaks for itself about the learning process and the role of the trainings to disseminate knowledge. It continues by explaining also how agreed-upon practices were standardised and institutionalized into manuals for further learning as follows:

> *"All issues discussed at this training will be presented in a standard operating procedures manual, which will include solutions for the various case studies. The manual can serve as reference material that NRC staff can consult as questions arise."*

The bimonthly newsletters prepared by the donor where these quotations were taken from were a good reflexive tool for learning and dissemination, but they ended with the project. NRC or the government of Albania did not continue them. Standard and institutionalized procedures have increased in number, being documented into manuals, laws, and information system procedures. However, the institutionalization process of learning discourse that took place to develop them is shrinking. As a result, the gained institutional knowledge remains concentrated on a few executives and people, rather than embedded in the electronic system for example. One of the people working in NRC explains the recent situation, four years after the centre was launched, as follows:

> *"When we work with meetings, with discussions like this, also the work is of a higher quality and I am able to serve the citizen and the business subjects better, it*

is better. This has been left in shadow, to a certain extent. Until a year, a year and a half ago it has been; now it has been neglected."

The learning process happening in consultation meetings is not practiced so often because many procedures and problems have been clarified, or are judged not to need further discussions. Further development and learning is sacrificed in this case for the sake of stability, and to give time to the newly embedded norms and rules to become institutionalized. On the other hand, there is no funding for large scale IT developments for NRC at the moment, considering its current budgeting strategy. Therefore, the reinforcement of the existing norms and institutionalized practices is also a financially sound solution.

Interestingly however, the technological solutions given in the case of NRC have been the source of learning and further developments for other agencies. The National Licensing Center created two years later by the same donor's programme uses a similar one-stop-shop idea of documents' submission, checking and registration. Its director explains the dissemination of technology from NRC in this case as follows:

"Initially, this kind of technology was first experimented with the National Registration Center of Businesses here, and we took their experience. Because they were opened two years ago, we took an almost ready experience. So the system was formed alike the one of the NRC."

It was also the same information technology company, IkubInfo, which developed both systems. One of their executives explains their own learning process as follows:

"We are talking here about the spring of 2007 and September then, when NRC was operational, with some problems, but it was operational. We learned and built it at the same time. When two years later we started to build NLC, the situation was completely different, because we had accumulated 2 years of experience and now, when I mentioned that we make optimisation interventions in NRC, many solutions that we have given to issues with the licenses, we take them and implement them back in NRC."

Learning in terms of information technology appears like a cycle of internal experiences, forward dissemination, and reverse improvements to the first systems. This is an important finding in the context of related projects, suggesting better learning from each other when they are part of the same system or programme. When these related projects happen in parallel, they can benefit in this direction right away, even before the project learning outcomes are documented. The implementing agency, the donor, or the IT company in this case play a crucial role when these lessons are learned, but not yet documented, being able to use learning and experience as a source of power and legitimacy for themselves.

In terms of the sustainability of the system, the focus remains on local practices and adjustments. Even if this means delaying some of the foreign practices and advanced lessons, it is justified to allow enough time for absorption, institutionalization, and integration.

6.4   INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRATION

The NRC project set-up was orchestrated under the supervision of the donor. Inter-organisational relations were functional to the project stages and the nature of actors. During the initiation stage, the government of Albania and the donor, Millennium Challenge Corporation and USAID, decided on the need for assistance. Possible solutions were looked at, and formalizing such negotiations into a formal agreement between the two states, USA and Albania. Among other things, this agreement describes the coordination of project parties as follows:

> *"USAID will oversee implementation of the Albania Threshold Program on behalf of MCC. Implementers within the Government of Albania include the General Directorate of Taxation, the Office of the Prime Minister, Parliament, and the Ministry of Finance."*

From this initiation stage, more resources and actors were involved with the project and post-project reform. The institutional integration of actors, processes, and forces operating at these two stages is going to be discussed in this part, starting with the administrative network.

6.4.1   THE ADMINISTRATIVE NETWORK

USAID and MCC took the lead in the business registration reform and project. From this point, a project management network was created and then followed by an administrative network of actors. The donor appointed the Institute for Contemporary Studies to research the current situation in the country, as one of the persons who worked with the group describes in an interview:

> *"So the first study was the preparation of a policy paper for the different options of the reform. This policy paper was presented to USAID and then to the government. It was approved as a viable solution for the reform and the second part of the contract followed, on the implementation of policies specified in this paper."*

This process of legal coordination between the government, the donor and policy-making stakeholders is described by the director of the National Licensing Center, part of the same donor programme following NRC and using the same platform:

> *"This work group proposed it, made them ready, while the laws passed in the parliament and the Decision of the Council of Ministers was approved in the Council of Ministers. So the work group prepared the suggestion. As I mentioned, in the work group there were representatives from the ministries and some lawyers from a project. I am not sure what its name was. I believe these were lawyers financed by USAID."*

Chemonics was appointed to design the IT system initially but later it subcontracted Alfa-XP and IKubInfo, the Albanian software company which actually did the system and maintains it currently. One of the project managers working for Millennium Challenge Corporation describes the intense involvement of the donor in coordinating different groups and organizations in the project as follows:

> No technical expertise to build the system. Chemonics Alpha-XP USA and then the part of Alpha-XP which started to operate in Albania became IKubInfo, the company maintaining now the system. No legal expertise, so two teams were created, one to design the law on business registration, the other to amend other

laws. Fierce discussion between the two groups needed international coordination. (This statement is paraphrased from notes as recording was not allowed).

The use of foreign expertise was justified by the lack of local skills in managing large projects, especially in the area of e-government where the local expertise was not sufficient. The network of actors required a strong-handed leadership, preferably the party providing the funding, to smooth all possible disagreements, and avoid any conflict or delay. Indeed, following this strategy, there were only minor problems and the project progressed smoothly, it was delivered on time and performed from the first day according to the specifications.

After the project was handed over to the government, the inter-organisational relationships of NRC were regulated by law. The law is cited by both NRC and businesses representatives as described before, but each of them gives its own interpretation. Now the centre is fully managed locally, and has become the central hub exercising its power not only on its users, but also on other parallel institutions and organisations. In one of the official presentations issued by NRC describing the project, the goal of the agency is described as follows:

> *"NRC is the only institution responsible for the registration of businesses in Albania. It serves as a one-stop-shop front-desk where all business registration processes are performed, including also registration for tax purposes at a national and local (city hall) level, health and social insurance and the Labour Inspectorate."*

Although NRC serves as a one-stop-shop for the tax, employment or local authorities, it is not replacing these agencies. Beyond the registration process, businesses will have to contact them separately as NRC explains in one of its informative leaflets:

> *"NRC will inform the tax administration, social and health insurances, as well as the Work Inspectorate about the registration of your business. It will inform also the city hall where the head office of your business is. All registered businesses will continue to communicate directly with these authorities for issues concerning obligations towards each of them."*

In some cases like, for example, between NRC and the National Licensing Center, Electronic Procurement Agency, or Taxation Directorate, the same donors, USAID and MCC, supported their electronic system under the same programme as NRC. Because they share many common features, integration and communication between them is easy as they were planned together from the beginning, as parts of the same reform. The donor that funded all these projects embedded similar elements in the structures and procedures of all assisted organizations. However, the systems are not merged, although they communicate well with each other, as the director of National Licensing Center explains, for example, about their relationship with NRC:

> *"We have a function that we receive data from NRC when we need, but is simply exchange of information; it is not that the systems are merged."*

At the same time there is a separation between front-desk and registration decision-making, with time limits to reply for each of them to preserve the work-flow, or automatic approval in the case of no reply. The engagement of NRC with IKubInfo maintaining the system on the other hand is described by one of the managers in the centre as a clearly contractual one:

> *"Regarding the institutional relationship, we have a contract with them for maintenance and development. Until now it has functioned normally. Every problem forwarded, either technical problem or some development, has been forwarded, has taken X time to be programmed and is implemented."*

While the contract regulates the formal relationship for the system's maintenance, further developments remain subject to case-by-case negotiations, and require separate financial resources which are limited after the donor's assistance, as mentioned before. NRC's services are centralized, so the coordination of branches in other cities or affiliated to other organizations is controlled by the head offices, as explained in a NRC leaflet:

> *"It functions based on an integrated electronic system of data that makes possible the connection between all service front-desks with the central head office of NRC in Tirana. This institution offers services and covers 100% of all territory in the Republic of Albania. There are 29 front-desks in districts near city halls and*

municipalities and in two Chambers of Commerce (in Tirana and Durres), 31 branches in total."

Applications are received in all these branches, but decisions for the business registration are taken in the head offices. The employees of NRC working in the City Halls and Chambers of Commerce affiliated offices have a dual administrative dependency. Conflicts in these inter-organisational relationships have been kept under control by the supervision NRC exercises towards these agents, either through the system, or its final decision making power. Communication at different levels also remains a problem with this institutional integration as a business representative explains:

"It is necessary to have more co-operations between local and central authorities".

To expand its administrative network of influence and actors, NRC is currently working on further relations with other institutions and organizations like, for example, public notaries and lawyers' offices who can be the intermediaries between the centre and businesses, as the director explains. Automatic connection of the system with European and international business registers is also planned, but not made possible yet.

International assistance by the donor is still thanked and presented on the walls of NRC. The users and stakeholders in Albania know how it was created, but they have embraced the centre as theirs via local practices discussed in this part, moving successfully from the project assistance to the post-project sustainable institutionalization. The procedures embedded in the information system are important here. Based on this example, Chapter Eight gives a broader picture on the role of assistance and projects to achieve sustainable institutions in public sector reforms. The institutional integration of the business registration and its network, however, is not only an administrative process, but more a political one as explained in the next section.

6.4.2   POWER AS POLITICS

No such large scale reform like the transformation of business registration processes and systems can be designed and implemented without a strong political will. A representative of the donors' coordination bureau near the Council of Ministers explains the importance of good political will for the success of such initiatives as follows:

"Here we have achieved to make a difference even in the region by creating these institutions. So they are major priorities. The political will can't be put into dispute in this case, whoever comes in the government."

The involvement of the different stakeholders beyond the donor and the government was used to shape political positions and planning decisions. The donor's report explains the following about this process:

"The rapid progress of the NRC legislation benefited from close co-operation with the minister of economy, who conducted hearings with business associations and municipal governments to include their concerns and gain their support. The resulting legislation contained several key political compromises that smoothed the way for enactment, although they reduced the scope of reform and complicated its implementation."

The shaping of political will and smoothing of power conflicts to reach a compromise was not done without a price of reduced project scope and a series of adjustments. The mechanism to accommodate such demands consisted of consultation meetings, first at higher levels between government policy makers and the donor, but later including more stakeholders from other organizations, civil society, and NRC employees as well once it was created.

While demands for yet inexistent features of the system could be planned and discussed on the consultation table, the transfer of power from the courts and other institutions required legal transformations. The head of registration in NRC, previously working with the Commercial Register at the court, explains the transfer of files as well as power from the courts to NRC as follows:

"The Commercial Register was transferred from the court on hard copy, as a material. With the entering of the law into force, the court had the obligation to transfer to NRC all hard-copy folders that kept in its archive of the Commercial Registry and the General Directorate of Taxes had the obligation to transfer all the electronic archive, of NIPTs (Personal Tax Identification Number) to NRC."

One of the project managers appointed by the donor explains that the most difficult part was taking the tax registration away from the tax authority. They didn't want to hand it over to NRC, but with support from up in the political hierarchy, the prime minister, they did. Political will was very important to get things done and support the electronic business registration reform. This power transfer was a strategic step for a new administrative and electronic system, but although most of the parties agreed on its necessity, there were a number of controversies about long term priorities embedded into national strategies as a specialist from the Donors' Coordination Bureau explains:

> *"So the governments or the one in power and the opposition should agree for more than 7 years on the main priorities in Albania and how they will be developed in the future. This is related to the political consensus, but it is very difficult."*

In the post-project stage a more cautious approach was generally adapted by users and interest groups compared to the government and the donor committed from the beginning to accept the new system because of their needs and immediate priorities. The point of concern here is the power of NRC to enforce its own interpretations of the law which in turn could risk to be used politically to favour of certain groups of interest. The following debate taken from a daily newspaper on the 1st of September 2010 between a member of parliament from the Socialist Party in opposition and the director of NRC illustrates this situation:

> *"The director of the NRC stated that the institution he leads is transparent and appeals to read documents not politically. According to the director Kola, the electronic system is impossible to manipulate and that the status of Namik Ajazi's company is suspended. The director explains that Ajazi has filed the suspension request in October 2009."*

After this first perspective of the NRC director, the article continues with the other view:

> *"The Socialist Party accused a couple of days ago that the National Registration Center by order of the minister Bregu has changed the business registration status of the company "International MIA" 50 minutes after the socialist head office made*

public some forms of this institution about minister Bregu's brother in law companies, Hector Ajazi."

The watchdog's role is played by opposition parties that monitor NRC's use for political reasons. The focal point of such power conflicts and rejection of authority remains the human element and leadership of NRC, associated with the very problem of corruption NRC offered to solve through an automated electronic system.

Regardless of conflicts of interest, fear of control, surpassing competences, or non-involvement problems, the current situation with NRC is characterised by conflict avoidance. Rather than focusing on problems and taking extreme positions, the different actors have softened their views and have come closer to each other, either as players or intermediaries. Neither the lawyers, nor the opposition parties and the non-profit organizations can deny the benefits of the system. Its acceptance and legitimacy was assured by its benefits that overall helped overcoming political conflicts.

Some are more critical than others on the existing system and political conflicts become evident in these cases, but no evidence was found during this research that some actor or group wanted to close it down, consider NRC as not successful, not legitimate or go back to the old system. The exercise of power to establish NRC was sometimes painful, but efficient and successful. The role of internationally assisted projects to institutionalise sustainable policies is discussed in Chapter Eight, compared with the other case on the National Register of Civil Status in Chapter Seven. In any case, the socio-technical integration discussed in the following section cannot be left out of this discussion.

6.4.3   SOCIO-TECHNICAL FORCES

The implementation of an advanced information technology system for business registration in Albania required and justified the international expertise in the project. However, this section will be dedicated to the user-system integration.

Starting with NRC and its internal dynamics, in the starting moment both the system and the staff employed to operate it was new, including the IT department of the centre. The company the created the system and now was responsible for its maintenance and further development, IKubInfo, was the only party that knew the system well before it started to

operate, but this company remained an outsider to its operations. In their website IKubInfo explains the contribution of the donor as follows:

> *"Millennium Challenge Corporation, funded by USAID, assisted the Government of Albania in [...] improving and automating the registration processes and building personnel capacity necessary to sustain, operate and improve the new automated information system."*

The socio-technical institutional integration of the new system took place through two elements: formal trainings and informal knowledge exchange. Formal trainings were intended to equip the user for the operational procedures in new centre. Some of this formal training was automated through tutorial videos as a manager from the company that made the system, IKubInfo, explains:

> *"When the system was handled over in 2007 it had a help module, not with a menu, but videos were prepared, for help, how is registration done, how is data entry. But this was handed over in 2008 and during this time we maintain it, the system has changed. It is not that we have progressed a lot with the pace of adapting the help or these videos, because there is some cost involved in producing these videos."*

Such technological aids didn't continue because of finished funds from the donor and the project. However, the same source mentions the importance of informal knowledge exchanges between local specialists. This made up for the lack of formal trainings and the socio-technical integration as explained below:

> *"It is not a problem, because in key positions they have people that have been from 2007, so they have what is called institutional knowledge. They have it and they share it with one-another."*

The staff in NRC became proficient with the system thanks to trainings, but also thanks to their everyday practice when they had to figure how to handle problems and systems limitations or refer them to their superiors.

The institutionalization of certain socio-technical patterns was shaped first of all during consultation meetings. The problems that emerged during operations with clients because

of the system were discussed extensively. This type of involvement made front-desk officers and registrars feel important at this stage. However, as such experiences and institutional knowledge was embedded into systems' improvements and additional standard procedures, there was less need for the staff's input.

The front desk and registration staff perceive the system as a simple tool to do their job now and feel in control of it. End-users one the other hand have a slightly different socio-technical relationship with the system. A business representative and end-user participating in the survey for this study has the following opinion on the role of technology:

> *"Every deviation from technology serves the corruption and the people connected with politics. The interest of all society is for everything to be electronic and none could be able to act against the laws. Like this the whole society would benefit and the national economy will increase. Procurement, bids and public expenditures should also have a clear electronic presentation. Today they are hidden badly and in a corruptive way. "*

Talking about the end-users, influenced by all the negative features of the past system in the courts, many embraced the use of IT in business registration as a good thing. With the passing of time they became familiarized with it. However, the institutionalization of this new technological solution didn't pass without some degree of scepticism concerning its management. The following statement by a business representative highlights this:

> *"There is no need for changes in the system itself. The management and maintenance of the system needs change."*

This end-user, like many others, recognizes the merits of the system, but remains sceptical towards the human factor in it, suggesting the following improvements for the future:

> *"The direct connection between NRC and the tax system: The transactions should be done online. The business registration is done very quickly, the closing takes years. The electronic signature should be introduced to increase the speed of transactions. Businesses should be able to take online from the premises of its work the extracts asked from NRC."*

Time and informality remain the major issues for business users of the system, and they expect information technology to offer solutions to both. The goal here should be to institutionalise positive rather than negative socio-technical interactions with the system, absorbing its benefits rather than by-passing or manipulating it.

This section explained how the socio-technical integration of internationally assisted e-government reforms happens. The specific role of donors and projects is not discussed in full here, but it will be addressed in Chapter Eight. To make this connection, evaluation discussed in the following section is important to assure a sustainable institutionalization.

6.4.4   EVALUATION

During the project stage, the donor supervising its implementation had a strong control over it and evaluated the project until it was handed over to the Government of Albania. The situation changed at this moment. The Albanian administration that managed NRC was able to generate reports from the electronic system, but it still preferred to use external sources for the public opinion. The reason that the new leadership of NRC gives for this, is the higher credibility in public of independent evaluations like the World Bank's Doing Business report.

The institutionalized authority of external evaluating reports among the leadership of NRC, but also among the users of the system was claimed to show unbiased results, detached from the political and power conflicts. Any progress evaluated and reported in this way could be used to gain political legitimacy for the centralisation of power by the agency. This is expressed very clearly by a high NRC executive, justifying the enforcement of new rules to opposing groups by using the evaluation of the World Bank as follows:

> *"The fact that they obeyed after their one-one and a half year resistance shows that it was considered acceptable because practically it is acceptable, this method that we followed. Not only this, but this is confirmed also the by the World Bank report that is issued every year."*

Institutionalized trust on evaluations and benchmarking performed by international organizations such as the World Bank is an important tool used to smooth political and power conflicts, but at the expense of not developing local control capabilities. The

strategy of NRC was based on reduced time, cost, bureaucracy and corruption. However, to gain support also from the marginal groups that presented some initial resistance it was necessary to involve them, like the actors from this civil society, for example, as one of the project directors explains:

> *"We also involved civil society groups in monitoring and advocacy in order to increase public awareness and exert pressure on the government to implement the reforms. Civil society involvement was built into the Stage II design by MCC."*

The role of civil society groups as intermediaries was important in the institutional integration of NRC, but their relevance and impact was limited because non-profit organizations wanted to be excluded from the NRC registration regime and its power. They refused its supremacy and control based on the Constitution of Albania as they state in a joint declaration:

> *"According to our judgement, every discretion concerning the registration or not of an NGO handled by the executive is incoherent with the meaning given in the Constitution of the Republic of Albania on the functioning and goal of this sector, considering the situation of continuous natural opposition that characterises the relationship between the executive power and NGOs."*

Focusing on end-users directly, USAID and MCC outsourced a number of independent evaluation studies to third organisations or research and non-profit nature. They were all quantitative, consisting of structured survey questionnaires distributed at the NRC or Tax Authority front-offices. IDRA's (2007) 'Business Needs Survey', for example, asked the top managers of 944 listed companies across Albania using random systematic sampling. In 2008 Partners Albania (2008) conducted a performance monitoring study (N=1605 companies), one year after the launch of NRC. This was the first independent evaluation on NRC and the institutionalization of its services. The result was a quick institutionalization of the new application procedures short after the centre was opened as the following chart from this survey shows:
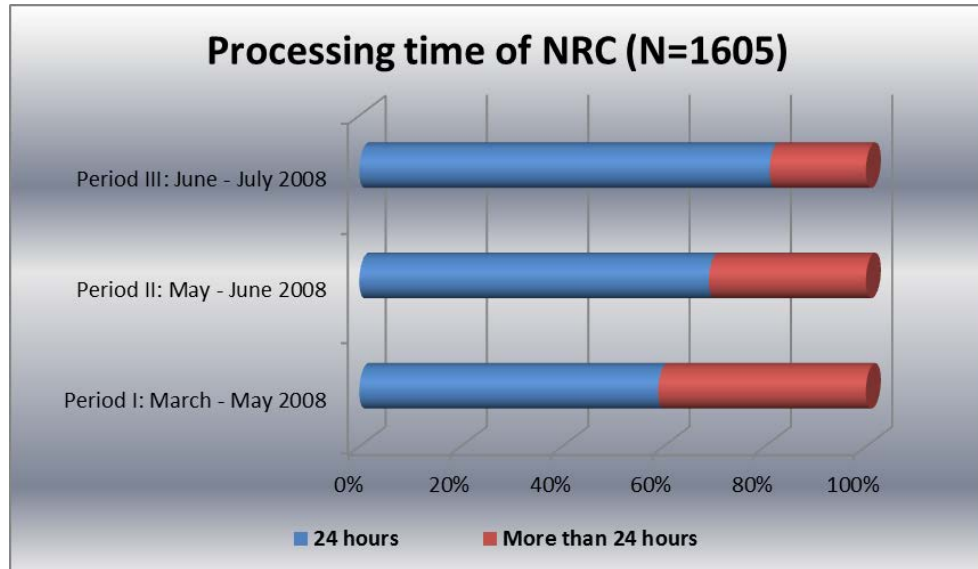
FIGURE 28: APPLICATION PROCESSING TIME IN NRC (Partners Albania 2008)

Two years later another study (N=1014 companies) was conducted by the same organisation (Partners Albania 2010), still commissioned by USAID and MCC like the previous two, although the project was handed over to the government in 2007, three year before this study. Again, the general perception on NRC and the electronic business registration system was positive as the following chart from this report shows:
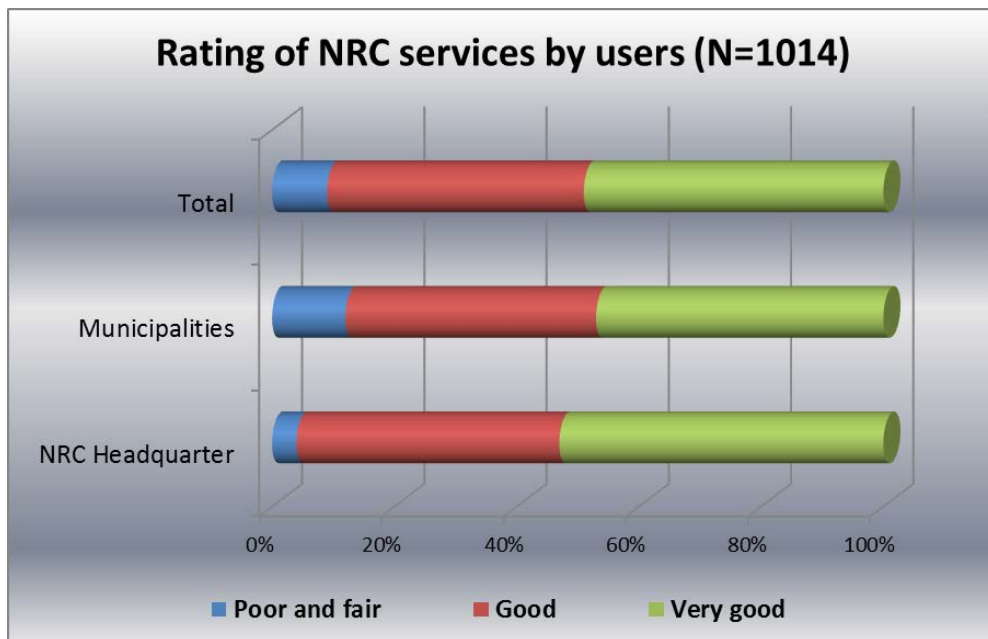
FIGURE 29: OVERALL RATING OF NRC SERVICES BY USERS (Partners Albania 2010)

A critical analysis of this chart would notice its bias towards the positive answer choices compared to the 'Poor and fair' option.

To explore and examine further the studies commissioned by the donor, an independent primary survey (N=108) was conducted online with company representatives for this study in September 2011. One of the most important questions on evaluation was: *"What do you think about the services of the new system of business registration?"* The following chart summarizes the results:
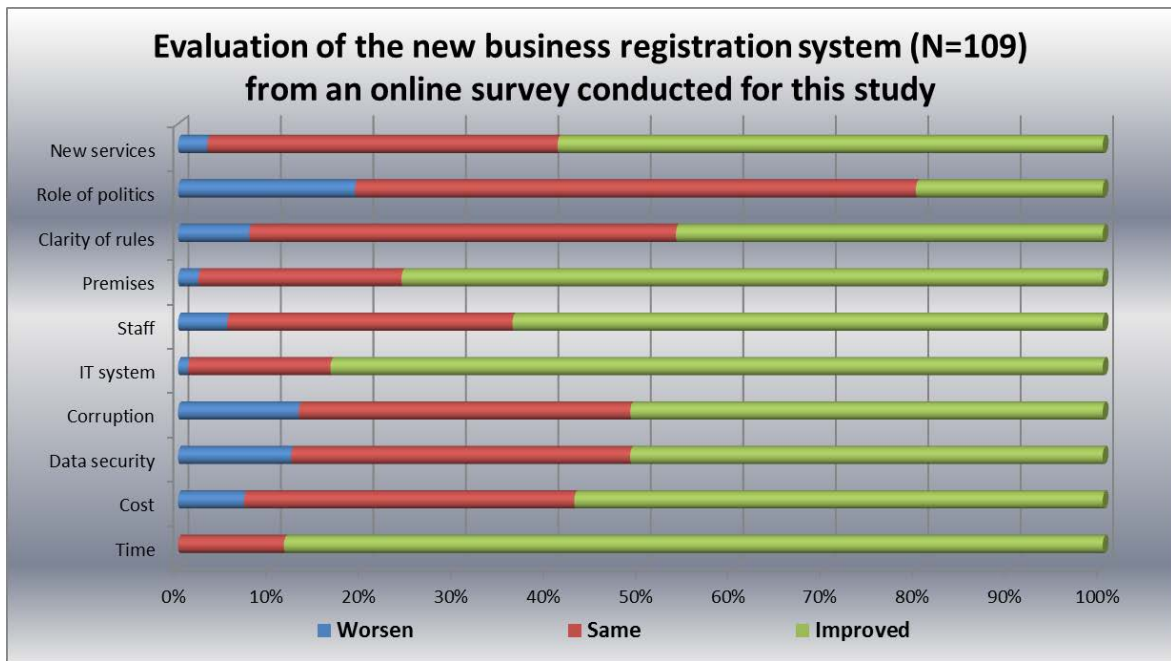
FIGURE 30: EVALUATION OF THE NEW SYSTEM OF BUSINESS REGISTRATION

The purpose of this survey was not simply to compare the findings with the previous surveys commissioned by the donors, nor to simply evaluate the quality of services. In fact, the chart intends to show which of the elements has been institutionalized better. For example, the role of politics in the process that was discussed earlier found a lot of resistance compared to the new, shorter, processing time with the new system.

This survey showed the generally positive attitude and perception towards the new electronic system of business registration in Albania. Such evaluations could help also policy makers and operational managers in the government to improve their work. Indirectly, this is a positive evaluation not only for NRC and the government, but also for the international donors: USAID and MCC. The legitimising role of the donors towards the assisted projects, and indirectly towards their indispensability, is discussed further in Chapter Eight.

The complete legitimation of e-government reforms requires not only the institutionalization of services, but also of their evaluation. Unfortunately, this important process of institutional integration has remained unorganised and spread between government records, independent studies, or international reports.

6.5 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter discussed the institutional structures, processes, and integration for the first case study project. This structure informed by the theoretical and methodological framework of this study introduced in the previous chapters, was complemented with some background information about Albania to assist a better understanding of its interpretations.

Summarising some key findings, in the beginning NRC's management kept the role of an average stakeholder assigned during the project stage by the international donor, sitting in consultation meetings and taking advice. With international assistance gone and the leadership gap left, NRC's management felt the need to take a stronger ownership of the centre's management and its further development. This inspired the newly created institutions to build some others. Some stakeholders, especially the lawyers who were involved with the previous legal system of business registration at the courts, had contributed to the legal design of the centre. Feeling themselves important parts of the system, they wanted their stake on the power gap left available by the departure of the donor. The influences of USAID and MCC were still strong enough to support the legitimacy of the centre. However, local institutional structures and forces had to take over, which they eventually did. In this case, NRC's leadership was very active to take the lead.

The transition of the project deliverables, and the change from the international donor to the government happened slowly. The influence of the donor remains high here, but takes more a supervisory and advisory role. This transition stage is where most of the conflicts and adaptation issues become evident and need to be addressed swiftly. The strategy followed by NRC and its leadership was based on centralisation of power, top-down control, and standardisation through the information technology and new regulations. This

practice resulted as successful in establishing the local identity and legitimacy of the new system in absence of the international assistance.

The institutionalization stage that follows the transition is characterized by continuous evaluation of operations and functions, modifications, adaptation of changes, and integration with other systems. International assistance can play an important role in building the institutional structures of the reform, but its institutional processes and integration depend more on the locally embedded practices. The informal communications that run through the new formal electronic system of business registration appear to be the most stable institutions in this reform. Such institutionalized practices bring together, into a dynamic system, the need for change through information technologies, and the strongly embedded norms of the Albanian culture. NRC was supposed to deal with the problem of corruption associated with personal relationships in an informal economy; however, the transition using e-government and information technologies should consider more the pace of acceptance towards such changes.

7   THE ELECTRONIC SYSTEM OF CIVIL STATUS

7.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about the second case study: the National Register of Civil Status and the reforms in the General Directorate of Civil Status. The introduction of the post-communist project environment in Albania is followed by a critical discussion of institutional structures, processes, and integration, informed by the theoretical and methodological framework of this study (Figures 13 and 14).

7.1.1   COMMUNIST AND POST-COMMUNIST CITIZENS' IDENTITY

Managing citizens' identity using e-government systems is currently a common practice in developed countries like United Kingdom (Lips, Taylor & Organ 2009). Civil status administration serving this purpose has become a cornerstone of interoperability in e-government (Otjacques, Hitzelberger & Feltz 2007), assigning personal numbers to citizens and integrating their data across systems. However, not many developing countries have been able to improve their civil registration systems in the past decades (Mahapatra et al. 2007). Now, with the help of development partners and increasing availability of information technologies, this priority has become easier to accomplish. This argument provides enough support why this study on international e-government assistance on the modernization of the National Register of Civil Status in Albania is important.

While electronic registers and data systems help governments to keep track of citizens, there is an on-going debate about a surveillance state, or a service state created from such services (Lips, Taylor & Organ 2009). Intermediating in this discourse, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is assisting some Eastern European countries like Albania, Georgia, Croatia, or Kosovo in their efforts that would improve voters' lists (OSCE 2011). These previous communist states in these countries have been known for dictatorship surveillance systems (Schwartz, Bardi 1997). However, such new projects aim to assure better representation of citizens' and stronger post-communist democracies by contributing towards the accuracy of voters' lists.

Civil status services are not limited only to electoral processes, but in a broader sense, to citizens' identity in the context of past and present changes. This is a broad area of study, but its discussion here will be limited to the scope of this research on international e-government assistance, and the institutionalization of sustainable reforms through projects. Post-communist civil status reforms and their institutionalization here can be better understood only by giving a brief analysis of the communist and post-communist identity issues in Eastern Europe and Albania, focusing on two main ideas:

National identities united around party-symbols. The communist party in Albania portrayed the 'western' nations as enemies, following the ideology of the eastern bloc in the period 1945-1989. Regardless if the threat of these enemies was real or not, the result was the creation of strong national identities united around the single communist party-state (Macdonald 1995). In Albania a great number of national symbols, rituals, and culture norms were reinvented to represent a 'new' communist society and leading party, using every pedagogical form of institutionalization (Lelaj, Kromidha 2010). As the communism collapsed, the single leading party dissolved and the enemies became allies. This change redefined people's national identity and their sense of belonging which still shapes post-communism transition states (Tolz 1998). In Albania, most of the national symbols were cleared out of the communist elements after the change of regimes in the beginning of the 90s like, for example, the state emblem in the picture:

Communist national emblem   Post-communist national emblem

FIGURE 31: ALBANIAN COMMUNIST AND POST-COMMUNIST NATIONAL EMBLEMS

The star symbolizing the leadership of the communist party during the anti-fascist Second World War and the date of the first post-war congress establishing the first communist government in 24 May 1944 were removed. The post-communist emblem looks more like the national flag with the black two-headed eagle in a red background and the helmet of Skenderbeg, the Albanian national hero fighting against the Turkish occupation 500 years ago. Changing such national symbols and reuniting the post-communist citizens around them was easier than it was to reinvent peoples' new identities, and develop fully functional democratic states. The new electronic system of civil status was an important step in this direction.

Citizens' personal relations and avoidance of public organizations. The relationships of citizens to their government and state during communism have been an interesting object of study. In his book and research in Eastern Europe and Russia, Howard (2003) concludes that post-communist societies can be understood only by considering how they adjusted to imposing restrictions by a controlling state, strengthening their relations with family and friends. In Albania the communist state structures and public administration could not be put under dispute publically as they controlled everything. Within smaller circles, discussions could be more open, although always with the risk of betrayal even by the closest ones. The consequences in that case could have been devastating for the expressive party compared to the small rewards received by the watchdog. Therefore, the best feasible option was to silently comply with the rules, limit the expression of information or give and keep what you know to yourself. After communism collapsed and citizens could express their identities and opinions freely, their unwillingness to cooperate and disclose information to public structures persisted from the old system.

There is a clear contradiction between communist and post-communist unity around a party/state and the dominance of personal relations over mistrusted public organizations explained in this part. Understanding the causes and complex effects of this situation in a post-communist country like Albania would have required a much more detailed study in an area beyond the scope of this research. The role of this introductory part was simply to give some background and personal perceptions on the role of the communist and post-communist state in shaping national and citizens' identities in Albania. This information can help the understanding of many 'Why?' and 'How?' in the following sections.

From a management perspective and based on the evidence collected for this study, the next parts will focus on the modernization of the National Register of Civil Status as an internationally assisted e-government project in Albania. As part of the same reform, the modernization of the system of addresses will be also touched upon, although it does not constitute a major part in this research. The new biometric identity cards and passports on the other hand were developed along the civil status project, but this was a different initiative. In 2008 the government of Albania outsourced with a concession of five years the application, production and distribution of identity cards and passports to a consortium named Aleat. This joint venture was between the Albanian-American Enterprise Fund (AEEF) and Sagem Securite (now named Morpho), member of the French Safran Group (AAEF 2011). Aleat was connected to the new National Register of Civil Status electronically. The applications for identity cards and partly for biometric passports happened in the same local civil status premises, in offices rented by Aleat. Although the international e-government assistance from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Austrian Government, and Statistics Norway for the National Register of Civil Status discussed here was not for the identity cards and passports; both projects are so related that they cannot be analysed separately.

7.1.2   PAST AND PRESENT OF CIVIL STATUS IN ALBANIA

Communism was good at record-keeping and storing information about citizens in order to have control over the society. Privacy was not an issue to discuss or dispute as its control was held by the leading party. However, the origins of the civil status in Albania are older than the communist system, as the director of the General Directorate of Civil Status explains in an interview:

> *"The system of civil status has started with the first registration in 1930, there was an initial registration in 1930. There were also some early books from years 1923-25 in some of the Albanian cities, but not in all of them. Then another registration, a transcription of the 30's books was done in 1945, another transcript is done in 1950 and the last transcript is done in 1974. With the books of 1974 we went until 2007 when the project started for the digitalisation of these registers."*

The need to modernise the old civil status system and replace the hard copy registers that were literally falling apart had been identified much earlier than 2007. The lack of funding, expertise, and coordination that were the major problems, found a solution with the readiness of international partners and donors to be involved and help with this reform. The new electronic National Register of Civil Status signed a strong detachment from the past, for example, from the handwritten birth certificates which were used before the ID cards and biometric passports. A representative of the assisting organisation, OSCE, explains this distance from the past as follows:

> *"The reliability of the system itself also now is not an issue. Certificates? Actually, nobody talks about certificates anymore."*

Yet, although often neglected or considered by the international assistance as forgotten, many of the actual structures and processes stand on those transcending from the past, both negative and positive. Many local players and the society in Albania remain in great part the same, regardless of superficial changes. However, a developing democratic system, a new market economy, and the perspective of European Union integration provide the vision for the future. The institutional structures, processes, and integration discussed in this chapter will be complemented by a comparative analysis of the role of international assistance, projects and sustainability in the next one. The goal and focus of this research remains the same: the institutionalization of e-government reforms.

7.2   INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

The modernisation of the National Register of Civil Status and the international assistance for this project did not create a new agency, but operated within the General Directorate of Civil Status. Nevertheless, a set of institutional structures were either developed or modified to make it happen. This section will focus specifically on the strategy, regulatory framework, the information system, and the format of service delivered to end-users.

7.2.1   STRATEGY

The strategic vision for the new National Register of Civil Status and identity cards in Albania was to *"Establish and develop a modern civil registration and address system to*

use as a basis for a secure and unique personal identity document in full accordance with international standards." as summarized in the National Strategy for Development and Integration (NSDI) 2007 – 2013 prepared in 2008. In the preface of this strategy signed by the Prime Minster, the following statement can be read about this document and the role of international assistance:

> *"The NSDI has also been consulted at length and with particular attention with our international partners who support Albania in its reforms towards development and integration and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals."*

While the NSDI covers many areas, the vision for the civil status register and identification documents relevant for this study is followed by these strategic goals in the document:

- *Establish and administer a modern address system to improve the quality of public services.*
- *Establish a modern civil registration system.*
- *Establish synergy between the civil register and identity card systems for sustainable results.*
- *Introduce identity cards and electronic passports.*
- *Protect personal data and implement the recommendations of the 2007 European Partnership document by clearly specifying institutional responsibilities.*

It is necessary to note that when this national strategy was published in 2008, all the points were completed, except the last one which was fully embedded into a national strategy for Personal Data Protection in 2010. In fact, the NSDI was trying to legitimate an already occurred reform, rather than setting a plan for the future.

The most important strategic decisions appeared to have been taken before the NSDI. The original vision and goals were recorded also in other documents, like the government programme 2005-2011 and other national strategies. This situation is explained better by an executive of the General Directorate of Civil status who makes the following statement:

> *"So, the idea of these registers was planned in the government programme. It took about one year and some time to reach a general conclusion on how this project*

was going to be, and also with international assistance, the big project was designed named the Modernization of the Civil Status which was legalized with a decision of the Council of Ministers of September 2007. After this process, after this Council of Ministers' decision, the actual work started."

Identity cards and biometric passports on the other hand were legitimized as parts of the modernisation reform for the National Register of Civil Status in the National Strategy of Information Society, based on the government programme for the period 2002-2005, by this paragraph:

"The introduction of identity cards and electronic passports will increase the level of service for the citizens allowing for a secure, fast and certified identification process. Connection will be established between the civil registration office and the identity cards system."

Once the strategic goals were set, international assistance offered for this project facilitated its implementation and made it possible. Statistics Norway, European Union (EU), and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) were involved as donors in this assistance project. While their help was very important to implement the general strategic goals, their involvement influenced many strategic decisions on the long term approach towards the system. A typical example here would be the discussion on buying or providing locally for the maintenance or further development of the system once the assistance was over. This situation is faced now, and there is no clear strategy and plan in place. To support this claim, here are two contradictory views given by two high level officials in the General Directorate of Civil Status during the interviews with them:

"In this moment the maintenance of the system is publicly procured, until we reach a time when we are trained in a way that we can take over it." (Respondent A, a technical expert)

"Maybe the specialists of the General Directorate of Civil Status will never be able to carry out a full maintenance of a second level because this requires specialization of very high level, and maybe it will be always an object of

procurement, or a specialised company that would do this as is the model of our Austrian partner." (Respondent B, a political executive)

Respondent A is a technical expert in the General Directorate holding also a middle managerial position. Respondent's B position on the other hand is higher in the organisational structure and more political, but involving limited technical expertise. Strategy in this case appears more politically than technically oriented. Emerging local expertise within the government structures is apparently challenging its policy-making leadership to outsource the newly developed system through internationally assisted project.

The question at this point is whether local forces are developing a range of new institutions or reviving some pre-project institutions, existing before international assistance, or even during the communist state. As the answer to this research question will become clearer in the following sections, it can be concluded here that local forces are trying to establish some secure strategic positions. International assistance equipped them with a new powerful system which they have to master and control now. The strategic position of such local experts like respondent A who would like to be more in charge, will have to be decided by their ability to take ownership of the system. A possible way to do so is through their involvement in policy-making and the preparation of laws and regulations. As it will be discussed in the following section, there are a number of other parties as well involved in this process, including the donors that might have different interests and opinions.

7.2.2   LAWS AND REGULATIONS

The laws and regulations concerning the national electronic register of civil status follow the strategic decision of the reform and are related to changes and coordination. Giving a general opinion about the legal framework a head of division in the General Directorate of Civil Status explains as follows:

"It is still improving. The new law of the civil status is prepared, which is also adjusted with the electronic system, so with the transfer from the previous system with hard copy registers to the electronic one. However, about these legal aspects I am not in a position to give much information."

This transitional situation is explained partly by the fact that the Law Nr. 10129 on the Civil Status was approved in the parliament on 11 May 2009, one year after the electronic register started to operate and the new identification documents started to be issued. Although this law triggered a number of adjustments on previous laws and decisions regulating the National Register of Civil Status and identification documents, in practice, the foundations of the system were laid down before. The future on the other hand is explained by an executive of the Development Division for the National Register who states that the new Civil Status Law is now guiding the technical development of the system, seen from the government perspective. The Civil Status Law specified the rules and regulations for the system as a whole, including the system of addresses assisted by the same international organisation: OSCE. A specialist paid by this organisation, but working in the General Directorate of Civil Status explains:

> *"It is specified in the law that all local power units, coordinated by the Ministry of Interior had to give their contribution for this project. They had to take and manage information, presenting it etc."*

However, as a local civil status unit officer explains in a focus group meeting, changes in the law of civil status have not been so frequent or presenting any problem.

> *"There are changes in the law, time after time, but they do not happen that often and we haven't had any problem with the system in this context."*

The real legal issues concerning the electronic National Register of Civil Status were since the beginning related not to its design, but to its use and coordination. The new Civil Status Law is not the only one regulating the activities with the register. There is a separate law on the management of the register and the assistance from the Government of Austria, more precisely the one with number 10044 of 24.12.2008. This law regulates the agreement between the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Austria for making possible the electronic system for the register.

Furthermore, there is a manual of how the civil status electronic system works, but because of its operational nature, there is no reference to any law or regulation in it. The document bears the following note on the role of the government of Albania:

"Prepared and adapted under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior, General Directorate of the Civil Status"

In its cover it is simply mentioned the assistance from the European Union and OSCE in preparing and printing it. On the other hand, the Decision of the Council of Ministers Nr. 1070 of 23.07.2008 followed by the Law Nr. 9972 of 28.07.2008 authorizes the concession contract to Aleat Ltd for the identity cards and biometric passports. As it will be explained in more detail in the following section about the project network, there are many parties involved with the national electronic register of civil status. The legal coordination of this complex network can appear unclear, regardless of the many directives following and complementing the above-mentioned laws. The situation becomes even more complex if other laws concerning the privacy of citizens are considered as well, as mentioned by the deputy head of a civil status local unit:

"Related to the civil status, there is also another law related to privacy of citizens, something which apparently is not secured by the system. Although there is a law that protects personal data and privacy, apparently we don't have information yet if my personal data, your personal data, those of citizens are protected or not."

The privacy problem became more evident after the project deliverables were handed over to the government, although there were some rules and procedures in place. In terms of legal protection of personal data and privacy, the strategy on the Data Protection Commissioner 2010 explains the coordination of Albanian legislation with that of European Union as follows:

"The Law on Protection of Personal Data, the provisions of which are in compliance with the EU Directive 95/46, has been approved in 2008. The necessary preliminary activities have been implemented by the DPC in 2009. That being the case, enforcement of Data Protection legislation will be the main objective of the DPC in 2010. Demands on the DPC will grow, in particular in relation to handling of complaints, notification of data processing and inspections on institutional personal data handling."

Such practices when laws are taken from other countries or EU directives and adjusted are common in Albania. Limited research on local needs and expectations by the citizens has often caused such laws and structured to remain only on paper (Kacani, J., Beqiraj, G., Frasheri, N. 2008). These approaches are often based on the assumption of a 'soon-to-happen' integration in the European Union, and the need to comply with its legislation.

The legal framework for the management of civil status, addresses and identification documents in Albania is strongly focused on the supply side of services, trying to make the complex network of actors, assistance, and concessions work. However, by doing so, it has to a certain extent undermined the security of the system and the legal right of information security for citizens. This situation resembles the lack of privacy and democracy in surveillance states serving the administration in power during communism, mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. The result of legal institutions designed by and for the suppliers of e-government services can undermine the support of citizens towards them. Continuing this discussion, the following section analyses how the normative institutions explained in this section are translated into information technology systems.

7.2.3   NEW SYSTEM, SAME AGENCY

The system used to transfer the records from the old hard copy registers to the new electronic system was called Double Data Entry. This meant that two separate civil status employees transferred the records separately, using software designed to support this process. If there was any difference between them, identified by the electronic system, the records were checked again. This method was used in the transition from the old registers to the new electronic system. The transition software was designed in Albania, but under the supervision of the European Union, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Statistics Norway, and the Ministry of Interior with its General Directorate of Civil Status on the other. The coordinating agency remained the General Directorate of Civil Status in the Ministry of Interior, so no new agencies were created for this project.

Regardless of the information technology used, the electronic National Register of Civil Status remains essentially the same in terms of services to the citizens. An executive of the Development Division for the National Register in the General Directorate of Civil Status explains its goal as follows:

"The goal is that through the National Register of the civil status individuals should have a unique identity, and every information can be stored and presented in this system, about the people. All marriages, engagements, all can be verifiable through the online electronic system."

A representative of OSCE, the assisting organization, has the following opinion about the system that was put in place and its future prospects after the project:

"Yes this is sustainable, even more, it can expand. And the use of it can be broadened so that every governmental agency has access to the database and used the personal data of the citizens only from the database and not develop other databases. Same with the address system; the National System of Addresses is the only source of addresses. So whenever you need an address for daily services or public utilities, emergencies, one address from the National System of Addresses is used so there is no misunderstanding. Or old addresses and new addresses: there is just one address, this is in place."

The system was taken as a ready solution, but it was adapted to local needs, although there were some local shortages in terms of experts, as someone from the Development Division of the National Register in the General Directorate of Civil Status explains in an interview:

"The system is taken ready as it was but then is adjusted according to our requests. There is still space for improvements according to our requests because this is always improving and developing. The idea is that we take it and develop it ourselves in a future time."

He believes that in the future the system can be fully managed locally. At the moment this is not the case. At a higher level the system is still controlled by the specialists in Austria with the justification that there are not enough sufficiently trained and skilled experts to manage it in full in Albania. Also at a lower level, the users' manual for the electronic civil status register translated in Albanian bears a lot of elements from the donor. A snapshot of the login page looks like this:
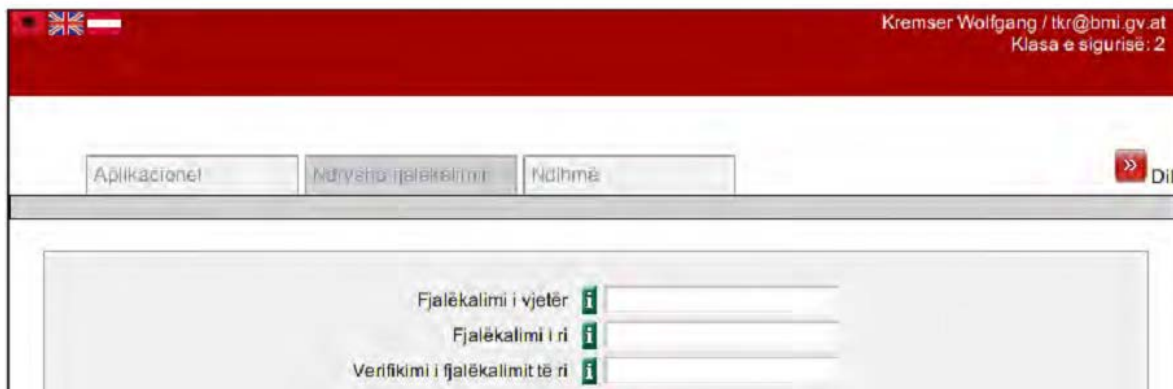
FIGURE 32: SNAPSHOT FROM THE LOGIN PAGE OF THE REGISTER

Regardless of the adjustments and adaptation according to the Albanian legislation, the system has the Austrian flag in the top left corner indicating that it operates also in German. On the other hand, the Austrian name 'Kremser Wolfgang' and an Austrian email address on the other hand of this demo login screenshot taken from the Albanian users' manual are remaining indicators of the systems' origin and its institutional dependency on the donors. The transitional software and the electronic system of civil status provided by the Austrian government were different, but the second was implemented as the permanent solution. An interface was built by Statistics Norway for this purpose.

Talking about the coordination of the electronic National Register of Civil Status in conjunction with the production of identity cards and biometric passports from Aleat Ltd, a civil status unit officer explains:

> *"There is always an employee from our office there in their office all the time, who should sign all application for identification documents on behalf of the civil status office. This is the procedure."*

The approach of Aleat Ltd, the consortium between the Albanian-American Enterprise Fund and Sagem Securite (Morpho) from Safran Group was very formal. They avoided engaging in public debates and limited any communication about their involvement in the project. During a short meeting with two executive directors of the Albanian-American Enterprise Fund which lasted only 12 minutes, not allowed to be recorded or noted down, they were very reserved to give any personal comment, but always pointed at the laws and directives about the engagement of their organisation with the government.

In conclusion to this part, although no new agency was created for this project, the new electronic National Register of Civil Status was the centre of a complex system. The software platform from Austria, the broadband connection between the local civil status units, the transfer of records to the new system, and the direct link to the outsourced service of biometric identification documents were difficult to coordinate by a single actor. With the support from international partners and donors, what appears to have been institutionalized in this system is the ability of different actors and organisations to work together and share responsibilities. To analyse the efficiency of this complex system in more practical terms, the following section will look at what it managed to institutionalise as a service.

7.2.4   SERVICE

The coordination of international assistance assured the consistency in the service throughout the whole transition process. The last stage of integration according to the information published in the website of the General Directorate of Civil Status was the secure connection between the National Register of Civil Status and the system of identification documents managed by Aleat, the concession company. An executive of the General Directorate of Civil Status explains how the integration of these two systems assures a better service in terms of accuracy:

> *"This relationship, this interface between the two registers assures for the ID cards and passports a maximum quality of data, excluding the human error because there is no manual data entry. On the other hand this has served immensely to increase the quality of data in the register. Because during the application process, the applicant, before, in the moment the applicant goes to apply, the operator receives the applicants' data from the online national register of civil status, these data are checked by the citizen."*

Citizens' applications for the new identity cards and passports were very important to increase the reliability of the service and accuracy of the system. This was enforced and speeded up by law. The government imposed the use of such documents to receive certain public services like pensions or criminal clearance certificates. The result was evident and this service was accepted without much resistance. However, from a number of

observations at the local units of civil status, the last resort of verification and control remained the old hard copy registers. The first problem is that of electricity or internet interruptions, as even a representative from OSCE admits:

> *"There are still problems of course, the infrastructure, meaning the physical, fibre network to link can still be extended, but notwithstanding you can get services and I think in these seven years shows progress. I think that is remarkable. There is still a long way to go."*

Except the reliability of information technology infrastructure, the other issue with the civil status service is the verification of any mismatching information. Because of these two reasons, the old registers were not removed from the civil status offices, but as the system improved in terms of reliability and accuracy, their role as a back-up reference diminished. Soon they might be considered for archiving. However, the use of information technology improved the service and its perception, as a local civil status operator explains in a focus group:

> *"When people come and see that we are now working with computers rather than with the old books, they perceive that the quality of the service has increased and so has the authority of the office. This is clear because with the new system is better, it allows less mistakes, it is more precise and it saves time. With a click now we can issue a certificate, while before we had to write it by hand, which took a lot of time. Second, now the system is online and we are connected with all the offices in Albania. For example, if I want, I can see the details of someone in another city, I have access from the system."*

This passage and all the discussion in this section indicated that the electronic system behind the National Register of Civil Status has been the motor of change in terms of services. Its use has been political from the government, strategic in the co-operation with the donors, operational with civil servants, profitable for some business service providers, and to a certain extent instrumental with its end-users.

The institutionalization process from the system to the delivered service went through much iteration before, during, and after the international assistance project. Now the new

format of civil status services is well accepted and has reached a sustainable stage, being strongly institutionalized among its users who prefer it much better compared to the old system. This will be discussed in more detail in the part on evaluation and legitimacy later in this chapter and in Chapter Eight. The challenge remains the empowerment of local staff and structures to run it fully and the integration with other systems that use citizens' records such as hospitals, taxation, or social services. Its maintenance and operation remain in a transition stage, dependent on international assistance and outsourcing, but also subject to contradicting forces of change, conflict, communication, and learning. The following section on institutional processes will discuss these elements in more detail.

7.3   INSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES

Taking an institutionalist perspective, this section looks at change, conflict, communication, and learning in internationally assisted e-government projects. The focus here shifts from clearly defined and often tangible institutional structures, to the way they interact with each other to develop institutional patterns and routines. This selective focus informed by the theoretical framework discussed in Chapter Three, and the research strategy for coding discussed in Chapter Five, might leave certain other areas out of the discussion. However, the four elements discussed in this part emerged during coding and analysis, so they are considered representative to interpret institutional processes.

7.3.1   CHANGE

The introduction of the electronic system of civil status for processing identification documents and addresses required a conceptual shift in Albania. A specialist in the Ministry of Information Technology working with the Department of Strategy and Donor Coordination near the Council of Ministers explains the philosophy behind these changes and reforms as follows:

> *"You need to push it. People have started to realise only now, after 1 year or 6 months. Like, for example, the case of biometric passports. In the beginning they asked why they would spend the money. Now that they see the benefits, they use it. Also with the ID card, now that they see the facilities it offers, they use it. But it is a process."*

Although this approach to change does not seem to face any strong resistance and is generally accepted by the citizens, it is not well informed by their opinions and expectations. This is how the previous quotation from the same source continues to illustrate this:

> *"You can't find how aware people are. Even us, when we first read about the ID card, we thought we don't need it, that we were fine with what we had. Now that we are using it, that we are always carrying it with us, we see how good it is."*

The enforcement of change and reforms is based on perceived benefits by the policy makers which are expected to be translated and institutionalized among end-users. This remains an obscure process of adaptation and institutionalization, but nevertheless seems to deliver results which are consistent with the initial plans. On a strategic level, a project coordinator from OSCE supports this argument on the complexity of change as follows:

> *"The international assistance itself is changing so you cannot make a direct correlation of how it works and make predictions that it will continue in this way. Plus people in the government also develop and change. So there is never, you cannot make a direct correlation with how necessarily understand how it will be. So this necessarily has a lesser influence while economic efficiency is always better."*

According to this project management approach, the institutionalization of changes in the National Register of Civil Status, regardless of its implementation strategy, seems to be strongly related to its economic and efficiency benefits for both the government and end-users. However, the same source does not forget to highlight the importance of the cultural factor in Albania as follows:

> *"Cultural aspects are not always but very often important. Maybe on a subliminal level, but it matters. Plus on personal things, how people work together."*

His argument is that not only this project is about change and reforms, but also the players involved are not static. They all change, including international assistance, government structures and people so a great deal of focus is necessary in this process. Nevertheless,

there are some cultural norms and deeply embedded institutions that remain the same and need to be addressed carefully. Connecting this argument to the historical background discussed before, change is influenced more by the need to do something about the old system, as a civil status officer explains:

> *"It was a major change from the 36 year old hand written registers, where everything was manual and was prone to many mistakes. Simply the fact that the data were entered by hand writing, sometime legible and sometime illegible due to ripped pages, spills, bad writing etc. created many problems which the new system does not have."*

The context here is not that of strategy making and project design as in the previous quotations, but that of social acceptance beyond rationality and efficiency. Changes in the formal structures were discussed earlier, so here it is necessary to focus more on the institutional process on an operational and human level. As an executive of a local civil status unit explains when taking about the transfer of data, for example, this process is not without problems:

> *"The first and second phase of the process, of data entry from the big registers to the electronic registers of course had its problems, because names were not entered correctly, cities were not entered correctly, places of birth were not entered correctly. As a result of this, every change to the system required some intervention. During the interventions, the Austrian assistance with its project, made some changes, let's say, also in the programme."*

Again, the technical assistance from the international donors, the Austrian government, and the concession company Aleat appears to be the solution instead of the government structures. At the same time, most of the labour-intensive tasks that require a low level of expertise were performed locally by the government structures. For example, a civil status officer explains how the data was copied manually from the old hand-written registers, to the electronic one:

> *"The data was entered into the new system from the old one by external operators, because we were busy with our daily work and couldn't do it. Some mistakes were*

made evident during this stage. There were some problems during the data entry as well during the transfer, but they were corrected with time."

New people were hired, trained and paid on a daily basis to enter data into the new system. OSCE played a very important role in this process, but the decision to employ local resources was clearly driven by the low cost of these employees in Albania. The new issue in this case is the exclusion of the permanent civil status officers from this data entry process, although they knew the records and often even the citizens in their local units, since they had entered them in the old registers and worked with them. Instead, they were left to perform their everyday task and new people were hired temporarily to transfer the records. This was done also to assure the continuity of work during the transition. In essence, the work of local civil status officers didn't differ much from the previous system as one of them explains during a focus group:

"There is no disruption in our work, also because we operate on the same basis. We do the same things that we did with the old registers, only that now we use the electronic system and not the old books. The procedures are simplified but not changed too much."

The local unit officers as well as the citizens recognize that information technology was not only a tool for the reform, but became an enabler of change. In a way, the new system contributed towards the legitimacy of the very structures that delivered the service, from the central government and donors to the local units, as another operator from the same focus group explains as follows:

"The authority of the office has increased with the new electronic system"

Although local officers in civil status units have mastered the use of the electronic system and like its benefits, they are not directly involved in policy-making process of change or technological advancements. The first reason is that their every-day routine leaves little time for them to contribute towards the development of the system beyond identifying small problems in their work. The second reason which will be discussed later has to do with weak communication channels, especially in the bottom-up direction.

End-users' involvement in promoting the long term reforms and institutional changes envisaged by the government remains also instrumental, limited in vision and contingency based. Problem solving and conflict resolution discussed in the following section play an important role in this context, to facilitate the transition and change analysed here.

7.3.2   CONFLICT

From what has been discussed so far, there was a general agreement that the National Register of Civil Status required some immediate change from hard copy books to an electronic system of civil status and address. The electronic system offered by the international partners was not only a technical solution, but also a tool for political reconciliation of trust between the parties in Albania, as a project coordinator from OSCE explains:

> *"The quality of voters' list is directly related to the quality of the National Register of the Civil Status so if we improve the civil registry system, there will be better voters' lists which in Albania is a specific problem because there is limited trust between political actors in all elections"*

This agreement on a strategic level between the stakeholders is supported by government representatives like, for example, the director of the General Directorate of Civil Status who explains the coordination meetings between the government, the donors, and other important actors as follows:

> *"The project was organized by creating a steering committee, with representatives from Ministry of Interior, with representatives from the European Union, OSCE etc. which periodically gathered, set the objectives, analysed the previous period and set the objectives for the following meeting until the next meeting of the steering committee."*

Regardless of these apparent agreement between the government and the donor on their goals in this assistance project, citizens in the survey conducted for this study (N=771) do not seem to fully agree. When asked if *"The objectives of international partners and those of the government match",* 51% of them said 'No', 40% of them 'Yes' and 9% are unresponsive. To explain the reason of such conflicting views and identify the institutional

mechanisms of problem solving, it is necessary to look at the root causes of such perceptions. Other interviews in this context suggest as one of the problems the dependence of the National Register of Civil Status on political and external influences. A technical specialist working for the General Directorate of Civil Status explains this conflict as follows:

> *"The more independent it [the Directorate] is, the better, if it will have its own funds, it will manage its funds itself and prepare the specialists. It would be much better. No this is like half independent, but it is not really independent, it depends a lot on the ministry. It would have been good to be a separate institution that deals specifically with this and is out of political interventions or anything else."*

The conflict here is between political forces that negotiated with international assistance, and the willingness of implementation structures to take ownership of the system and its post-assistance governance. This is a dynamic power debate where conflict resolution was not planned, but left to contingencies and upcoming events. The decision to be made is whether to outsource or provide in-house maintenance and development, as discussed in the strategy part before and in the integration part later. At a lower operational level, closer to the citizens as end-users, the second type of conflict is related to service delivery as an executive of a local civil status unit explains:

> *"Considering that the system was improving more and more, different mistakes in data entry started to be found: mistakes in names, surnames, dates of birth, places of birth. This resulted on some conflict between the employees of civil status and the citizens who came and asked for services in the offices of civil status."*

Especially during the initial stages, incorrect data entry created a lot of confrontations with the citizens. The conflict in this case is not strategic, but more operational, so its resolution appears to be easier. However, the process of data correcting has not been without any pain as a local civil status representative explains, talking about the problem of duplicated records:

> *"Today for example, there are still people in the system that are blocked, because of this duplication, which means they have two personal IDs."*

The way these problems were handled was only through some mutual understanding of both the local civil status operators and the citizens. The intervention of international assistance was not needed at this level, so the local parties had to work on the solutions, which they did. Both had to accept that the new system needed time to become optimal, as a local civil status officer explains:

> *"As everything new, it couldn't be perfect from the beginning. This was done on a case by case basis, so as the problems emerged, a solution was found and implemented. We could say that most of the problems were evidenced during the first 2 months of the system. Then, they were dealt with one by one as they were reported. The problems were reported by us and different offices of civil status I suppose, based on situations that were created with the people. Only a few have still remained, but they are being solved."*

The involvement of local civil status servants in passing this message and smoothing conflicts with the citizens was very important. On the other hand, citizens as well helped a lot to improve the accuracy of their records and thus the whole system. This co-operation and mutual understanding at the local level helped a lot towards the institutionalization of the electronic National Register of Civil Status as a whole. A very important conflict resolution tool in this context was communication, discussed in more detail in the following section.

7.3.3   COMMUNICATION

Communication or the lack of communication in the public sector is always an important issue associated with a degree of uncertainty. OSCE as the donor implementing agency funded the publicity campaign for the new system and services, as the director of the General Directorate of Civil Status explains:

> *"Part of the project was a broad publicity campaign organized by OSCE, so by the technical assistance of OSCE as part of the project, which included publicity spots, meetings in districts with employees of civil status, workshops etc. which made possible that during these three years Albanian citizens to become aware of the project."*

The government took a passive role when OSCE presented the information on behalf of the Ministry of Interior and the General Directorate of Civil Status. The donor attempted also a push strategy by involving civil status front-desk officers in meetings and workshops. In practice however, on a project implementation and operational level, the users perceived the information communicated to them in different forms.

There are some communication problems also between local and central civil status authorities. An executive of a civil status unit in the capital Tirana calls this lack of stability in the modernisation process of the civil status services:

> *"It is not stabilised yet, there are continuous interventions made, by international assistance and the Austrians who, to my knowledge, are still working and improving the system. How it will go, what are the stages, where it will be intervened, maybe more specifically on the system, this is something which depends on the Ministry of Interior and the General Directorate of Civil Status where there are specific directorates."*

Issues in this area between central structures and local authorities were confirmed also by a focus group in another local unit, during a meeting with front desk employees. One of them makes the following statement when asked about future plans of the General Directorate on online applications:

> *"We don't know this. You have to ask at the General Directorate. Maybe, as you have heard, we have heard as well that it could be that citizens can apply for a certificate online and receive it as it is done now for the criminal record certificates. We don't know when and how this is going to happen. This is an issue for our heads of institution."*

Interestingly they have some information, but this appears to have reached them through words of mouth as a stronger informal institution in place, rather than through formal communication channels. A manager in this Directorate looks at communication and trainings under a positive light not only at a central level, but also with local authorities as follows:

"Communication is very good and on a daily basis for problems. Trainings are organized for employees upon demand; in the latest elections also for local authorities so there were no major disruptions. The system as well has been working fine."

Communications and trainings in the civil status structures need to be coordinated also with the activity of Aleat Ltd., the joint venture between Sagem Securite and the Albanian American Enterprise Fund, producing and issuing the identification documents. At this level however, the employees of both parties work at the same premises and their jobs are related. However, they use different information systems, each containing confidential data, and depend on different organisations, public in one side and private on the other.

To summarize this part, the communication campaign promoted the electronic National Register of Civil Status and the new biometric documents. Indirectly, this communication strategy promoted OSCE and the other international partners involved and helping with it, institutionalizing their position as indispensable players in this sector in Albania. This created image existed before and persists even after their assistance project to the government ended. As a result, four years after this project finished, OSCE and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR) remain the ultimate experts on civil status and democratic elections between the government and its citizens in Albania.

7.3.4   LEARNING

The development and modernisation of the National Register of Civil Status was a very important learning process for all parties involved. The first and most obvious element was coded in the analysis of data as 'learning from abroad', referring to all the know-how brought by the international assistance, imported from outsourcing foreign companies, and lessons learned from world best practices. The reason is clearly given by a specialist in the Department of Strategy and Donors Coordination in the Council of Ministers as follows:

"It is also a security issue I would say, because if someone has tried it before, we don't need to experiment. It has a standard. At the moment you find the funds, you take it and treat it the same way. You don't start from A but from Z and you are sure."

This statement highlights the security of implementing proven project practices, expressing confidence on the ability of Albanian authorities and users to adapt the lessons learned and changes to local needs. In this case, local parties had to make use of their experience with the old system and combine such lessons learned with a ready-given new National Register of Civil Status. Speaking in these practical terms, one of such lessons adapted in Albania were, for example, the adaptation of manuals used for the electronic register of civil status or addresses, as a specialist who worked for the General Directorate of Civil Status explains:

> *"But for as far as the technical part is concerned, I can say as I said before, there was a manual based on which we were working. So a model of work was created, based on the examples of similar work models in Europe."*

Local authorities were involved to create these manuals, contributing with their experience, but the 2.5 million Euros of assistance for the project came from the European Union. What appears like learning from best practices for the government, translates into enforced changes for the users. Here are two examples that support this argument. The first is a quote from an interview with a representative of the National Agency of Information Society, talking about the adaptation of e-government stages, their methodology, and evaluation in Albania:

> *"We have seen and analysed how Europe monitors this. […] We have analysed these, we have tried to adjust them for our country and this is easy for as long as you monitor the situation by monitoring the web page, because when we want to look at use, then we have to conduct surveys with the users."*

Trying to understand how end-users learn the use of new systems, or even learning from them, appears difficult from her words. Instead, as many other best practices in Europe, they end up with an easy but less accurate top-down approach based on assumptions.

The second example is from a representative of the Department of Strategy and Donor Coordination in the Council of Ministers. He talks on the importance of top-down communication to promote strategies or otherwise lessons learned, and to-be-implemented reforms like the modernisation of National Register of Civil Status:

"Part of our system of integrated planning is a strategy of communication which is also on the web site. It explains how all our objectives are promoted and how it is monitored."

Learning from and about citizens appears to be a bigger challenge for the government, than it was for end-users to become used to the new system. Indeed, objectives are developed and promoted from top to bottom, but there is no strong evidence of a parallel bottom-up approach.

The government of Albania sees a learning challenge related to the education and literacy levels. This is how a representative of the Ministry of Innovation and Information Technology explains this situation:

"The strategies in our field of information society are, how to say this, even if 20% of population will absorb them only, that is a great step, because these strategies are related not only to information technology, but also to education. Education has a great influence. But for the time it takes for the new generation to finish school and enter our cycle of policy-making, it takes at least a cycle of 10 years."

The time constrains to achieve such long term goals tend to justify the current approach of enforced changes and adaptation. Thus, enforced fast-track learning of the electronic National Register of Civil Status appears to have been the norm during the project implementation stage. The bottom-line in terms of transfers of knowledge and learning is the utilitarian view of a project coordinator from OSCE, the donor agency, focusing on the end results:

"The system is in place and it works. There are people in the ministries who know how to manage it, what are the problems, how to manage, how to improve it with continued investment in the infrastructure, with maintenance, including regular updates to the hardware, software. Regular investment into human resources in terms of training, in terms of latest know-how, latest developments."

The interview where this statement was taken happened only a few months before the OSCE assistance was officially and ultimately over for this project in Albania. All the local and foreign staff like the interviewee in this case was dismissed. The system clearly works,

but beyond the clear reporting picture presented by the OSCE's representative, an official of the General Directorate of Civil status has a more critical approach to the control of expertise and knowledge by the assisting third parties:

> *"Since OSCE started, it is helping us with trainings, financing trainings for our staff, to take over the system of the civil status, because still the system is under the control of the Austrian party. We are simply users. To acquire the knowledge to administer the system ourselves, they offer, OSCE offers support for our trainings."*

Local authorities and citizens have learned how to use the electronic National Register of Civil Status. The question is whether the Albanian structures are capable of managing and further developing the system, or international assistance was and will always be indispensable. A representative of the assisting agency, OSCE, leaves the responsibility for such decisions with the Albanian parties by giving the following answer about dissemination of experiences and learning:

> *"Success stories implemented by Albania are ready to be multiplied in different countries, there is no doubt. So again there are some lessons learned. Look what works, share that, see what doesn't work, what are the mistakes, inform partners about that and ask them to adjust it. So I think, yes, Albanian examples can be used and can be presented. Yet, the decisions to adopt them or not, again, lies with the government, with individual governments."*

Calling the project a success story is related to its potential to be successfully disseminated elsewhere, but it is exactly the part on *"inform partners about that and ask them to adjust it"* that the Albanian specialist before doesn't like. The OSCE representative talks, but is still sceptical about the learning and development of local capabilities in Albania. The former Albanian technician on the other hand perceives this policy as undermining his jobs' independence and creating a sense of dependency on international assistance.

Learning from international practices and assistance has been adapted successfully in Albania. The National Register of Civil Status was a success story in this sense being easily institutionalized among end-users. However, to preserve and advance the progress achieved so far, the policy-makers have to learn how to learn from citizens and understand

them better. While the top-down learning has been institutionalized and disseminated, this bottom-up approach has not yet been fully integrated in the Albanian public administration. More on these institutional challenges that involved different actors and forces are discussed in the following section.

7.4   INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRATION

The co-operation between the European Union, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and Statistics Norway in one hand, and the Ministry of Interior with its General Directorate of Civil Status and local authorities on the other, is extended beyond the strategic level, to the implementation and maintenance of the National Register of Civil Status. Locally, the register is operated by city halls and municipalities whose officials are elected independently. The involvement of Aleat Ltd., the company responsible for the identification documents, makes this project even more complex. Therefore the discussion of the institutional integration of actors and forces into a stable network is going to be the main topic of this part.

7.4.1   THE ADMINISTRATIVE NETWORK

What characterises best the creation of the national electronic register of civil status in Albania is its network of actors brought together for this purpose. The financial and technical contribution of different international partners and the purpose of the project are summarized in this news release of 17 February 2011 from the Council of Ministers' website:

> *"The project was supported by a 2.5 million euro fund allocated by the European Union, the OSCE and the USA and it had the technical assistance of Austria, Norway and the Council of Europe. The project was undertaken by 2007 and got finalized by the end of 2010."*

A snapshot of the actors from a less political and more organisational and technical perspective is given by the head of the Development Division for the National Register in the General Directorate of Civil Status during an interview with him:

"The System of Electronic Register is bought by our state from the government of Austria and Xion. It was made by IBM, it uses IBM equipment and the operating system is by Xion. The fund used to buy the system is Albanian, not commercial. We have assistance from the Norwegian assistance project in Albania and from OSCE."

The director of the General Directorate on the other hand, who has been directly involved in higher level decision-making, explains the mechanism behind the created network of actors from the government, donor agency, international partners, and system providers as follows:

"The project was organized by creating a steering committee, with representatives from Ministry of Interior, with representatives from the European Union, OSCE etc. which periodically gathered, set the objectives, analysed the previous period and set the objectives for the following meeting until the next meeting of the steering committee."

The steering committee mentioned here agreed on a manual created with the contribution of all the actors for the transition of records from the old registers to the new electronic system. The administrative network of actors in both central and local levels was coordinated according to certain European standards, as the National Strategy for Development and Integration 2007-2013 mentions:

"In the process of decentralisation, there will be full compliance with the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. "

The regulation of the administrative network according to international agreements and the Albanian legal framework imposed a certain level of stability. However, some administrative network actors like, for example, Aleat Ltd. dealing with the identification documents, have a certain degree of independency. An executive of the General Directorate of Civil Status explains this situation as follows:

"Although the officers in the front offices do not have access to the ID card system, the General Directorate of the Civil Status receives monthly updates about the

applications for ID cards with details for each applicant and keeps close contact with the company about all the data and information."

At the moment the situation appears complex. The administrative network is administered by the government of Albania with its Ministry of Interior and the General Directorate of Civil Status. Certain actors, however, like the Austrian party maintaining the National Register of Civil Status or Aleat producing the identification documents, are more like partners than outsourcing companies and services. This relationship continues even after the assistance from OSCE on this project was over.

Concerning the interoperability of the civil status offices across the country, the new system solved some major problems, for example, on the transfer of data according to movements of citizens from one place to another, as a civil status officer explains:

> *"Because when someone moved address from a zone or city to another, before all the data had to be transferred by mail. This took time and created many problems with delays. Sometimes records for the same citizen were duplicated."*

This was a major benefit of the administrative integration of the new system to citizens as end-users. On the other hand, since the project assistance from the OSCE and Statistics Norway was over a few years ago, the role of government structures increased, but it remains highly dependent on the technical expertise of the Austrian partners for the register, and that of Aleat for the identification documents.

The civil status reform is beyond its strategic planning stage now. While most of the practices are institutionalized by law and in practice with the citizens, the administrative network of actors and its balance remains fragile due to its complexity and political powers discussed in the next section. As a consequence, four years after the project implementation, the relationships between the network actors could still change and are not considered to have been strongly institutionalized yet.

7.4.2   POWER AS POLITICS

Locally elected civil status representatives had to streamline their activity with the law, the General Directorate of Civil Status in the Ministry of Interior, as well as with party policies

whenever possible. This last point was especially important for representatives from the opposition whose relationship with the government was strictly legal and functional, but not without some power and political contrasts. Legal changes in 2009, as the director of a civil status unit in the capital explains, have shifted some more power to the central authorities:

> *"Before 2009, the civil status offices in the mini city halls depended from the administrative point of view on the city halls themselves. After 2009, with the new law for the civil status, these offices, these units are now under the authority of the Ministry of Interior, or the General Directorate of Civil Status."*

This was an important change in the balance of administrative and political powers which surprisingly didn't face much resistance by the interest groups. Many later problems and political debates originated from this root cause which none of the parties considered sufficiently. Instead, the political debate and power conflict moved from the formal administrative structures into the informal arena of news, media and press releases. An example was the 2011 census, an issue of much smaller importance in terms of power, but which did not go unnoticed. Instead of at least referring to the National Register of Civil Status, the census was conducted door to door under the sole supervision of the central authorities. This was accepted by the opposition, but the political conflict escalated when the government decided to include a question about religion and another about ethnicity in the census. This information was not contained in the National Register of Civil Status and was not approved by the opposition and many other interest groups. While the political conflict escalated in courts giving right to the opposition, the government went ahead with it without making any major change. This research was conducted in a time of extreme disagreements between the government and opposition on this issue. The new electronic National Register of Civil Status could have provided a very useful resource to validate the census data as one of opposition's elected representatives in a local civil status unit explains:

> *"But I think before starting a very big process like the census, which by law should start in 1 October, the Institute of Statistics and the Ministry of Information will take this let's say political action, I can say that the registration system, now with*

the electronic register, of course will give its contribution, but I think there will be problems."

Unfortunately the contribution of the new electronic National Register of Civil Status was not considered, exactly as predicted in this interview, not without disappointment especially from the opposition party. It is exactly the way government has kept all processes related to the civil status system closed and under strict power control that has shaped the political discourse.

The privacy issue has heated the political debate between the government and opposition even more. During the time of the project, the socialist opposition required that the application, production, and distribution of identity documents were not managed as an entire process by foreign companies, because this could risk the security and privacy of records. This is what a socialist representative and Member of Parliament says in *"Shqip"* (Albanian), the biggest independent daily newspaper on the 9th of January 2008:

> *"Giving with concession the identity cards, especially the biometric passports, is illegal, unsuitable, unjust, and with a high cost for all Albanians. [...] Can the ministry please tell us which company is preparing the terms of reference for the 28th of February? Who is the expert, how did they find the expert that is preparing these terms and what is the legal basis upon which these terms are being prepared? Secondly, who is the committee of evaluation this procurement?"*

The real problem here is not the decision of the government, but its lack of communication, transparency, accountability and consultations with the parties involved, especially with the opposition. As a reply to the declarations above, in the same article the Ministry of Interior replies that the identification documents will be prepared according to the highest ISO standards of security and that:

> *"Regardless of the fact that the form of doing the project will be a concession, the state is the sole owner of the data".*

In practical terms, information technology has made possible a more secure and independent storage of personal data as the head of the Development Division for the National Register in the General Directorate of Civil Status explains:

> *"Normally this is an independent system, a system which stores the information based on the personal data of citizens. Now we are working with third parties that can ask for information about different individuals from the national register of the civil status."*

The greater power offered by the information technology brings up greater challenges and demands in terms of inter-organizational integration with third parties and the information security of records. More than three years later from the article mentioned before, a journalist of another daily newspaper, *"Shekulli"* (Century), claims to have a USB drive with the personal records of all citizens. Here are his words in the article of 23 July 2011:

> *"I don't know from where this came out, from the Ministry of Interior, but the fact that I have it means that other persons can have it as well. The problem is that these records can get in the hands of persons who can misuse them. Although I have reported this on the newspaper, there has been no reaction from the authorities. I think it is dangerous, because it is illegal and if the law is broken, it is necessary to take measures for the infringement"*

This investigative journalist that had managed to have all the records of the National Register of Civil Status in a USB pen-drive raises awareness about the low level of information security.

The informal political and power discourse has been institutionalized in the media and public arena. The opposition continues to charge the government for intentionally misusing citizens' records for political purposes. The government on the other hand considers these opposition's claims as false. However, formal public structures responsible to work on legal and administrative solutions appear weak and overwhelmed by the informal leading forces. The political actors appear to know this game and play it well with each other in front of a passive local public watching both of them. This discourse system might be sustainable locally, but it is not in the international perspective of joining the European Union, a change expected so much by the people.

In conclusion here, international assistance provided a good system for the National Register of Civil Status, but couldn't change the strong political and power institutions in

the Albanian post-communist society as a whole. Maybe this change should be expected from the bottom-up socio-technical forces discussed in the following section.

7.4.3   SOCIO-TECHNICAL FORCES

The National Strategy for Development and Integration 2007 – 2013 in the field of public services aims to achieve a higher integration of e-government systems for citizens, coordinated by the National Agency of Information Society, by taking the following actions:

> *"Coordinate all initiatives with the aim to maximise the benefits, standardisation and provision of online services to citizens in an integrated information framework. These include: identity cards, electronic passports, vehicle registration, applications for health insurance benefits, unemployment registration, social insurance payments, property registration, applications for construction permits, customs declarations, transparency of court decisions, all of which would be done with the use of electronic signatures"*

The socio-technical benefits for the users of the electronic civil status register and other e-government services appear to be strongly related to the standardization of such services. The fact that this passage appears exactly the same in the Cross Cutting Strategy of Information Society 2008 – 2013, prepared by the National Agency of Information Society, reinforces this argument. However, an earlier version of the National ICT Strategy has the following statement:

> *"A National Civil Register will gradually contain data to be used by government and private users, making possible the direct distribution of information for those institutions that use this information as a key source in statistical, social insurance, education, public order, justice and other fields."*

These passages do not focus much on citizens' data protection and privacy, but instead on legitimizing their use by the government. Such surveillance practices and their fresh memory from the dictatorial communist regime appear again, and in this context we have two contradicting strategies. In this situation, international assistance steps in as an intermediary. The Strategy for Personal Data protection of 2010 is *"prepared and printed*

under the auspices of the Technical Assistance Project to the Government of Albania on Modernization of Address and Civil Register Systems, funded by the EU and implemented by the OSCE Presence in Albania", as specified therein. In this strategy of 2010, OSCE presents its involvement on data security as follows:

> *"Since 2007 the EU funded project on Modernisation of the Address and Civil Register systems as implemented by the OSCE, has been working on the implementation of the data protection framework. Within in the framework of this project the Council of Europe (CoE) implemented the subproject "On personal data protection".*

The new electronic National Register of Civil Status offers better services, but has some clearly identified issues with information security and privacy. This is the price citizens of Albania are paying to use the integrated services that will be based on it. Furthermore, their visa free movement from 2011 in European Schengen countries depends on the electronic registers' accuracy and their biometric records in the identification documents.

According to the surveys conducted for this study, the citizens of Albania are aware of the use their government can make of their data and they don't like it. The reason is that the last two elections have been highly contested by the opposition accusing the government for manipulations, issue of fake identity cards, or interfering with the electronic civil status system and citizens' data. The citizens accept the register and the new identification documents. However, being not given the benefit of discourse before its implementation, there is no surprise that the system didn't improve much the quality of election processes. Yes, there were fewer problems with the identification of citizens and the voters' lists, but problems increased on the side of the state structures in charge for the counting of votes. This is an example of negative institutionalized therefore unsustainable practices.

Clearly the system works, demonstrating a satisfactory socio-technical institutionalization of the new services. However, its enforced integration, legally by the Decision Nr. 1 of 7 January 2008 issued by the Council of Ministers, and institutionally through all means described in this part, has undermined some of the very values of democracy, and transparency it was supposed to assist. The persistence of old institutions of state

dominance and control continue to be legitimized and supported by international assistance for the interest of policy-makers, but not necessarily of the citizens of Albania.

7.4.4   EVALUATION

Although international benchmarking and standards are often mentioned when talking about e-government and e-readiness (UNPAN 2003-2010), the donors are aware that final evaluation and legitimacy has to emerge from within the countries where the systems operate. In the case of the civil status in Albania for example, a representative of OSCE explains that there are no strict roles related to the EU integration and this process:

> *"The decisions lie with individual government and I think on the systems of e-government, on the systems of citizens registration or the system of addresses there is no international standard. This is not part of EU aquis. There are not strict regulations on how this can be done. Each country in terms of addresses' system, each European country has its own system."*

From the donors' perspective, the project should be evaluated based on the extent to which it met its objectives to improve voters' list and the election system. The same representative of OSCE as before explains this goal and the role of this international donor in this process:

> *"This project stands from OSCE to support through the electoral reform in Albania, and improvements intend to support the quality of voters' list or voters' register. Now in Albania voters' list is extracted from the National Register of the Civil Status."*

The government on the other hand likes to evaluate and report about the project in terms of numbers, focusing on the increased number of applications for identity documents, and on the accuracy of the National Register of Civil Status.

Technically, the evaluation of the information system is done on a daily basis by both Albanian and Austrian specialists. The audit division in the General Directorate of Civil Status has two employees that monitor the network. Albanian Satellite Communication (ASC) is the company that provides the internet connection for all 354 local civil status

units and it reports to this Directorate. A group of specialists in Austria monitor the whole National Register of Civil Status through remote desktop functions. The monitoring process is automated at this stage, as ASC or the National Register of Civil Status will highlight any problem that requires some action to be taken like, for example, when it is down due to overload and requires a restart. However, further developments that require allocation of resources are coordinated and integrated into broader programmes by the General Directorate of Civil status in the Ministry of Interior.

The evaluation of the National Register of Civil Status and the assistance from OSCE is also political. This is how the Prime Minister describes it in the final meeting of the project in February 2011:

> *"On this day we finalize a project which enabled us to hold elections like in 2009. Without the project it would have been impossible to get separated from the paranoia of certificates of 2007 and it would have been impossible to provide the Albanian citizens with the most modern IDs and biometric passports in Europe."*

Project evaluation in his words is strongly related to the fulfilment of project goals and objectives for both the government and the donors. His political rhetoric does not forget to put everything in the perspective of citizens and benefits created for them, either internally in Albania, or in the context of the EU as follows:

> *"The project also made an essential contribution to complete the visa liberalization process and bring about the historic decision of the EU member countries for lifting of the visa regime for the Albanian citizens."*

However, to validate these claims and have a more detailed citizens' perspective an online survey was designed for this study. 82% of them (N=279) have both a new identification card and a new biometric passport. They have clearly learned to benefit from the system, but this is what they think on who should evaluate it more:
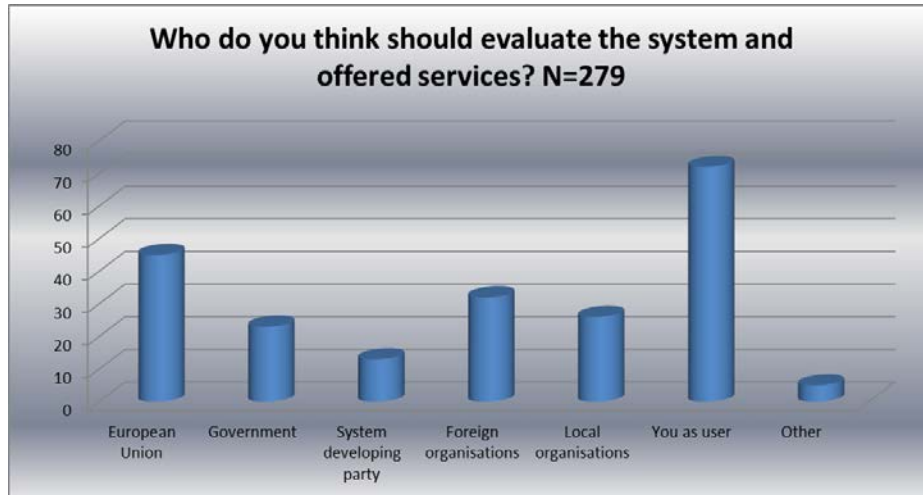
FIGURE 33: EVALUATION ACTORS FOR THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF CIVIL STATUS

The citizens asked here are asking for more power to evaluate the service and be heard. Neither the government of Albania, nor the donors or companies involved in the modernization project of the National Register of Civil Status, have conducted a general study asking end-users about their perceptions and satisfaction. This was done by this study through an online survey and here are some of the results:
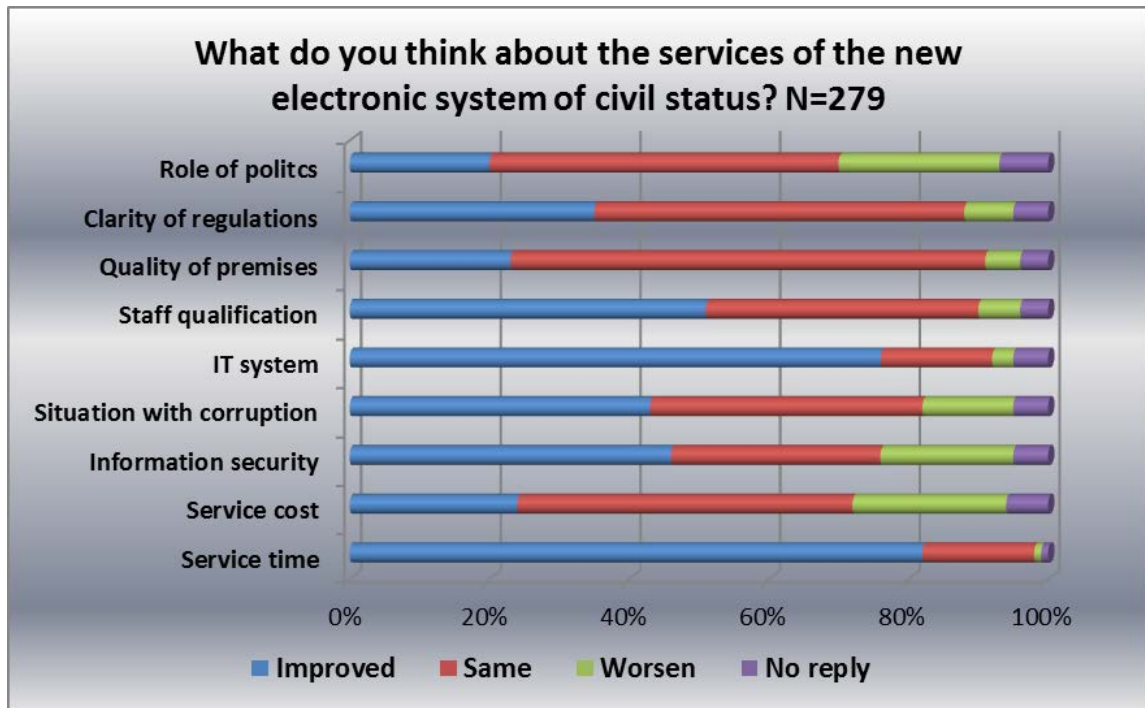

FIGURE 34: EVALUATION OF THE ELECTRONIC SYSTEM OF CIVIL STATUS

After this pilot study (sent to 25,000 Albanian email addresses), another online survey with the same or similar questions was conducted with a larger population sample (75,000 Albanian email addresses), asking this time for the National Register of Civil Status specifically and e-government services in general. The chart below summarizes these results. The only methodological difference in this case was that respondents did not have the option to select 'Same' as before. This was done on purpose, to see the biases of such responses in the first survey, but also to understand how they react in a situation of limited options given by a technological artefact like the online survey. The replies are summarized in the following chart:
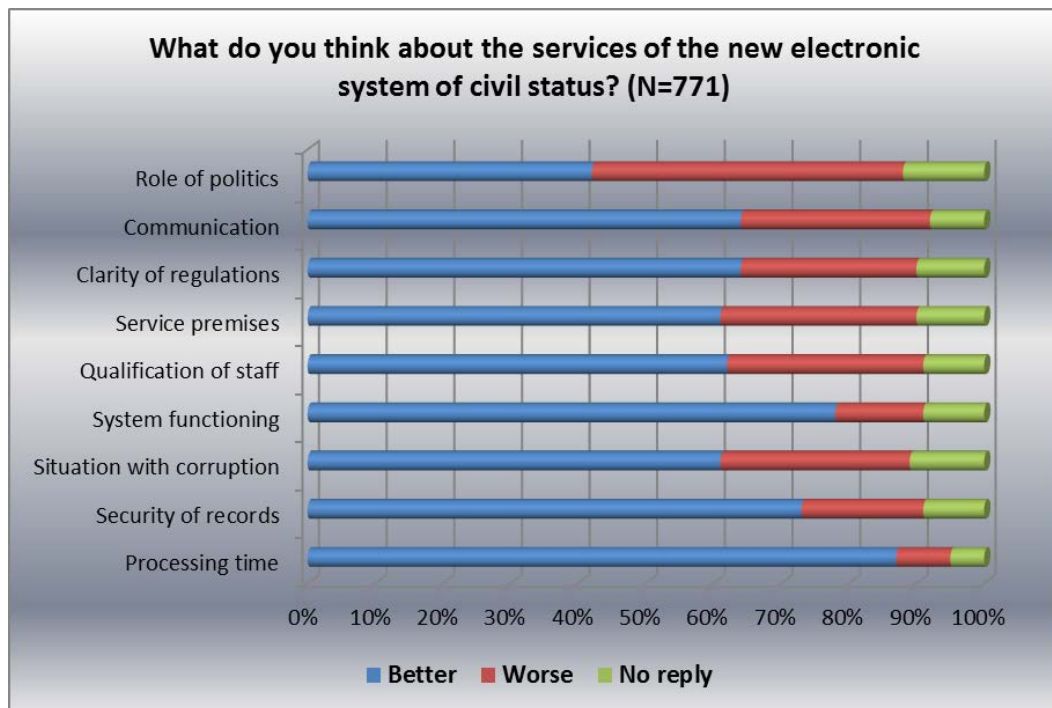

FIGURE 35: EVALUATING THE NEW ELECTRONIC SYSTEM OF CIVIL STATUS

The results in both surveys and charts remain similar in terms of what has improved and what has not. Interestingly, although the respondents in the second survey were different, so not aware of the first online survey, they asked through personal emails for the 'Same' reply option. They felt they were not given enough choices to select from, and some considered it as a lack of professionalism in conducting surveys, although in this case this was done on purpose. This shows both their experience in participating in such surveys before, and their critical sense of evaluation.

However, the surveys conducted for this interpretivist study are only secondary to the interviews and documentary review, used to examine some of the key points based on the users' perspective. In any case, they go beyond the raw data the government and the identification cards' company has on the number of applicants and citizens' records, by trying to capture their perceptions. Citizens are not only using the electronic National Register of Civil Status, identification cards, and passports, but are also able to evaluate it. From the chart the new system is clearly perceived as positive, with 'Service time' and 'IT system' rating the highest. The only indicator showing a negative average trend is the 'Role of politics', for reasons discussed before in this chapter. Translating this message into institutional language, it can be concluded that the system and its services has been generally accepted and institutionalized. However, it is the climate of political conflict and disagreement in Albania that throws some doubts on its institutional sustainability.

7.5 CONCLUSIONS

The discussion in this chapter followed the same structure as the previous one, based on institutional structures, processes and integration, informed by the research framework of this study. Applying the same research strategy, methods and design in both case studies, as explained in Chapters Four and Five, was necessary to develop a consistent and well-informed narrative on which the cross-case comparison in the following chapter builds.

The introduction of the new electronic National Register of Civil Status was a major transformation that influenced many other structures, processes, and institutions for the government and in citizens. To make it happen when the international assistance was available, and in line with country's development and EU integration reforms, a certain level of enforcement was needed. The discourse between centralization and decentralization forces remains a conflicting issue between organisational, social, and political powers.

The electronic National Register of Civil Status fulfilled its purpose towards the citizens, in terms of processing time and voters' lists. International assistance in this project was useful to develop the system, but did not enable local structures to administer it independently or to learn their own lessons. Because of this, the political class could not

improve during this process, leaving them behind the citizens' expectations, and legitimizing the need for international assistance and interventions in the future. This will be discussed further at the end of Chapter Eight with the generalisations from the cross-case comparison.

Institutional sustainability, from the discussion in this chapter, is related to the mutual coexistence between a donor and a recipient during the project, but also after it. Both players appear to need each other: the first to justify the use of available funds and exercise of power; the second to benefit from such funds, the expertise, and political influence of the donors in an international context. The hybrid public administration system, resulting from this coexistence, combines both project and operational features discussed further in the next chapter. In the end, formal institutional structures implemented in a developing context of e-government are run according to many informal forces and discourses found present.

8   CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

8.1   INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a cross-case discussion of international e-government assistance, projects, and sustainability. These three concepts, that form the structure of this chapter originate from the research question: '**How are internationally assisted e-government projects institutionalized?'**. Towards the end of Chapter Four, a similar diagram to the following one was introduced to present how assistance can be conceptually related to institutional structures, projects to institutional processes, and sustainability to institutional integration:
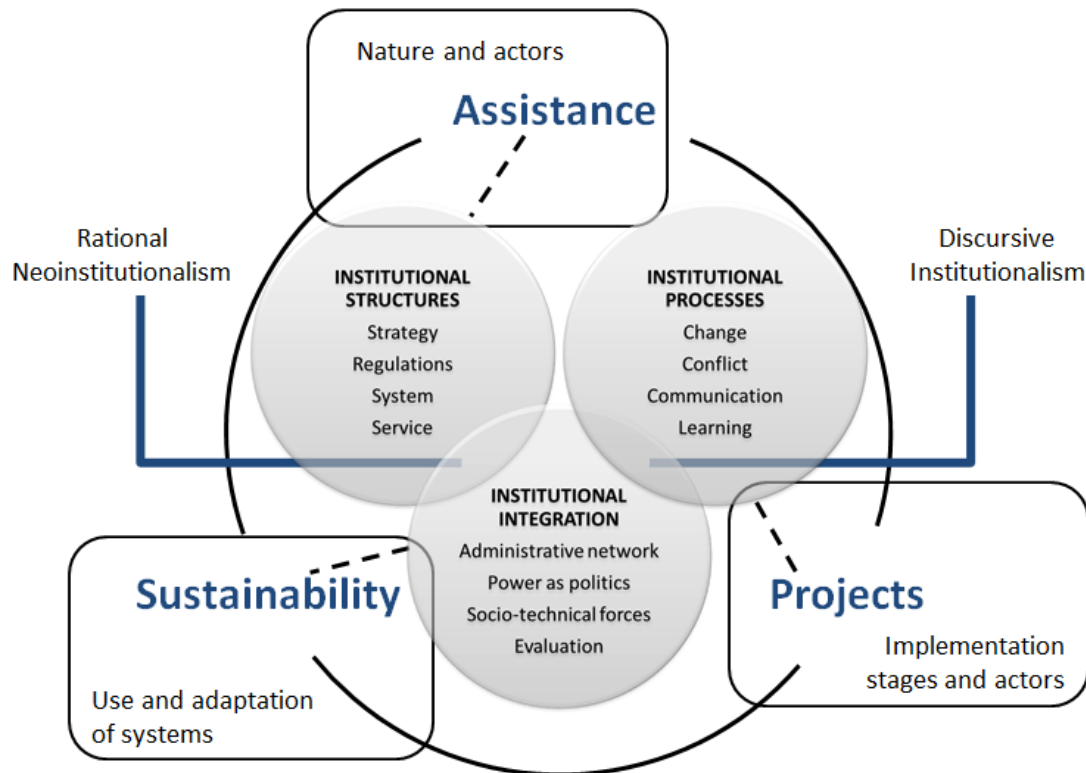

FIGURE 36: THE COMPLETE FRAMEWORK OF THIS STUDY

This diagram presents the complete framework of this study. Its final version here is enriched with the sub-units of analysis in the outer circle. For assistance, its nature and actors were considered as the most important ones to be analysed in more detail here. For projects, it was necessary to look at their implementation stages and actors. Finally, sustainability is discussed along the lines of use and adaptation of e-government systems.

All these sub-units of analysis are associated with the main concepts in the outer circle, but also with the three inner ones which emerged during the coding and analysis explained in the research strategy part of Chapter Five.

The analysis in Chapters Six and Seven drove attention on the roles and positions of different actors and, especially, end-users. This is complementary but important, because actors provide the links between the units and sub-units of analysis in the inner and outer circles of the previous diagram, due to being involved in all of them. The reason for this choice is also to give a critical interpretation of the institutionalization of internationally assisted e-government projects by looking at it from different angles.

Like the two previous chapters, this is informed by Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) as the diagram shows, but the aim of the cross-case analysis here is to compare and generalise, answering thus to the research question and informing back to theory. The implied relationships between institutional structures and assistance, institutional processes and projects, and finally institutional integration and sustainability, are important to assure a clear and organic flow of ideas from the previous discussions. This should lead to the analysis and identification of theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions of this thesis in the final parts and conclusions.

8.2   INTERNATIONAL E-GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

The technical expertise of international donors on certain areas does not need to be considered the same as their ability to implement the changes they propose in a local context. Neither does the recipients' knowledge of local forces need to support the claim of some local leaders that they have the expertise to implement certain changes and reforms.

The two previous chapters showed that when both donors and recipients are able to work together in a constructive way, the results are generally satisfactory. Although both case studies were considered successful, they followed different paths of bilateral (the first) and multilateral (the second) assistance and project management strategies. These reforms were not without challenges. This chapter builds on the two previous ones by discussing in more

detail how international assistance can be related to institutional structures by focusing on the changing roles of its actors in a changing environment.

8.2.1   THE NATURE OF INTERNATIONAL E-GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

To understand the nature of international e-government assistance in this study, it is necessary to highlight again that Albania is a world example for receiving and administering international aid for public sector reforms. The general aim of such assistance is to benefit the citizens of Albania by supporting their government. A representative of OSCE, the donor agency for the second case study makes the following statement about this:

> *"The overall aim is to support Albania in its democratization efforts and establishment and consolidation of the rule of law in Albania. So the beneficiaries at the end of the day will be all Albanian citizens by practically the support given to the Government of Albania"*

This approach and the expectation towards international assistance have been institutionalized in Albania. The government takes it so seriously, that there is a Department of Strategy and Donor Coordination in the Council of Ministers to regulate all such activities at a strategic level. A representative of this department explains about it as follows:

> *"A structure is created, a system is created, a calendar of work, how the work is done, in order to standardise this process. Because before, just for orientation, every ministry applied for funding to every donor. While now there is a specific structure, there is a process where the requests go, their approval, who contributes. For this the department is responsible."*

The role and influence of international assistance, adapted practices, and imported models is so strong in Albania that even the Department of Strategy and Donor Coordination itself is not original, but adapted from an Anglo-Saxon model as the same source explains:

"There are many projects involved; especially the system of integrated planning is something you can focus on because it is very important, also as an experience, because it is an Anglo-Saxon experience."

Looking at the two previous chapters, there are some similarities and differences on the nature of bilateral or multilateral assistance that influenced their institutional structures, but also processes and integration. The nature of international assistance and the relationship between the government and the donors was not always the same. In one hand, USAID and Millennium Challenge Corporation supported a large scale programme on e-government services and the new one-stop-shop agencies for businesses in Albania. Except the National Registration Center discussed in more detail in Chapter Six, part of the programme was the E-Procurement Agency, the electronic database for taxes, the National Licensing Center, and a number of other projects.

The European Union, the Organisation for Stability and Co-ordination in Europe (OSCE), Statistics Norway and the Austrian Government on the other hand helped with the modernisation of the National Register of Civil Status in the General Directorate of Civil Status and Ministry of Interior. This is how the USA and EU assistance differ from each other in the eyes of a representative from a non-governmental organisation in Albania who has worked with both:

About U.S. assistance: *"What I can say, what I see as the difference between the two is this. USAID comes with a unique idea here. They have some money like, for example, from the Millennium Challenge Corporation, yes, and they want to spend that money here. We apply and so do also other organisations as well, which can be foreign, local or foreign with local sub-contractors. They have prepared the project and they have targeted it specifically for Albania."*

About EU Assistance: *"Europe differs from this I just mentioned, at least on the surface, because there might be similar approaches. They don't have projects targeted for Albania, they have projects targeted for themselves, but they want also Albania to be in."*

This external opinion highlights the difference between the USA and the EU approach to international assistance in general. There are many non-governmental organisations like this one in Albania that emerged not out of civil needs, but from the opportunity of funds available from international donors (Chiodi 2007). It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss the role of such organisations, but their perspective is important to understand the impact of international assistance on e-government projects. Because of their experience in the last two decades of post-communist transition in Albania, non-governmental perspectives like this one provide a solid knowledge background on many assistance areas.

To corroborate the validity of this external opinion from civil society, a closer look at both projects confirms the idea that USA and EU took two different strategic approaches on the two e-government projects of this study. One of the major differences here was the creation of new structures, agencies and even laws by the U.S. programme and projects, but the reformation of existing ones by the EU assistance as Chapters Six and Seven showed. Here is how a top representative of the first case and USAID involved in the management of the programme justifies the new institutions' approach:

> *"It would be best if you interviewed someone in the GoA about why it was necessary to establish new institutions. My personal experience is that it is almost always easier to stand up a new institution than to try to reform an existing one."*

The decision is left with the Government of Albania (GoA); however, the personal experience mentioned in this quote became the reality for the National Registration Center discussed in this study and other related projects of the same assistance programme for businesses' public administration. A representative of OSCE on the other hand, answers the same question as follows:

> *"In Albania the technical assistance projects work in a way that the GoA has the strategy for the modernization of the civil status system, and we support the implementation of that strategy. So in this regards, on the decision whether to make it part of the General Directorate of the Civil Status or to create a separate agency, we gave an opinion to the government, and the government decided to leave it as it is at the moment."*

He doesn't disclose in the interview the opinion that OSCE gave to the GoA, considering it as internal information, but in practice, there were no new agencies created. The General Directorate of Civil Status continued to operate within the Ministry of Interior and according to the institutional relationships with local authorities set by the existing legislation.

Although both international donors, the USA as a bilateral party and the EU as a multilateral party, have been operating in Albania for a long time, their approaches to the international assistance they give remains different in many aspects. Nevertheless, their goals and implementation is matched by the strategic structures in the Government of Albania that coordinate such collaborations. Both international assistance approaches are similar in this sense, expecting for changes and reforms to be demanded by the country, before they interfere. The fundamental difference between the two donors remains related to the implementation of assistance projects, the independence of structures they create, and the degree of control such donors want to have over them. Before discussing this in the project management part, the following sections will analyse the donor-recipient relationship as an important institutionalizing factor.

8.2.2   THE DONOR AND THE GOVERNMENT

The relationship between donors and the Government of Albania as two of the most important actors in this process is first of all conditioned by the development of the country, and so is the role of international assistance on the institutionalization of e-government reforms. When asked about the future prospects of the possible European Integration, a representative of the Department of Strategy and Donor Coordination in the Council of Ministers explains the situation as follows:

> *"This is changing even now. We have a withdrawal of the main donors. Starting with the first idea that growth and development in Albania has influenced that the income per capita as a percentage or the gross domestic product has increased. This has brought that Albania cannot be classified among the poor countries, but it is a middle income country."*

This interview clarifies that when Albania will receive the 'EU candidate' status as it is planned, it will be able to benefit from new forms of assistance from the Union, regardless of the termination of earlier ones. On the other hand, the withdrawal of the donors is not uniform among all of them as the same source explains talking about USAID, for example, that helped with the National Registration Center:

> *"USAID, for example, hasn't reduced or changed the financing. Last year we signed an agreement with them based on the framework of co-operation for 2010-2015, about 75 million dollars which are all a grant. So there is no withdrawn of focus, but it depends on the state."*

Normally the Government of Albania tries to bring different donors with similar goals and funding together to support coordinated reforms as the officer working in the Department of Strategy and Donor Coordination in the Council of Ministers explains:

> *"An objective of our work is to orient the donors to work on some specific sector. So the first objective is to direct every donor by looking at their focus, their experience and the expertise they offer, to make a division of work for the donors. […] Also in these 3 year agreements we discuss with them, we try to orient every donor into 3-4 sectors. The other goal which is even more important for giving foreign support is for us to have joining of funds from different donors to support one sector."*

But how far down the specific projects goes the integration of international assistance projects with each other? The assistance from the European Union through OSCE and Statistics Norway on the National Register of Civil Status, the second case study in this research, is a typical example of joining international assistance projects with similar goals, as an executive of the General Directorate of Civil Status explains:

> *"Statistics Norway was an independent project of the Norwegian government […] independent from European Union. It was an independent project, but because the goal was the same it was incorporated and we have worked during all the time together. This means that in that table there we had meetings every day where there*

were present the technical assistance of OSCE, Statistics Norway and the General Directorate of Civil Status, Ministry of Interior."

Not only has the Government of Albania been able to convince both donors, Statistics Norway and EU-OSCE, to work together on the same project, but it also has a coordinating role in the steering committee meetings. There were these types of arrangements that institutionalized such consultative approaches or international assistance coordination in Albania. Going further down the operational level in the government structures, the perception of international assistance remains positive, as one of the middle managers working in the General Directorate of Civil Status explains:

> *"Normally it is better that we have received the international assistance. Because of the experience, because of trainings and using the international assistance we have been much better, because we would have had to suffer all problems ourselves if we hadn't taken the international assistance. We would have been left behind if we had wanted to do everything ourselves from the very beginning, while here we have used the last technology and we have used the training, in a way, we have taken a lot from them."*

The assistance from OSCE, Statistics Norway and the Austrian party in this project was highly regarded compared to the local capabilities, although they worked together. The relationship between the government and USAID - Millennium Challenge Corporation was different. The donor in this case had a much more centralized power at a higher level, coordinating the whole programme and projects as newly created agencies. However, on a more operational level, the work was performed by local experts and staff as an executive of the National Registration Center summarizes:

> *"International assistance, now, practically, international assistance consisted of, or as a final result has become clear that it was about the financial capabilities they had to help the Albanian government, because the staff they selected for implementing these ideas and processes has been all selected in Albania, they were all Albanians."*

The relationship with USAID is characterised by the project management control of the donor on a central level, but at the same time it empowers Albanian experts and government resources to decide on a local level within the newly created structures. With OSCE the relationship was different. The donor and the government had balanced consultative project meetings at both higher and lower levels. Not surprisingly, no new structures were created for the civil status, but the existing ones changed significantly with the electronic register. The donors' involvement is justified by their perceived expertise in helping Albania to join the European Union, as a representative of an executive of Public Administration Directorate indirectly related to the two projects explains:

> *"These are new institutions created because of challenges, because of obligations, because of adjustments needed between Albanian legislations and public administration with EU countries where we are heading."*

Clearly the institutionalization role of donors and international assistance towards the government in Albania is a strategic one. Accepting international assistance appears to have become the norm or in other words institutionalized for many governmental reforms and structural changes. This was discussed also in the part about institutional structures in the two previous chapters. The accepting attitude towards international assistance among local staff working in the General Directorate of Civil status, but also in the National Registration Center, is a reflection of the accepting attitude towards higher-lever decisions. The only difference is that their responsibility toward the end-users of the services is much more direct than that of the policy-makers and signers of the donor agreements. This discussion about the end-users of the two internationally assisted e-government projects continues in the following section.

8.2.3   THE DONOR AND END-USERS

The purpose of this study is not to assess the quality of e-government services offered by the assisted projects. However, an analysis of their assessments done by third parties or the online survey conducted for this research is expected to contribute towards a better understanding of the institutionalization of such assisted reforms. End-users that should adapt the services are the first to be considered in this case.

The contact of end-users with international e-government assistance happens in two moments: first when they hear about the new services and donors' contribution from the media and later when they experience the services. Starting with the first moment and the assistance from USAID for the creation of the National Registration Center, the donor had prepared a strong public relations campaign. Its goal and purpose was to inform the public and assure its acceptance of the project. The campaign, including its evaluation and study by an external organisation, was financed by the same project for the National Registration Center. The results of the survey conducted by the donor-appointed independent organisation are summarized in the following chart:
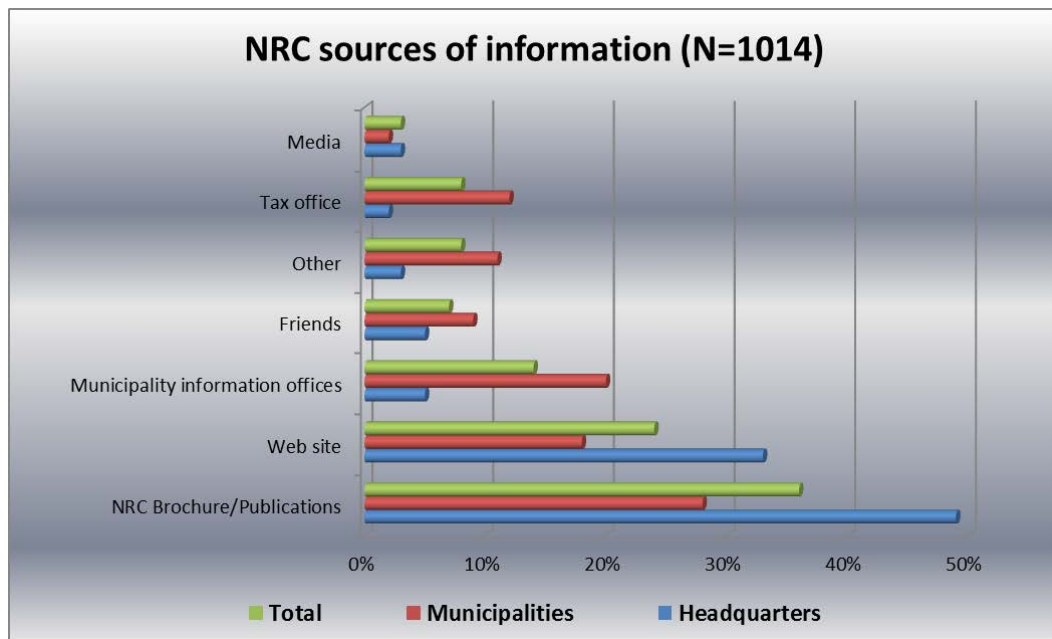

FIGURE 37: NRC SOURCES OF INFORMATION (Partners Albania 2010: 54)

This report was prepared by Partners Albania for the Millennium Challenge Corporation Albania Threshold Program II in partnership with USAID. The study took place between January 2009 and March 2010, about two years after the Center was handed over to the government. As the chart shows, the respondents received information about the NRC from a variety of sources including NRC publications and brochures as the most common one, followed by the NRC website, tax authorities, local government, friends, and media. The differences between the head office and municipalities are related to the level of formality in the communication which was higher for the first where brochures and written

publications were used more, and lower for the second where information offices were used more.

Monitoring the performance of NRC two years after it became operational was the last component of the assistance project and the last link between international assistance and end-users. But how were the results of this chart institutionalized? Looking retrospectively, in July 2007 the donor outsourced the business needs' survey in Albania, two months before the launch of the National Registration Center in September (IDRA 2007). There are two interesting information in this report about the interaction of the donor with the end-users who in this case are the survey respondents. One of the survey charts shows a reliance on visits to the tax office for companies, especially outside Tirana (84 %) compared to the companies located in Tirana (54%) (IDRA 2007). This was before the NRC was launched. The web site and online communications are only on the third place here. Later the survey asks an interesting question on the business registration process and the issue of information as summarised in this other chart below:
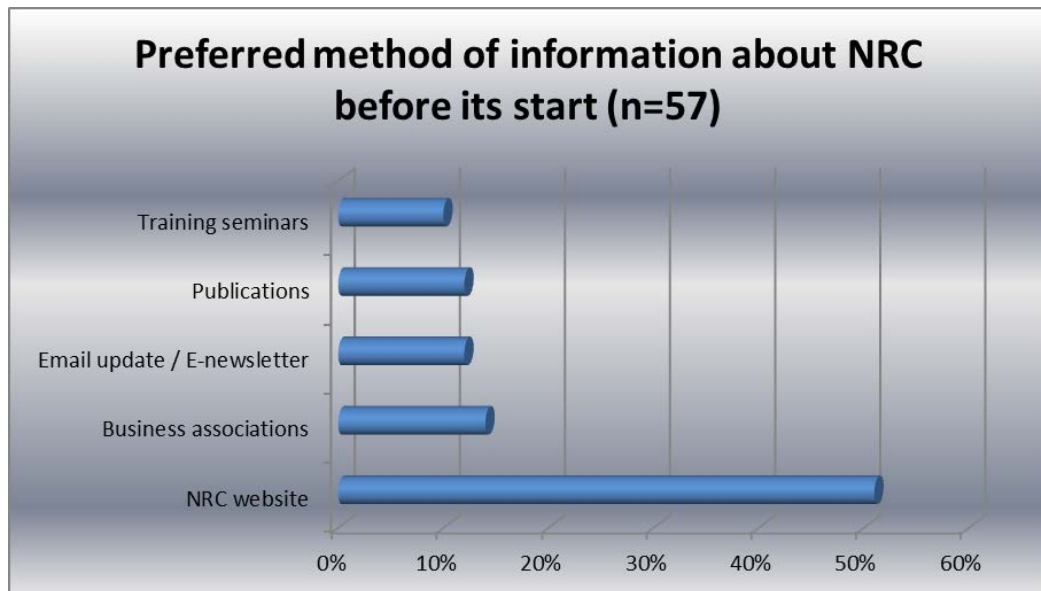

FIGURE 38: DESIRED SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT NRC (IDRA 2007: 47)

The option scoring the highest here (IDRA 2007) is contradicting the report in 2010 (Partners Albania 2010), showing a lesser use of internet services for this e-government service now than the expressed desire before. The problem, however, is not related to a

change in end-users' behaviour, but to the 2007th survey structure where *'information and visits in the office'*, is not a choice in this question.

The apparently independent organisation conducting the survey, IDRA, is not really asking about business needs in their study two months before the launch of NRC. Instead, through this question, it is pushing the institutionalization of electronic communications to the respondents as end-users. The promotion of this choice and through it the legitimisation of NRC is a strategic goal for the donor and the government, considering that the core of the new agency is the one-stop-shop electronic registration service. In this sense, this is an example of how project evaluation surveys can be used not only to pre-assess the needs of end-users, but instead, to raise awareness for the new services, create, and shape the demand for them.

The respondents have no other choice, but to select the NRC website as the main source of information here (49%). But does this really mean that new practices of new online vs. old face-to-face communication practices are being institutionalized, as these reports financed by the donor attempt to show? Not really. The evidence in the previous chart (Partners Albania 2010) from another independent organisation, but again hired by the same donor, shows a more realistic picture. NRC publications remain the most popular source of information because they are formal and contain also legal information about rules and regulations, regardless of the distribution method on the website, in the NRC offices or face-to-face.

In the case of OSCE and the National Register of Civil Status, the donor supported the launching promotion campaign when the system was ready, as this news release from the website of the Delegation of the European Union in Albania shows:

> *"TIRANA, 27 October 2010 – A public awareness campaign to promote the use of Albania's new standardized address system was launched today, in framework of the project "Modernisation of Administrative Address and Civil Registration Systems", funded with €2.5 million by the EU, and additional funds by the OSCE and U.S. government and implemented by OSCE. The campaign informs about the*

new address system and about the benefits of using official addresses instead of the informal reference points used so far."

It was the government who arranged the promotion of the electronic register of civil status associated with the new biometric identification documents, although the two projects were different. This latter service was outsourced with a concession contract to Aleat, the joint venture between the French Safran Group and the Albanian – American Enterprise fund; however, it took most of the attention by the government and by the end-users in the promotion campaign.

The association made between the electronic register of civil status and the new biometric documents was so strong among the end-users that this research could not separate the first from the second, although the initial intention was to study international assistance on the first only. To support this statement, this is how the General Directorate of Civil Status advertises the National Register of Civil Status in a promotional brochure, along with the picture shown here:

"The certificates (of birth, marriage, death and family), identification documents and passports are all considered as secure documents issues by the government. In order to produce these secure documents, it is compulsory for your civil status data to be extracted from the National Register of Civil Status."

The new identity card shown in the picture and the biometric passport is not produced by the government at the time of this study, but by company that won the concession on them: Aleat. The government, however, supervises the whole process, including the partnership with the Austrian party and the donors. The General Directorate of Civil Status is fully responsible for the National Register, although to the citizens this is presented as a system in function of the identification documents. The reason for this could be first of all that the register is more related to back-office functions, rather than tangible services like the

identification documents. The government enforced the use of the system legally by pushing the applications for the new identification documents in line with the donor, but also with the business partners involved in the reform.

In both cases of international e-government assistance discussed in this thesis, there was no formal study on the role and efficiency of international assistance on the newly offered business registration and civil status services. This gap was filled by this research. Two surveys were conducted in September 2011, one about e-government services to businesses and the other about civil status services to citizens. A specific question, similar for both, focused on the perception of international assistance on each of the projects discussed in this study. The results are summarised in the following chart:
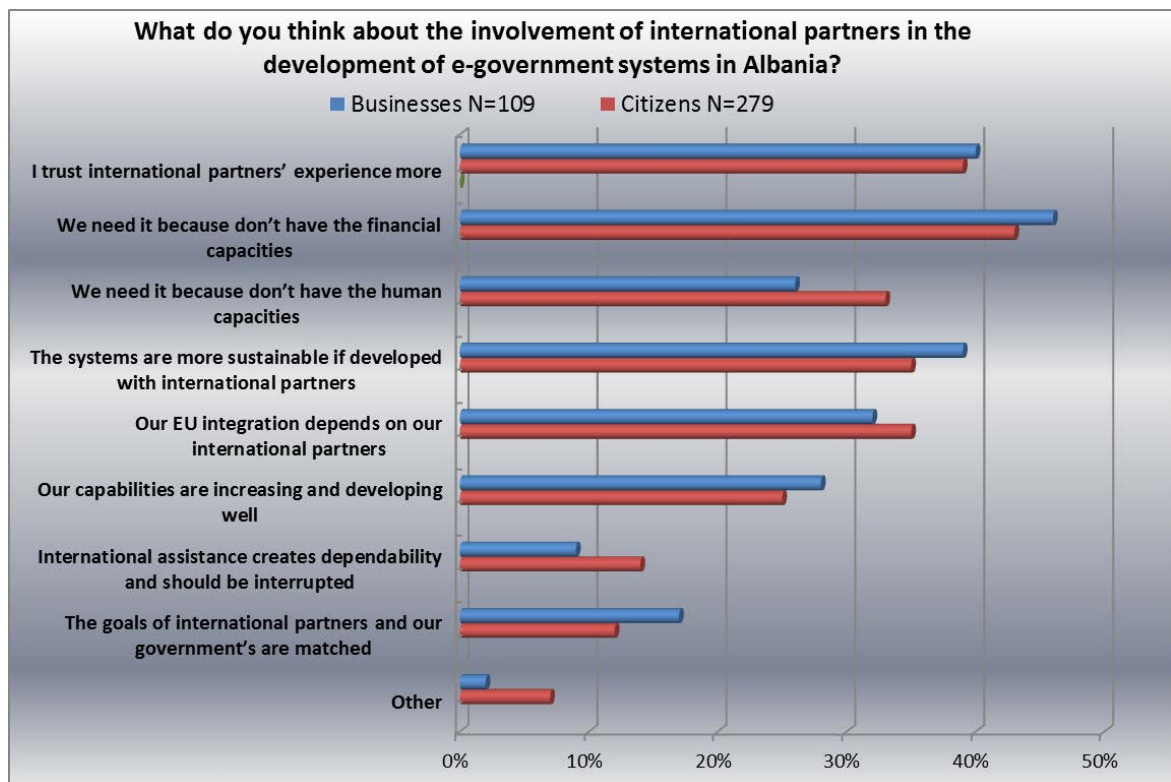

FIGURE 39: USERS' PERCEPTION ON INTERNATIONAL E-GOVERNMENT PARTNERS

The results in this chart are the users' perceptions four years after the two projects were implemented. There are no big differences between the responses from business representatives and citizens, although the two surveys were conducted separately. What this chart shows is that international partners have been institutionalized in the perception

of both types of users as first of all providers of financial resources. It makes rational sense that every tax payer would be happy for international assistance to pay for public services rather than him or herself.

It is interesting to notice the high number of respondents who trust international partners' experience more. This is associated with acknowledging the lack of local human resources. International organisations and donors have institutionalized their policy-making role towards important reforms in this sense. What is contradictory here is that regardless of the temporary nature of the projects, respondents believe that internationally assisted e-government projects are more sustainable than those developed in-house. The same trend persists even in the second part of the larger survey (N=771) on the same questions about e-government services in general:
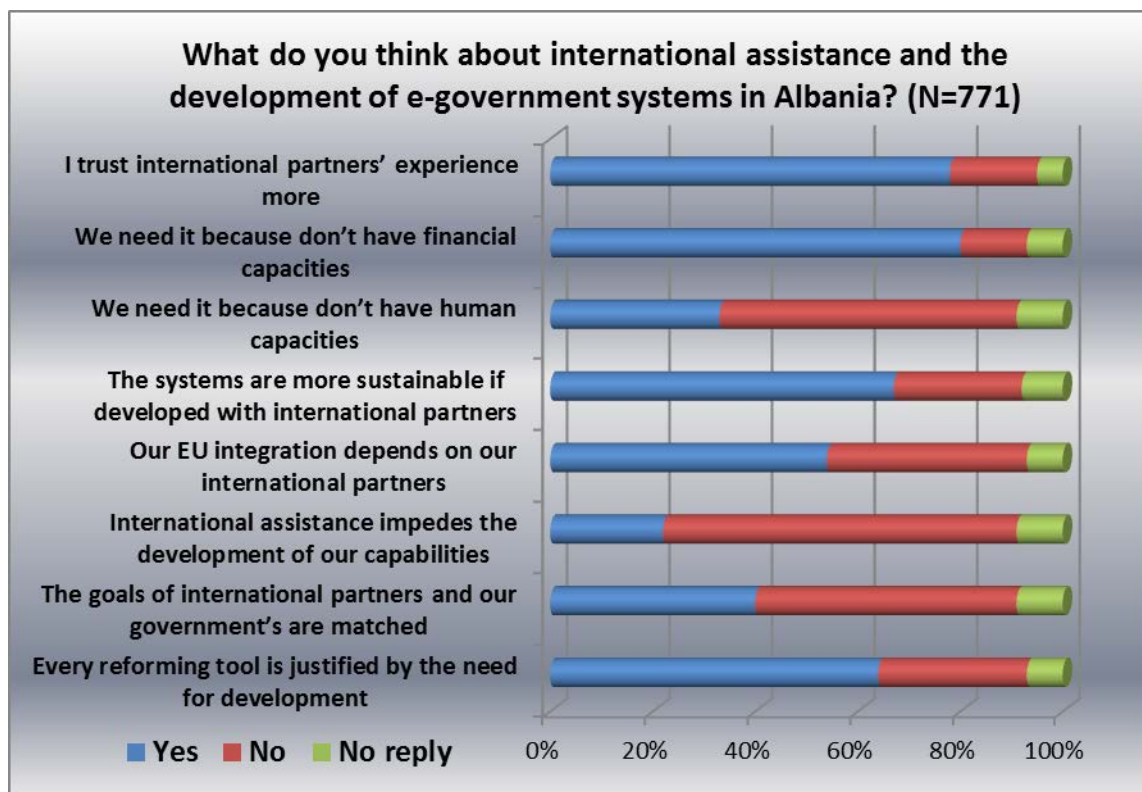

FIGURE 40: INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS AND E-GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS

End-users have adapted an over-positive attitude towards international e-government assistance in Albania. In a new 'Yes' or 'No' format, the question in this survey yields similar results compared in both case studies. End-users don't agree that international

assistance impedes the development of local capabilities. Furthermore, they show a very pro-reform and pro-change attitude where the need to hurry up development justifies the means, focusing on short term solutions. They perceive in the international donor organisations the level of expertise, trust and responsibility towards them that they miss from the government structures, thinking in this sense that the goals of the two are not generally matched. A negative perception of the role of politics in Albania, especially in the case of civil status services from this last survey, confirms this as 42% of respondents think it is better and 46% think it is worse.

The sense of disappointment towards the government leads the end-users to seek for the same reconciliation tools as the government itself: international assistance and information technology which are in turn institutionalized. Technology and international assistance artefacts in this case serve as a bridge to fill the gap between the government and its end-users. The negative perception of end-users toward the role of politics and the top-down approach of the latter in a developing and post-communist transition country like Albania demonstrates this clearly. This problem is not solved by international assistance because the government has to take its responsibilities and rebuild the missing trust towards its citizens. International assistance was efficient to start the reforms by helping with the business and civil status registers, but it is up to the Albanian actors to take these systems and the relationship among themselves further. More important lessons can be learned in this context by the cross-case comparison of project management in the following section.

8.3   E-GOVERNMENT PROJECT MANAGEMENT

From the framework of this study presented in the introduction of this chapter the project nature of e-government reforms is assumed to be associated more with institutional processes, but to a certain extent also with institutional structures and integration. This section compares the two case studies from their project management perspective, building on the discussion of the two previous chapters, but looking more closely to the roles of their different actors during the implementation stages.

The end-users' opinions are considered more here as a triangulation tool toward critical interpretations that can enrich the researchers perspective. They serve as a starting point in

this section, based on the online survey on e-government projects and international assistance in Albania. This survey is related to the case study approach and the other research methods of the thesis discussed in more detail in Chapters Four and Five. One of its purposes was to reveal what respondents believed should be the level of involvement for each project actor. The results are summarized in the following chart:
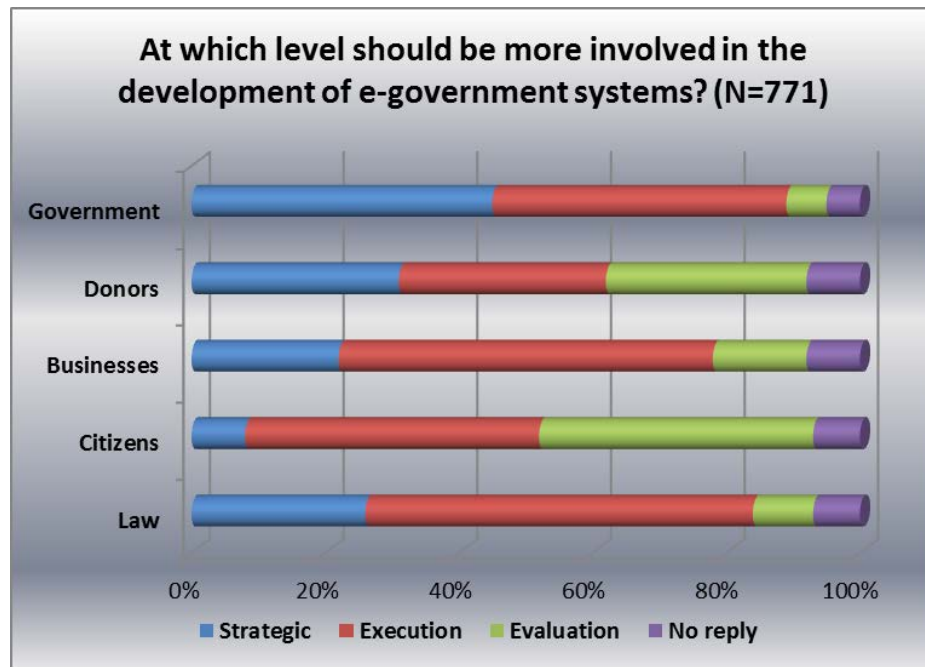

FIGURE 41: INVOLVEMENT OF ACTORS IN E-GOVERNMENT DEVELOPMENT LEVELS

The discussion of this chart will continue in this session by comparing the two case studies along the project stages (Project Management Institute 2009) of initiating, planning (both summarized as 'Strategic'), executing (same in the chart), monitoring, controlling and closing (summarized as 'Evaluation'). The findings will be cross-checked and discussed in line with the qualitative data gathered from the interviews, documentary reviews and observations discussed in the two previous chapters.

Let us stop for a moment on the values of 'No reply' for each category, since this is not going to be discussed further in the following sessions. This value is the highest for the Donors (8%) that at the same time show the most balanced distribution of other responses (Strategic = 31%, Execution = 31% and Evaluation = 30%). This 8% value of 'No reply' for the Donors, same as for Businesses (deducting that most of the respondent were answering as citizens and did not have a business), shows a level of insecurity in picking

an answer. While for businesses the hesitation could have been due to lack of knowledge, for Donors they could have wanted to pick more than one option, as they wrote on some personal emails later. Based on an interpretative assumption, if multiple options could have been chosen for each actor and not only one, the figures could have been different. Especially the 'Donors' could have ranked higher in all three categories in this case. This reflection is important in the discussion that follows.

8.3.1   INITIATING THE REFORM

Initiating a project is a strategic process necessary the obtain authorisation and justify the start of a project or phase (Project Management Institute 2009: 44). The survey chart in the introduction of this section shows that respondents expect the Government of Albania to have a leading role in the initiating and strategy-making processes of e-government projects. Following order of importance suggested by respondents, this should be followed by the involvement of donors, the legal framework, businesses and finally the citizens. The respective representatives of USAID and OSCE mentioned earlier in this chapter confirmed that the Government of Albania was responsible for initiating both projects. This is in line with the perception of end-users from the survey here.

The exclusion of citizens from the strategy-making and initiation processes on the other hand might be very well a reminiscent institution from the communist system where the people had very if no saying on the policy affairs. There is a contradiction here with the respondents' expectation to be the top evaluators of the systems as it was mentioned in the last parts about evaluation in both Chapters Six and Seven. This will be addressed again later in the monitoring and controlling session of this part.

The project initiation should be characterised by two important processes: the project charter as the document legitimising it, and the identification of stakeholders (Project Management Institute 2009). There was no problem to identify most of the stakeholders for the registration of companies or the civil status in the two previous chapters when talking about the administrative networks in the integration parts. The issue would have been as simple with the charter too; if the Government of Albania had been the sponsor of these two projects. However, because of the international assistance involved in this case, the issue of a legitimising charter and initiation is more complicated, to the extent that it is

not covered by the classical Project Management Body of Knowledge (Project Management Institute 2009).

Let us have a closer look at how the initiation of both projects was legitimised. In a brief Executive Summary of its Threshold Program, this is how Millennium Challenge Corporation explains the background of the project as follows:

> *"The newly elected administration in Albania was voted into office in July 2005 on a strong anti-corruption platform. […] The Government of Albania has requested assistance from MCC to fund three program components aimed at reforming tax administration, public procurement and business administration over 24 months."*

The two page document follows by highlighting the agreement between the government and the donor on anti-corruption reforms, recognising this problem as an impediment to the country's transition to a stable democracy. The interest on this issue is brought forward from the previous government before 2005. The summary document that bears no date continues by specifically describing the 'Expected Program Results' in clear quantitative terms as follows:

- *An increase in the total tax collected by the Large Taxpayers Office from 30.4 percent to 50 percent;*
- *Establishment of an automatic VAT refund system which is operational within six months;*
- *A reduction in the cost of governmental procurements by 20 percent (adjusted by volume, currency and inflation);*
- *An increase in the percentage of procurements completed electronically from zero to 2.5 percent;*
- *A reduction in the number of days it takes to start a business from 47 to1;*
- *An increase in the number of new businesses registered monthly from 625 to 1,000.*

Planning these quantitative outcomes might have been appropriate in USA. However, trying to institutionalise such project management practices in an informal society like Albania from the beginning was not so easy. The very problem of corruption and informality e-government systems were trying to solve could be one of the main obstacles.

The last two points are directly related to the National Registration Center. In fact, this document lays down the charter key points for the donor.

With a budget of $13.85 million mentioned in the document, USAID was put in charge to oversee the implementation of the Albania Threshold Program, together with MCC. The Government of Albania on the other hand would coordinate the activities in the General Directorate of Taxation, the Office of the Prime Minister, the Parliament, and the Ministry of Finance.

The genesis of the National Register of Civil Status on the other hand also dates back to the Government of Albania Programme of 2005 – 2009, but the need for its reformation can be found also in previous ones. This is how the General Directorate of the Civil Status summarises the starting point for this project on its website in April 2012:

> *"The existence of a complete, accurate and uniformly maintained civil status system can be considered of crucial importance for the functioning of the public administration and the society in general. For this reason, the Government of Albania made the implementation of a functional civil status system in Albania one of its main priorities. The objective was to create a National Register of Civil Status that would be ready for the Parliament elections in June of 2009."*

What is interesting in this case is how the international assistance agency, OSCE, describes its involvement in this project. The following citation is taken from their website in April 2012:

> *"The Presence assisted the country in establishing a computerized National Register of Civil Status (NRCS), which contains the civil status data of all citizens. The Register was made possible through the development of an electronic information infrastructure."*

Clearly the language of OSCE as a representative and implementing agency on behalf of the Delegation of the European Union to Albania is more diplomatic and less project-oriented than in the case of U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation before. The vagueness in this statement that can potentially describe the beginning, implementation, and even the delivery of the system, is the best representation of their consultative involvement in the

project. In every stage they worked aside the Government of Albania. Another important factor could have been the substantially smaller contribution of only 2.5 million Euros in this case compared to over 13 million USD given by the U.S. government for the other project. The logical direct relationship between the amount of the assistance and the level of involvement appears to have dictated the project management power of international donors from the beginning.

In both e-government projects, it is evident that the needs for these reforms were identified by the government that initiated them. The involvement of donors in the institutionalizing processes becomes evident from the initiation stage. The policy-making project actors appear to have been institutionalized from the beginning among themselves, but also among end-users. In order to better understand the strategic level of institutionalization in internationally assisted e-government reforms, the following section discusses the roles of different actors in project planning.

8.3.2   PROJECT PLANNING

Planning the project management is related to strategic and policy-making processes of e-government. It consists of establishing the total scope of the project, defining objectives, and developing the course of action to attain those objectives (Project Management Institute 2009: 46). On the other hand, according to classical project management standards, the planning process consists of collecting requirements to define the scope and preparing to manage time, costs, quality, human resources, communications, risks, and procurements (Project Management Institute 2009). Let us see how each of the actors engaged in this process.

The expectations of end-users in the starting chart of this section were met about the involvement of first the government and then the donor. The role of consulting businesses and citizens as interest groups were to follow. The part on the 'Law' from the chart in the beginning can be related to project planning, showing that this is expected to happen before the implementation of reforms.

Starting with the National Registration Center it was the donor that hired a group of local experts and consultants to perform a feasibility study, collect the requirements, and prepare

the new law. These groups of experts were independent from the government and the donor, but the two had agreed on involving such parties in the planning process. Following-up from Chapter Six on NRC, one of the lawyers during the interview explains this process as follows:

> *"The Institute for Contemporary Studies in one hand created a team to look at macro aspects, economic analysis, political choices etc., etc., and we were attached as legal consultants regarding specific problems and technical solutions for the new project. […]A comparison was also made with Albanian problems, so we made a real study to come up with the law. To my opinion, this has been the reason why it worked, because a tailor made study was made for Albania."*

The project planning activities were coordinated by the donor, but the content of the plan is designed by local actors and independent consultants hired for this. In this way, the U.S. donor became indispensable in the planning process. This included bringing together all decision that had to be made about time, costs, resources, and quality. Local consultants and lawyers that continued to keep a relationship with NRC even after the foreign assistance was over became the first promoters by appropriating the law according to local needs, including theirs.

This fragmentation of direct planning labour outsourced to local experts, and indirect planning to the U.S. donor, reminds us of the Taylorist approach in scientific management (Bratton, Gold 2001: 104). The 'divorce' between planning and doing goes a step further-up in the policy-making process here, being between planning to plan and actually planning. The implications of this important finding will be discussed further in the project execution part following this one.

The planning process in the case of the National Register of Civil Status was different because, first of all, of the nature of this task. There were many parties involved in this reform, so to understand the project planning process related only to the Register, it is necessary to dissect it from the operational assistance, and the outsourcing of identification documents.

The network of actors in this case acted as follows: The Government of Albania identified the need for the modernisation of the civil status. The European Union through OSCE offered its assistance to coordinate this reform. Statistics Norway was brought in, because it was already assisting the government on a very similar project. The Austrian government offered the system for the National Register of Civil Status. Aleat, the joint venture between the French Safran Group and the Albanian American Enterprise Fund was given the concession to produce the identification documents. Either as a whole or fragmented for each relationship explained here, the involvement of each actor has both operational and project assistance elements. Let us recall for a moment a statement by a leading executive in the General Directorate of Civil Status who explains the mechanism behind the created network of actors from the government, donor agency, international partners, and system providers:

> *"The project was organized by creating a steering committee, with representatives from Ministry of Interior, with representatives from the European Union, OSCE etc. which periodically gathered, set the objectives, analysed the previous period and set the objectives for the following meeting until the next meeting of the steering committee."*

No new agencies were planned beyond the existing General Directorate of Civil Status. No processes were changed in the civil status units. Even the law Nr. 10129 on the Civil Status was approved in the parliament on 11 May 2009, one year after the electronic register started to operate and the new identification documents started to be issued. Being contrary to users' expectations on the rule of law expressed in the chart at the beginning of this part, not surprisingly they blamed the role of politics for this. The only new component was the electronic register, but instead of a project manager or leading organisation, planning and coordination happened in on-going consultative meetings.

For all these reasons, the National Register of Civil Status reform can be called a hybrid 'operational project', which is an interesting conclusion in this discussion. This project was planned not by collecting stakeholders' requirements to define the scope, but had them engage in every step of the planning and later executing processes. It is important to note here that representatives of local civil status units and citizens as users did not have a direct

voice in this steering committee. However, neither the government, nor either of the donors or partner companies admit they had the leading role in this project or programme.

The project planning structures and processes were institutionalized differently by the two assistance projects. USAID and MCC took a focused perspective, coordinating project planning at a higher level, but enabling local actors and specialists to design the new legal and institutional framework for new agency from the beginning. OSCE and the National Civil Status network on the other hand gave birth to a collective decision-making structure with shared responsibilities and accountability in the form of a hybrid operational project with step-by-step planning.

What was institutionalized from the beginning by both donor groups, although different, had an important impact on the perception and implementation of the projects later. The following section continues in this direction with the project execution for both case studies.

8.3.3   PROJECT EXECUTION

Executing is about completing the work defined in the project management plan in order to satisfy the project expectations and specifications (Project Management Institute 2009: 55). The respondents of the survey and at the same time the users of both systems, expected businesses to be highly engaged in executing and implementing the projects by providing the systems. The government and the users themselves came next. Donors being last in this list is a contradictory result in this survey, as the same respondents in another questions said that they trust international partners more than their government, and they believe the solutions they provide are more sustainable. The perception and reality about the relationship between donors and end-users was discussed in the previous section about international e-government assistance. To understand their replies better, it is necessary to put them in the context of project execution that the users expect to happen locally.

The current project management alignment of actors is based on balancing outsourcing with local capabilities. However, the two projects in this study did not follow the same path from strategic planning and legal regulations to execution. It was only USAID and Millennium Challenge Corporation that based the whole execution of the project on the

new law of the National Registration Center. It is important to remember here that the preparation of this law was part of this same donor project, in its initiation and planning stages. In any case, this was better than execution of the National Register of Civil Status project. The new law for the civil status in this case passed in the parliament about one year after the electronic system started to operate. Until then, the National Register of Civil Status was regulated by the old laws, the steering committee actors, and some new decision of the Council of Ministers.

Businesses were highly involved in both project executions as expected. First Chemonics, a U.S. company, was contracted by USAID and MCC to design the NRC system as well as that of the Directorate of Taxation, e-Procurement, and other related projects in the same programme. The company, however, subcontracted a number of IT services to Alpha-XP (US), then through it to IKubInfo (Albania), to design and build the business registration system. The project was clearly financed and coordinated by MCC and USAID, but using local resources as a lawyer engaged as a consultant explains in an interview:

> *"It has financed the project, its technical and IT aspects. IT as well was financed by USAID. The project, the system itself was property of USAID which then was donated to the Albanian state. So the IT system in itself was created by USAID. They financed also the building itself, the preparation of the building, the whole hardware system for IT, so the whole project was developed by USAID, also staff trainings."*

The same fragmented approach as in the case of planning is applied by MCC and USAID during execution. The central coordination of the project execution activities is centrally controlled by the donor, but lower level responsibilities are broken down, fragmented, and delegated locally. The procurement of information technology services was institutionalized from the beginning at NRC.

The government followed the vision of the donors even after the projects were over. At the moment, IKubInfo, an Albanian company, is contracted by the Government of Albania to maintain and develop the National Registration Center, but also the related E-Procurement System, Electronic Tax System and the National Licensing System that were developed from the same U.S. assistance programme.

On the other hand, the Government of Albania continues to pay according to a service contract to the Government of Austria and related subcontractors for the National Register of Civil Status. Only a limited number of operations are performed in the General Directorate of Civil Status, regardless of the desire of some staff there to take more control as explained in Chapter Seven.

The support from USA on the NRC started with a centralised project management approach. It consisted on providing the financial resources and coordination enabling local actors to build and later maintain the systems and the new agencies. EU and OSCE with their consultative approach on the other hand, supported the prebuilt system by the Austrian party, but did not enable the full transfer of such capabilities to any public or private Albanian organisation. The donors' involvement in the project execution context in this case was limited, mainly helping the General Directorate of Civil Status with infrastructure.

As a matter of fact, the outsourcing of development and maintenance of services results to be the preferred solution for the internationally assisted project executions and beyond. This practice is further institutionalized by keeping reduced structures and underpaid staff in the information technology units of both the National Registration Center and the General Directorate of Civil Status.

The role of the government in both projects has been limited in the execution stage, mainly facilitating the allocation of some resources under its control. In the political and public arena, the government was much more active than the other actors to assure the institutionalization of the new systems as governance tools. The result is two well institutionalized information systems with their operational practices, but which could hardly be replicated without international assistance. The policy-making structures of government missed the project management lesson by outsourcing a great part of project execution. However, the local experts working with the new systems, as described in the two previous chapters, could take the lead in their further development and institutionalization, even without the help of international assistance. This in turn remains a power struggle between policy-making forces pushing for outsourcing and technical forces wanting more control. Monitoring and controlling in this context is discussed next.

8.3.4   MONITORING AND CONTROLLING

Monitoring and controlling consists of tracking, reviewing and regulating the progress of the project, identifying areas of change and initiating these changes (Project Management Institute 2009: 59). This is related to the evaluation asked in the surveys, as explained in the 'Evaluation and legitimacy' session of the 'Institutional integration' part in both previous chapters. The respondents are clear that it should be them as end-users who should evaluate the e-government systems. It is interesting to notice that the actor they trust the least in this is the government with only 6%, the lowest figure in the chart at the introduction of this section among. Respondents would be happy to have the donor monitor and control the project, businesses or even the law to be used as a standard, before the government.

This research was conducted after the projects were over, so the only resources to cross-check the monitoring and controlling processes are the project reports and interviews. Some of the previous discussions on public communication, conflict resolution and learning in Chapters Six and Seven will be placed in the project management context here.

In the case of NRC, the project was strictly monitored and controlled by the donors: MCC and USAID. Reporting for the public in Albania, they had a bimonthly newsletter named Millennium Challenge Corporation Monitor that was issued for along the 24 months of the project. Its purpose was twofold: to report monitoring and controlling on the project, but also to educate the public on the new agencies and services. The final report of MCC and USAID was very detailed as well, containing not only a summary of what was done by the programme, but also a lot of other documents, from the legal framework to TV publicity spots. This was distributed on a hard and soft copy.

Although bound by an agreement with the Government of Albania, the donor in this case was accountable for the expenditure of the funds to the U.S. government. These monitoring and reporting practices were not available for this study. However, to control this process they implemented a Performance Based Monitoring Plan for all contractors and subcontractors in the project, as specified in the donor Request for Task Order Proposals of the Stage II MCC Threshold Program:

> *"USAID is committed to rigorous evaluation of program impact. The PBMP (Performance Based Monitoring Plan) should accord with social scientific standards and include both baseline, outcome and if possible 'control' data to allow valid inferences about program impact The Contractor shall develop the PBMP along the lines elaborated in this section to track progress on a quarterly basis."* (p. 14)

In order to meet the objectives of this project, monitoring and controlling followed the same quantitative approach as the objectives explained in the initiation stage. This is what the expression 'social scientific standards' mean in this quotation. To illustrate with another example, this is how the technical proposal evaluation criteria were presented in the Request for Task Order Proposals of the Stage II MCC Threshold Program:

Technical Evaluation Criteria	*Weight*	
Technical Approach	*40 points*	
Personnel Qualifications and Experience	*30 points*	
Management Approach	*15 points*	
Past Performance	*15 points*	
Total Possible Technical Evaluation Points	100 points	(p. 44)

On a more strategic level, the whole MCC and USAID programme that included the creation of NRC considered the Control of Corruption Measure and the Rule of Law Measure baselines from the World Bank Institute, expecting quantified improvements based on them. Not surprisingly, this quantitative approach to monitoring and controlling became institutionalized, as the words of an executive manager in NRC show about four years after the project setting up the agency was over:

> *"So, considering that the evaluation of impartial, they are not biased, ok, they are out of my control, out of the government control, out of the control from interest groups. They say 'yes, the followed practice brought Albania 71 places up in the list of countries."*

He is talking about the World Bank Doing Business Report here where, according to him, Albania jumped 71 places up the list with the creation of the National Registration Center

and the modernisation of many services for businesses. These benchmarking reports are good to give an overview of the country, but to monitor and control the work of NRC the agency itself has to develop its own capabilities. These structures on an agency or governmental level are either missing, given little power to enforce any changes, or are based on contingency approaches led by top policy makers as explained also in Chapter Six on NRC.

There is very little to say about monitoring and controlling of the National Register of Civil Status and OSCE. Monitoring and controlling of the project stage merged with the operational practices in the existing General Directorate of Civil Status. The only exception was the steering committee of local and international partners that supervised the reform and international assistance in this case. The newsletter format was used even here by the donor to report the progress, educate the public about it, and promote the project outcomes. This appears to be among those institutionalized international assistance practices.

The international assistance from European Union through OSCE did not produce any final report on the National Register of Civil Status reform beyond two newsletters and some press releases which they were happy to share. All other documents, including monitoring and controlling, change management, and finally reporting to the European Union Commission for the project was not shared or available at the time of this research. Interviews remained the only source of information in this case. The following statement from a high level officer in the General Directorate of Civil Status explains the whole process:

> *"Here the money was of European Union. European Union has its supervision. We have had some times supervisions of the system, of the project from the supervisors because OSCE doesn't have anything to monitor, because OSCE was to be monitored, because it was an implementing agency, but European Union had its monitoring. "*

Many things can be understood from this statement. First, the relationship between the European Union, OSCE and the Government of Albania does not seem regulated as a whole, on a project or programme basis, but on a one-to-one basis. Each of these actors

kept their independence and direct line of accountability. At the same time, the real monitoring and control mechanism that at the same time had the power to discuss and enforce changes was the already mentioned steering committee as the same officer continues explaining:

> *"Except the steering committee which, as I mentioned, gathered at a frequency every two or three months, depending on the problems, where the main donor which was European Union was present at every time, made its questions, had its remarks, evaluated the report presented by the technical assistance of OSCE, supported also by the Ministry of Interior and concluded how the project had to be developed in the future."*

This steering committee and the joint opinions discussed therein seem to have much more monitoring, controlling, and decision-making power. Its role is institutionalized first of all because of the longer term relationship and commitments between the Government of Albania and European Union, related to the integration prospects of the country. The involvement of Statistics Norway had only to be adjusted and accept this format in the local context of these civil status reforms in Albania. This becomes clear by noticing that they produced two reports in the beginning, one in 2000 and another in 2004, following a clear project monitoring and reporting structure. However, as their assistance was combined with the larger assistance project from EU and OSCE, in the second half of 2000s, no further reports could be found from them. Formally institutionalized measurement standards in the numeric sense like the case of USAID and MCC are missing in this project.

Project monitoring and controlling discussed here is related to public communication, reporting, but also to learning, evaluation, power as politics discussed in the two previous chapters. Two different practices can be identified by this study: The first is a strictly quantitative and performance based approach applied by the U.S. donors for the NRC and electronic register of businesses. The second is a consultative and relational monitoring and controlling practice applied by EU and OSCE here is following a relational approach. In practice, the second approach appears to have been more strongly institutionalized and accepted locally. The reason for this could be the informal nature of existing local

institutions in line with the EU integration and negotiations. These future prospects lead to the following section on the project closing stage and the lessons brought forward.

8.3.5   CLOSING TRANSITION

Project management closing consists of processes necessary to finalise all activities and formally complete the project, phases and contractual obligations (Project Management Institute 2009: 64). When this research was conducted, all staff from the two donor projects was gradually dismissed. A few contacts and interviews with some of the coordinators from USAID and OSCE were only possible in the beginning. By 2011, even the Albanian staff previously working for the two projects in the donor organisations had left or been allocated to other projects, and didn't want to talk or contribute to this study. This situation describes the post-project stage after 2007 when both the National Registration Center and the support for the National Register of Civil Status were delivered to the government. Let us go back to that moment marking the transfer of ownership.

MCC and USAID had a clear project plan. Once the National Registration Center was set up, they delivered it to the Government of Albania, specifically to the Ministry of Finance who started to operate it. This was done according to the agreement the donor had with the government. The project, however, was not over here. Part of it and the closing stage was monitoring the activity of the Center for one more year. The donor did this as a consultant and through a survey study at this stage, adjusting and aligning further improvements, but with less financial support. This transition phase of one year was necessary to assure the continuity and the transfer of knowledge in NRC. More important, the donor's concern was to embed in the newly formed agency certain management practices. This is how they document this learned lesson in their final report after the project:

> *"Transfer ownership of initiatives to beneficiaries as soon as feasibility and value are demonstrated. Ownership by the counterpart guarantees sustainability. For example, the data cleaning process to create an electronic commercial registry was turned over to the NRC once the initial data matching operations had been conducted and the feasibility of the methodology had been established."*

This goal had to be aligned with the purpose of the assistance programme to fight corruption in the public administration for businesses. Other lessons for the donor include planning and executing initiatives in parallel, stimulate demand through media campaigns, take calculated risk, use local contractors and avoid duplications of projects with other donors. The government benefited in practice from these lessons documented by the donor, but did not learn to documents such lessons itself. The sustainability of this approach will be discussed in the following section later.

OSCE followed another practice in the case of the National Register of Civil Status. Their assistance focused on a strategic level, creating a network of dependencies and collective decision-making in the steering committee mentioned before. Now, however, the project is closed and the situation is summarized by this statement made by an executive in the General Directorate of Civil Status:

> *"I highly appreciate the assistance given by OSCE and European Union, but this project can now be considered close […] Regarding the part of the national registry of civil status, we have a contractual agreement with the Austrian Ministry of Interior for the maintenance of the system, which is an operational maintenance, but which has not to do with the functioning of the service as a whole"*

According to this statement, the outcome of the assistance project was more a policy for the administration of civil status services in Albania. Now, it was the task of the government to manage it. The real problem is that the General Directorate of Civil Status is politically and financially dependent on the Ministry of Interior. While international assistance itself hasn't changed this degree of relationship, the new electronic system has empowered some voices to speak for more independence for the Directorate, as one of its IT leading experts explains:

> *"No, this (the General Directorate of Civil Status) is like half independent, but it is not really independent, it depends a lot on the Ministry (of Interior). It would have been good to be a separate institution that deals specifically with this and is out of political interventions or anything else, because the Register of the Civil Status is not related to politics at all."*

The political and financial issues mentioned here remain an internal problem of the Albanian administration and public, but external to the assistance project and the donor. The project closing marked the institutionalization of an important reform, establishing a new system within the old structures. However, after the closing of both projects, both USAID and OSCE maintained their focus on the democratic governance and European Union integration of Albania through other projects.

The institutionalizing power of actors related to their identities and nature is stronger than that of the projects they support and promote in a developing country like Albania. Therefore, there is hardly a complete closing of the internationally assisted projects, as long as the co-operation between the government, the donors, and the outsourcing companies continues in related areas. The question at this point is about the sustainability of such internationally assisted e-government project reforms. This will be addressed in the next section, after the following summary for this one.

8.3.6   RECREATING GOVERNMENTS THROUGH PROJECTS

The creation of an electronic register for businesses in Albania does not require only the electronic system as a software and hardware package which can be provided with ease by the donor. The legal revisions, trainings, changes in other sectors and institutions, along with a strong political and social good will to implement the system, are a must to reduce the risk of failure which is high (Heeks 2003). The same is the case for the second example, the National Register of Civil Status, especially when thinking of how this will be connected to the system of addresses, national insurance number, criminal record, property, and other personal information. Therefore the aims and objectives of explained first in Chapter Two are very complex when analysed beyond simply stating 'democracy and good governance'.

The aims of IEGA are often based on a system-wide approach of programmes, composed of many projects and technical assistance. Involvement is essential from both donor and recipient, but in order to achieve the successful integration of such projects, political willingness is very important. The roles of the government, the donor, and those of other stakeholders can evolve throughout the different project stages and processes, regardless of the methodologies used for implementation. The changing roles of stakeholders in

internationally assisted e-government projects highlighted especially in this study are important to understand the later integration, institutionalization, and sustainability of such reforms.

Many IEGA projects and programmes are unique for a given context, so their institutional analysis should go beyond the rational view of project management methodologies. This section has shown how institutional structures, processes, and integration discussed in the two previous chapters are related on the implementation level to assistance, projects, and sustainability discussed in this one. After all, e-government reforms are nothing more than a composition of, structures, processes, actors, and technology that becomes established and institutionalized beyond projects.

8.4   SUSTAINABILITY OF REFORMS

Sustainability in the narrow sense of this study was initially related to the stability of e-government reforms. Although the analysis of sustainability could be extended to consider different ethical approaches, in this research this discussion will be limited to the combined perspective of Rational Neoinstitutionalism and Discursive Institutionalism. In this sense it was assumed that if the changes brought in by internationally assisted projects are institutionalized in the society, they are considered to be sustainable.

Although the two project cases analysed in this research are relatively new, their sustainability at this stage can be investigated in two moments: one related to their development and management, and the other to the adaptation and use of systems. In the following section, the first will be based on the views of donors, government, and system developers, while the second on those of the users. Any rising issues evidenced by analysing these views will be combined with the two previous parts on assistance and projects, leading thus to the final findings and discussion in this chapter.

8.4.1   SECURING DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE

This research indicated that there is some conflict between imposed development and maintenance practices, and the current culture of doing things with information technology in Albania. Here is an example that illustrates this: A representative of IKubInfo, the

Albanian company contracted to make and maintain the system, mentions that in 2007, when the system was handed over at the project closing stage, it had a 'Help' module. This consisted of tutorial videos. However, as the system was changed and modified under the management of the government later, they didn't continue to update the video tutorials. One of the reasons was the cost of producing them, but more important is what he says in the following statement:

> *"It is not a problem, because in key positions they have people that have been from 2007, so they have what is called institutional knowledge. They have it and they share it with one-another."*

This statement summarizes the type of management that was in reality institutionalized after the project closing stage. Regardless of the two different ethical and managerial approaches brought in by each donor, the socially accepted norm that became institutionalized followed the local ethics of personal relationships and knowledge. People have now the power that the donor and the project intended to embed in the system, procedures, and structures, because now they can control and change these structures as it suits them, without the donor's intervention. Regardless of the fact that the MCC and USAID, but also OSCE in the other project, tried to institutionalise certain practices, some of the informal institutional culture that existed before prevailed.

At the same time, the stabilisation of civil status policies at a higher level between OSCE and the Government of Albania created new dependencies from the outsourced operational and maintenance services, provided in this case by the Austrian party and other companies. The transition process that justified such decision is summarized by a part-time expert paid by the assistance project to work on the system of addresses in the National Register of Civil Status:

> *"Besides the fact that this is built, it leaves a mark, another institution is created, a mark, a specific department that will remain that will manage this work. So let's say, we have been 20 specialists. In the end 4-5 specialists will remain that will maintain the system and will refresh the data. On behalf of the Albanian government there will be a unit in the Ministry of Interior within the General Directorate of Civil Status. "*

The expectations of this Albanian specialist are that the institutional knowledge will remain with the local people who were involved with the project, like him, and who remained with the agency. This will constitute the basis for the sustainability of the new system and services. Unlike USAID and MCC, OSCE does not make strong attempts to embed all civil status reforms into formal new structures, technology, and processes outside the existing organisational context institutionalized in the Albanian civil status administration. Local experts involved with the project would use their expertise on the system, manage, and develop it further together with the outsourcing companies.

On a political level, the power of local technical specialist is acknowledged in the General Directorate of Civil Status. This is kept under control by limiting their role, even when they would like to take more responsibilities as described in Chapter Seven and in the project execution session before. This is done through the outsourcing of operational services or through the financial dependency from the Ministry of Interior. The international e-government assistance from OSCE did not or could not interfere with such local power struggles and institutionalized discourses. Instead, both donor agencies, USAID and OSCE respectively, left the new National Registration Center and the National Register of Civil Status to find their place among interdependent post-project actors.

Embedding the institutional knowledge in the people and not in the system, processes, or structures sacrificed some usage of information technology to fight informality and corruption which was the goal of these two projects. However, the positive side of this was assuring the local acceptance for the development and maintenance of the systems. This situation represents the ethical and sustainability balance of internationally assisted projects in this study. Institutionalizing the sustainability of these reforms started with the technical assistance and involvement of the donors, but it is finally shaped by the local managers and end-users. More about the use and adaptation of the systems on this level is to follow in the next section.

8.4.2   SUSTAINABILITY BETWEEN USE AND ADAPTATION

The level of usage for both the electronic register of businesses and the one of civil status is assumed to be a direct indicator of their social acceptance, therefore of their adaptation and sustainability. However, there is a different between unwanted use and desired

adaptation in terms of sustainability conflicts that this cross-case discussion will try to interpret. The diagrams summarising some of the survey responses for this study, or taken from third party documents, are not intended to assess the quality of e-government reforms, but rather explore their degree of adaptation and institutionalization.

To analyse the situation for the two case studies, the discussion in this section is based on two survey questions. The first is related to the current use of the systems. This question is expected to give insights on the sustainability of the services. The second question is about end-users' expectations on the future integration of the systems. Its purpose is to understand how sustainable the new electronic registers of businesses and civil status are perceived to be in a broader context of society, interoperability, and future.

Starting with the sustainability of services offered by NRC, the data is taken by a survey conducted by Partners Albania in 2010, an independent organisation hired by the donor to perform this study:
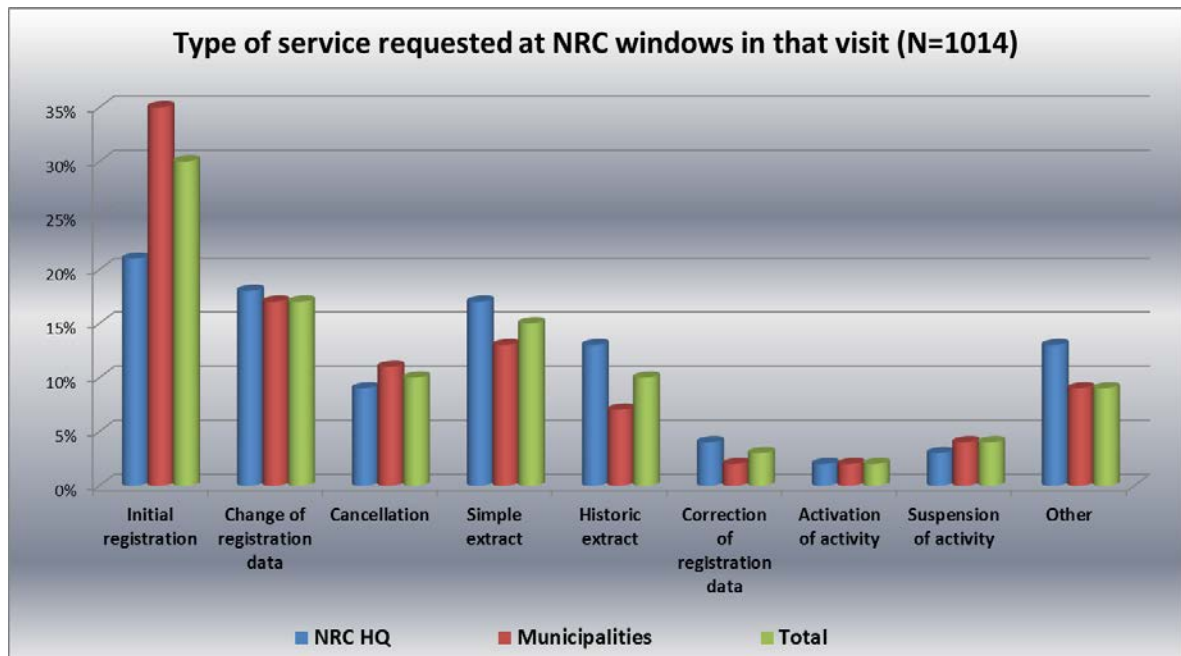
FIGURE 42: TYPE OF SERVICE REQUESTED FROM NRC (Partners Albania 2010)

The chart shows that initial registrations, changes in registration data, and requests for simple extracts are the most common transactions. Before, businesses used to come to Tirana to register their businesses, because it was there where NRC was opened first. At

the moment of this survey however, in 2010, they perform most of the transactions including the initial registration at their local offices. This shows that the institutionalization of the NRC services has spread consistently, decentralizing the services, balancing the resources in a sustainable way across the country. The situation is similar for the National Register of Civil Status:
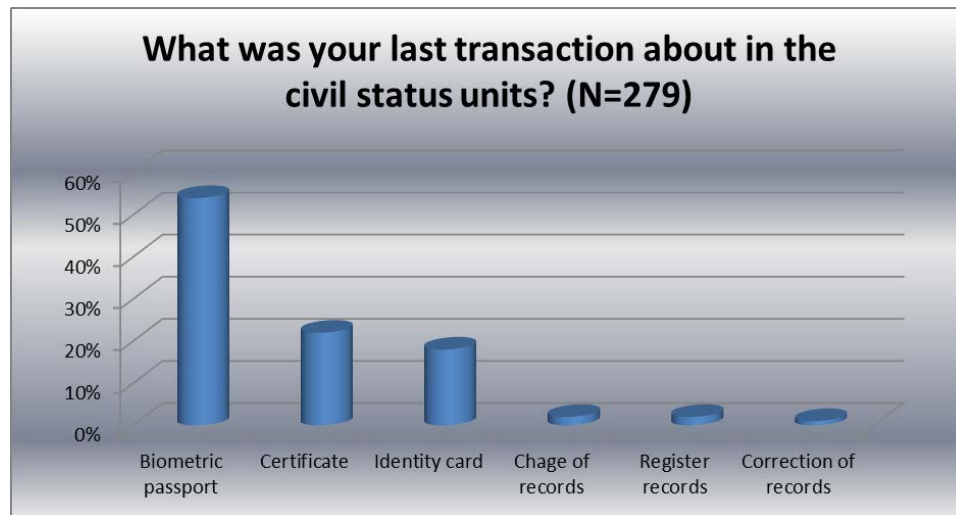

FIGURE 43: LAST TRANSACTION IN THE CIVIL STATUS UNITS

The survey in this case was part of this study and the question was on the last transaction in the local units. For most of the citizens the last transaction was applying for a biometric passport. This meant that they already had an identity card, as this was a requirement to apply for the passport. What they don't differentiate in their answer here is that the application for the passport was done at Aleat, the company assigned by the government for this process. Its offices across the country were inside the same premises as the Civil Status unit, so both became institutionalized as one single service related to the National Register. Because of the very low number of record changes or corrections, the system seems to function well, therefore it can be considered sustainable at the moment of the study. Certificates on the other hand remain the sole service offered by the local Civil Status units, but only for a limited number of cases when identity cards or passports are not sufficient like, for example, the family configuration or marriages.

Looking at the present and future adaptation, businesses using the electronic register and the National Registration Center highlight the areas where they face difficulties according to the following chart:
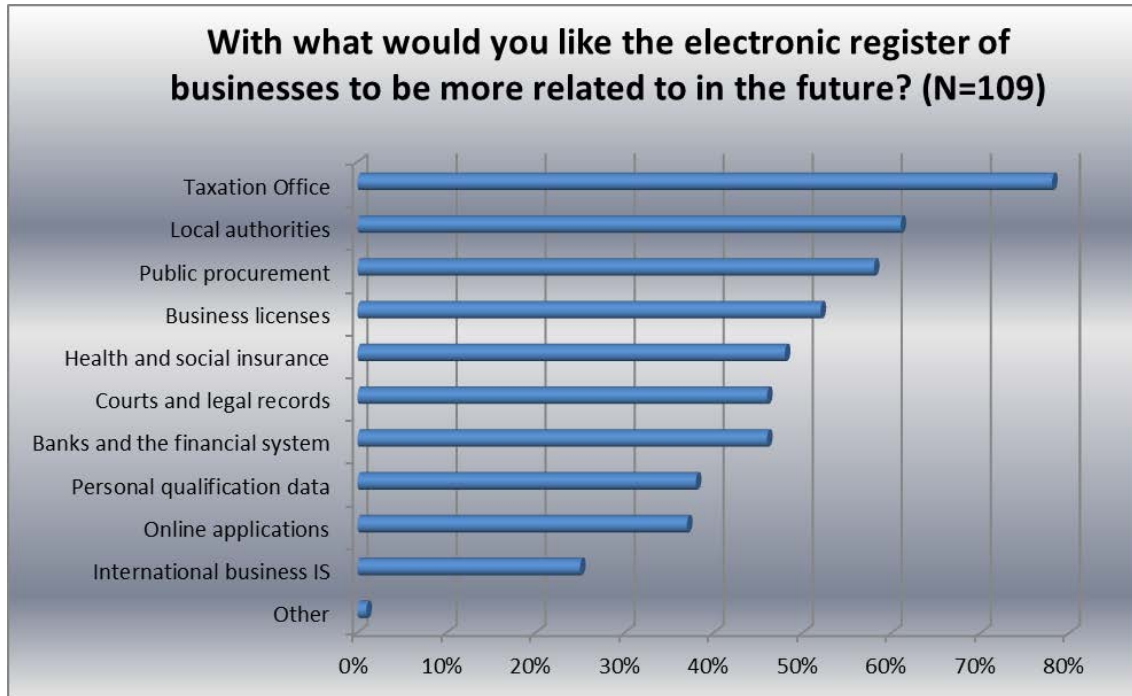

FIGURE 44: FUTURE EXPECTATIONS ABOUT THE REGISTER OF BUSINESSES

MCC and USAID financed the modernisation and electronic database of the Taxation Office as part of the same programme. The systems of the two agencies, the Taxation Office and NRC, are connected over the internet with each other. However, businesses expect a better relationship and integration. The problem in this case is not the system, but its administration and residuals of the old corruption and informality problems. Businesses do not have access to the transfer of their information from one agency to another. This is in the hands of the employees of these agencies, and there is where the problem starts as the information flow stops. The nature of the problem is the same for all other agencies mentioned in this chart. Local authorities are not electronically connected to NRC, but there are plans that they will be soon. The National Licensing Center was opened only in 2010 as part of the same donor programme. Employment insurances, online financial services and personal qualification records on the other hand are longer term plans.

The information system and technology is formally sustainable in the case of NRC, but its nature of work is informally sustainable. Separately, the two approaches can be stable. However, the need for integration is what triggers the conflict between these two forces which can undermine the stability and sustainability of the whole system. The balance, looking at the bigger picture, is fragile and under development based on the local forces.

The National Register of Civil Status on the other hand has been fully integrated only with the system of the company producing the identity cards and biometric passports. However, the infrastructure and technology used permits the adaptation in a multitude of other services, as the citizens expect according to the following chart.
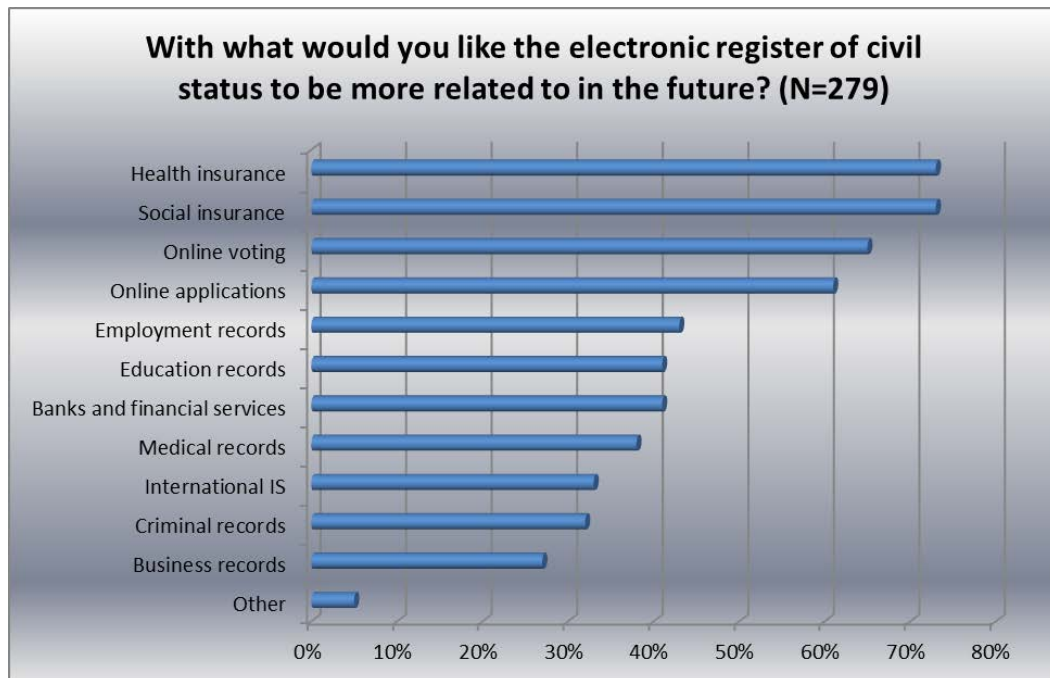
FIGURE 45: FUTURE EXPECTATIONS ABOUT THE REGISTER OF CIVIL STATUS

The survey was conducted online, so certainly there is some bias on the respondents who in this case are 'computer wise', as the high value for online voting might suggests. However, on the other hand, the data remains representative on highlighting some of the key problems in the country. The expectations of the citizens in this question, more than expressing an opinion, suggest the integrated use of the National Register of Civil Status as a solution. The problems they would like to be addressed better are all related to the need

for higher transparency. This is how one of the respondents writes in capital letters in the survey box about additional comments:

> *"WE WOULD LIKE TO HAVE PERSONAL ACCESS TO DOWNLOAD OUR INDIVIDUAL RECORDS AS NEEDED"*

The control issue over personal data expressed in this statement demands a better information flow and transparency between the government and its citizens. This higher level of access and integration is difficult to achieve without sacrificing something from information security, or at a higher cost. Therefore, while the electronic system of civil status in Albania is sustainable for its narrow purposes, its integration to other systems has been slow. Furthermore, the limited integration with other agencies and services make it vulnerable to political forces.

The current status of the electronic systems of businesses or civil status might be preferred and sustainable for some policy-makers who can control it easier at this size now that international assistance is over, but it is not for the society who expects them to perform more and be better integrated. This, however, can come at the cost of privacy in exchange of efficiency. Neither the policy-makers, nor the society at large in Albania has found the institutional balance between these conflicting values. This is a major reason why international assistance and organisations rejoice such a welcomed presence, because they represent the image of experience, development, and integration missing locally. As a consequence, their best practices on which the social contracts are missing, but that need to be signed quickly in a developing country to catch up with development, are easily institutionalized.

In conclusion to this part, the analysis shows that although the execution, adaptation, and use of e-government services have been institutionalised, their users sometimes think otherwise. A more critical approach is necessary to combine the external influences of international assistance with the local realities of implementation shown in the charts. This is an important lesson not only for policy-makers, but also for project managers, consultants, and specialists being involved in these projects. Only after this process takes place, the local leadership in public administration can rise to the level of end-users' expectations.

8.5   GENERALISING FROM FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Very little research has been focused on internationally assisted e-government projects and their institutional sustainability. This study started by identifying this gap and trying to answer the following question and its two sub-questions:

How are internationally assisted e-government projects institutionalized?

1. How are internationally assisted e-government projects managed?
2. Is international assistance generating sustainable e-government development?

Following the framework of this study presented in its final version in the introduction of this chapter, the answer to its main research question is summarized in the following chart:
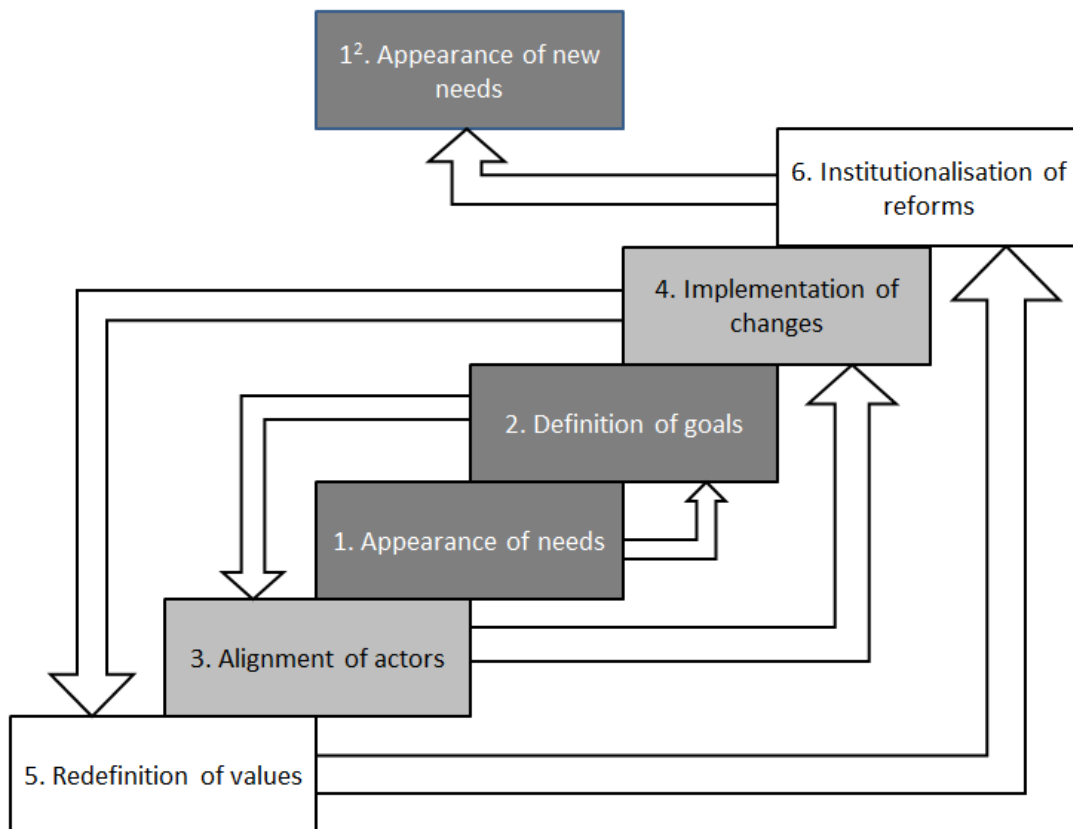
FIGURE 46: THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF INTERNATIONALLY ASSISTED E-GOVERNMENT PROJECTS

The chart presents a possible interpretation of how internationally assisted e-government projects are being institutionalised, but at the same time it summarises the main findings and contributions of this research. The context remains that of a small developing country

like Albania, after considering the micro and macro environment, answering thus the research question.

To explain it briefly, the institutionalization of internationally assisted e-government projects starts with the appearance of needs. When they are matured and can be captured, goals are defined and strategies prepared. Depending on these goals, different actors such as international donors are engaged. This implementation of changes by the network of actors constitutes the project stage of e-government reforms. Because of its vibrant dynamics, this stage has captured a lot of attention from management and information system researchers or practitioners. However, the institutionalization of reforms is not complete without a redefinition of values that the new e-government system introduced. At this point, the cycle can start again with the articulation of new needs.

This figure should be seen as an extension of the framework of this study presented in the introduction of this chapter. They are both informed by the combination of Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio, Powell 1983) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008). Boxes 1 and 2 are related to institutional structures and assistance. Boxes 3 and 4 represent institutional processes and projects as mechanisms of institutional change. Finally boxes 5 and 6 represent the institutional integration and the sustainability of reforms. Boxes 1, 3, and 5, representing the more human and informal nature of institutionalization, are informed by Discursive Institutionalism, while boxes 2, 4, and 6, representing its more formal nature, are informed by Rational Neoinstitutionalism. The arrows show a complex spiral rather than a linear relationship among the concepts discussed in this research, but also among the two institutional frameworks. However, the combination of the two figures, this one and the study framework in the introduction, suggests that these institutional approaches can be combined efficiently to interpret the new areas discussed throughout this research.

This study has shown that continuous change itself can be institutionalized, and the typical example of this can be found in a developing country with a long transition period. However, for the sake of development, stability is more often sacrificed over change than the other way around. Taking a position by either one or the other does not always follow a logical process of analysis by policy makers and practitioners. Therefore, a critical

interpretation of these findings is necessary to justify the first statement which was evidenced as the most common in this research, and in general. Based on this argument, the first proposition of this study is summarised as follows:

1. ***Institutional values define institutionalization processes:*** *Institutions stand on values part of which can be the rational efficiency suggested by Rational Neoinstitutionalism or discussion and ideas suggested by Discursive Institutionalism. The degree of conflict or agreement between respective values for different institutions defines institutionalization processes driven by them.*

New institutions of governance, according to this study, are not really new, but rather a formal materialization of informally existing needs. Institutional change exists in the limited notion of institutional implementation projects. As a consequence, the main research question on how internationally assisted e-government projects are institutionalized, remains relevant. International assistance and foreign interventions, in this context, appear as institutional means to an expected end of e-government reforms. Following the previous point and this argument, another proposition would be:

2. ***Institutional change creates parallel institutions and contingencies.*** *Such institutions require a contingency approach to be managed. Old and new institutions have a tendency to coexist even when they are conflicting with each other. Their possible merge, mutual transformation, or elimination takes a long period of time.*

Ignoring conflicting forces would result in failure to institutionalise changes and reforms. Although many possible outcomes are usually planned from the beginning, some unintended consequences and irrational institutional behaviours are difficult to predict. Thinking about how and where the institutionalization process should start, the next finding summarises what this study revealed in this direction:

3. ***Institutional change starts where existing and not necessarily new institutions interact.*** *The closer institutionalizing lead actors start change to existing institutions in a given context, the higher the chance of institutional reforms to be successful and sustainable in the long run.*

Institutional change also depends on the position and role of different actors during the transformation. Control over resources play an important role in a formal context, often associated to the policy-making level, but the ability to form alliances and build relationships is necessary to ensure acceptance among end-users.

4. ***Institutionalized identities of actors define their institutionalizing power.*** *As actors help to legitimise institutions or not, the power and legitimacy of such actors too is influenced by the direction of institutionalization they have promoted in the beginning, and over time. Lead actors try to deinstitutionalise what can empower others to preserve their institutionalized position.*

This study shows that the lead actors, either individual experts or organisations like the international donors, position themselves near different institutionalizing strategies and are able to coexist successfully. For example, the centralised approach based on efficiency for the Electronic Register of Businesses and the consultative discourse for the National Register of Civil Status in Albania were guided by the donors, being both successful and yielding good results. This argument confirms the importance of lead actors' identities as an important force in institutionalization processes. For this they need something more as summarised in the following finding:

5. ***Multi-user intermediaries shape institutional discourses in the network.*** *The translation of communications through them is rarely valueless, even in the case of non-human intermediaries. Such intermediaries can rise to become leading actors after their position in the network becomes institutionalized and therefore indispensable.*

Both information technology systems as non-human intermediaries, or consultants as human intermediaries, maintain the connections between the lead actors. Their very making can be the reason for the network actors to come together, like in the case of e-government. Such intermediaries created to implement institutional changes, once established as hubs in the network, can absorb the very actors that created them to comply with their institutional power. Formal societies are more inclined towards the empowerment of non-human intermediaries. Informal societies on the other hand found present in developing countries are more inclined towards the empowerment of human

intermediaries such as consulting individuals and organisations. In any case, for institutional change to take place, the positioning of actors, structures, and processes in time is very important. The following theoretical statement summarises the findings of this study in this direction:

6. ***Institutionalization through projects is a timely process of continuous alignment.*** *The transitional stage of institutionalization from project to its stabilisation requires adequate time to allow the changes to take place, different forces to reconcile and actors to be aligned. Enforcing, and trying to speed institutionalization processes, are risky, and could result in conflicts and failures.*

As a conclusion to this part, theoretically speaking, this study proposes that there is hardly any institutional change, but more institutional elements of change. Sustainable institutionalization exists as an improved version of old institutionalized practices. New structures and processes would hardly form new institutions if they didn't build on the existing ones. This happens as a function of bounded rationality, negotiating powers, and timing. In a transition context the last from these three elements, time in respect of the position of actors, results very important from this study, although it has been generally ignored by institutional theory.

8.6 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter analysed three important elements in the institutionalization of internationally assisted e-government reforms in small developing countries: assistance, projects, and sustainability. The purpose of this chapter was not to assess e-government services from different actors' perspectives, but rather to explore and critically interpret their institutionalization as a system, answer the research question, and try to generalise from a cross-case analysis.

Different international donors follow different approaches in their involvement in a developing country. In Albania for example, USA (USAID – MCC) as an example of bilateral assistance, followed a centralized assistance approach. EU (OSCE – Statistics Norway) as an example of multilateral assistance, on the other hand, followed a consultative approach with different stakeholders. Their relationships with the government

and end-users were shaped from the beginning by the pre-built assumptions and institutions they brought in. In general, the donors try to make their role practically valuable in terms of funding, but also institutionally desirable in terms of values they appear to represent.

The project nature of internationally assisted e-government reforms does not necessarily follow the format suggested by classical project management thinking. In this study, the discussion started with the end-users' perspectives on the roles of each actor along the project. The alignment of project implementation actors is highly influenced by the donors' reputation, expertise, and management power over the financial resources it allocates. The project implementation stage shapes the end-users expectations. However, because of its temporary nature, it is unable to break through many strongly embedded local institutions, like, for example, the role of personal relationships in the Albanian culture.

Sustainability was initially associated to the stability of the systems, but the study of different actors using and adapting new information technologies, in this chapter, identified more perspectives in the context of internationally assisted e-government projects. In Albania, for the donor, governance sustainability is related to 'western' governance models of institutional isomorphism, according to the ideas of new institutionalism in organisational studies (DiMaggio, Powell 1983). For the government of a small developing country like Albania, it was about long-term political goals and alignment along powerful international actors such as international donor organisations. The engagement in a long-term discourse with these actors is a goal on its own in this direction.

End-users from this comparative study had to comply with almost all the changes, because their influencing and decision-making power was low, but not without a degree of resistance and criticism, especially towards the government. For them an e-government reform is sustainable, and becomes institutionalized if it can find a place among institutionalized practices in the society. The informal culture and established norms in a developing country like Albania, and the formal nature of changes the donor supports, is a constant source of sustainability conflict that will take time to be settled.

Information technology companies take a contingency approach in this case, trying to satisfy both parties. The first tactic identified in this study was to align themselves along

the focal actors in given moments, first the donor, then the government when it takes over the project. The second tactic is about becoming indispensable, thus irreplaceable and institutionalized in their expertise to maintain and develop the systems. The two tactics run in parallel to each other.

The contradictory values of conflicting institutions identified in the changing environment of a small developing country that coexist yet remaining unsettled, cannot be fully explained by Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio, Powell 1983) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) in this study. This is more evident between the policy-makers, their top-down approach, and the end-users who require not only better services but also more accountability through e-government reforms. In this context, this study is important to feed back to the theory some constructs and ideas on the importance of institutional values, contingencies, the relationship with the past, institutional identities of actors, discourse networks, and the time alignment.

9   CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This final chapter summarises the findings, contributions, limitations and future directions. It is divided in three parts: the overview of the study and its findings, the research limitations, and some areas for further research and practice.

The research angle of this study focused on the institutional sustainability of internationally assisted e-government projects. Failures in e-government reforms have not been rare, due to their novelty, diversity and potential misuse (Heeks 2003), but also because they haven't been fully institutionalized, as this study shows. Because of the need for developing countries to control change, in this study, the sustainability of e-government systems is given a higher value than continuous transition.

Going back to the research aims presented in the introduction of this study, it is now time to see how they have been met. **The first aim was to develop a study methodology for researching internationally assisted e-government projects before, during, and after their implementation.** Starting with a literature review and conceptualization of international assistance, this research builds on institutional theory. This was presented in Chapters Two and Three, followed by an interpretivist case study methodology in Chapter Four. The combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods as discussed in Chapter Five was tested in the field-research, meeting thus the first aim.

The discussions in Chapters Six and Seven meet **the second aim by exploring how internationally assisted e-government projects can be managed in terms of strategies, processes, and integration.** This was done by reviewing two case studies: the National Registration Center for businesses and the National Register of Civil Status in Albania using a theoretical and methodological framework developed for this study, following its first aim.

The third aim was the critical evaluation of the role of international assistance and different actors on the sustainability of e-government reforms. This aim was met through the critical cross-case analysis presented in Chapter Eight examining assistance,

projects, and sustainability. The conclusions here continue by giving an overview of this study and summarising its theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions.

9.1   OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The findings, interpretations, and discussions throughout this thesis can contribute to inform theory, methodology, and practice on international assistance, e-government, project management, and sustainability research. This overview intends to highlight and summarise some of its contributions before discussing the limitations of this study, and some areas for future research.

9.1.1   INFORMING THEORY

The theoretical propositions of this study are based on the combination of Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) in a complementary rather than a contradictory way. Many e-government models and frameworks on development stages, technology adaptation, stakeholders or actor-networks were discussed in Chapter Three. However, Rational Neoinstitutionalism was selected for this study because of its focus on rational decision-making and institutional structures. Discursive Institutionalism on the other hand was selected to explain interactions, change, conflicting ideas, and the processes of institutionalization related to them.

What emerged and was developed as a combination of the two institutionalist approaches in this study, concerns what can be called transitional institutionalism; trying to interpret institutions in a changing environment of projects. This sounds like a controversial oxymoron on how change can operate as an institution to bring forward reforms and desired outcomes. Yet, this study has indicated that conflicting institutions can develop and coexist in a changing environment. At the same time, this study on internationally assisted e-government reforms has indicated that change does not come without conflict and resistance. These points, and the whole idea of transitional or contingency institutionalism, are born from the broader debate on the contrasting values of transition and sustainability. The following diagram summarises some of the key concepts that were discussed throughout this research and some of the final findings discussed in Chapter Eight:
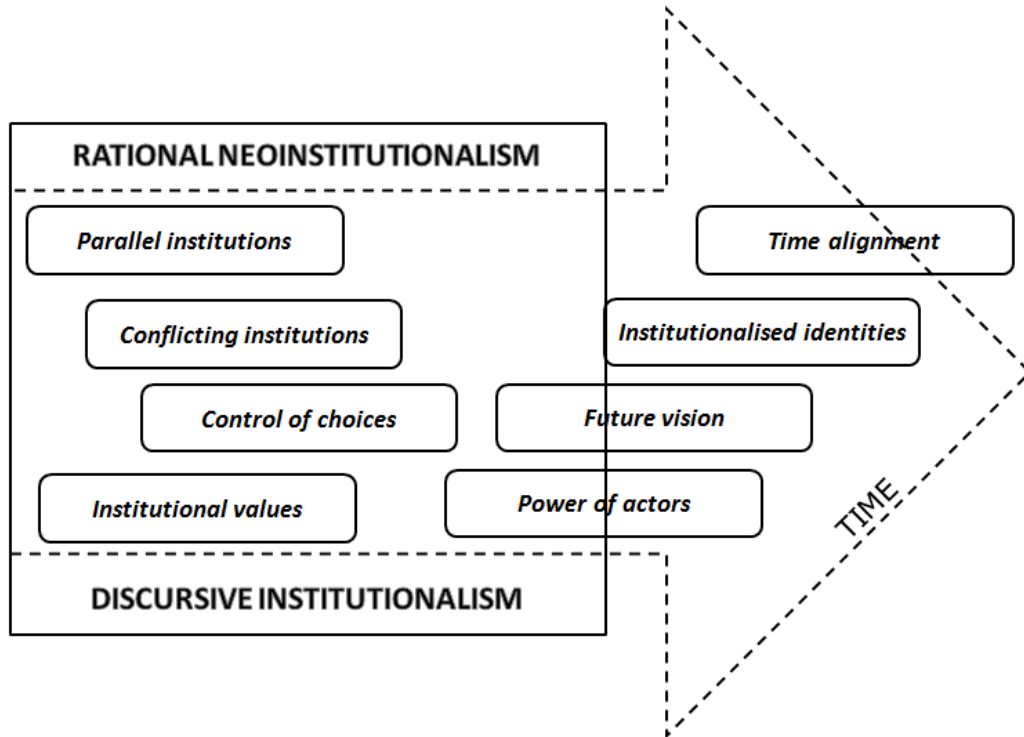
FIGURE 47: CONCEPTUAL FINDINGS AND THE BOUNDARIES OF THEORY

This diagram outlines some of the most important concepts discussed in this study from a theoretical perspective. They are based on the six propositions and generalisations at the end of Chapter Eight about institutional values, parallel institutions, change, identities, intermediaries, and timely alignment. Their position and proximity to the respective two theories and to each other indicate what they were informed by and where can they feed back into. The middle concepts between Rational Neoinstitutionalism and Discursive Institutionalism on the other hand are interpreted as those areas where the two theoretical approaches come together more.

There are also a number of other concepts discussed in this research that Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) struggle to explain. As it can be easily noticed, some concepts fall outside the square on the right, representing the theoretical framework and boundaries defined in the beginning. The institutional identities of actors and the time dimension, for example, are two of these areas discussed in the final part of Chapter Eight that deserve more theoretical focus to understand the institutionalization of projects. The discussion of the theoretical concepts

summarised in the diagram, regardless of the limitations of an interpretivist stance in this study, are important on informing theory, but also valuable for future research.

9.1.2   INFORMING METHODOLOGY

The research methodology of this study was based on the same study framework that guided its theoretical interpretation, informed by the combination of Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008). The following diagram discussed, developed, and applied throughout this thesis summarised the structure of this multiple case study approach and its interpretivist analysis:
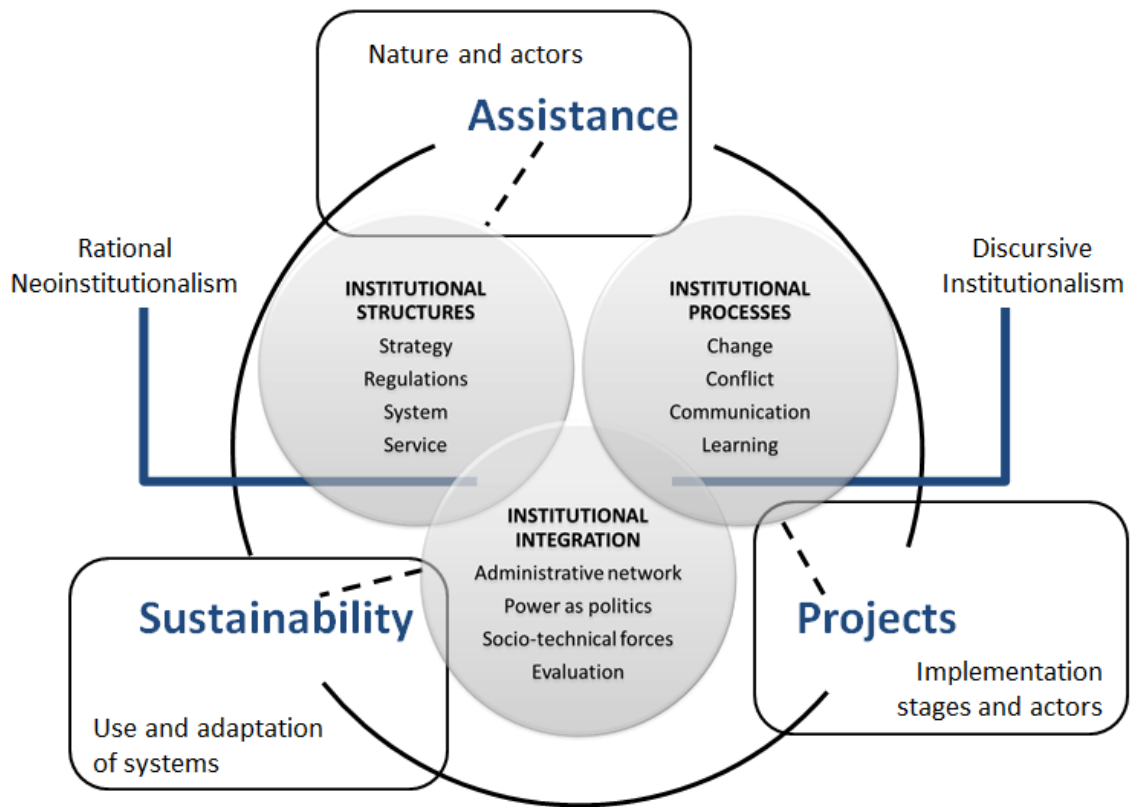
FIGURE 48: THE COMPLETE FRAMEWORK OF THIS STUDY

This proposed framework brings together the micro case study dimension of institutional structures, processes, and integration with the respective macro dimension of assistance, projects, and sustainability. The first were informed by the theoretical frameworks, while the second by the research question, resulting thus in a holistic study from abstract conceptualisation to practice. In a critical interpretivist study like this one, initially the

theory informed fieldwork methodology, but the latter was expected to inform theory back through cross-case study generalisations discussed in Chapter Eight. That is why this framework was finalised after much iteration, and is a central methodological contribution of this study. The research methodology and design embedded in it can contribute to future studies that would like to replicate, use, or develop it in similar research settings.

Internationally assisted e-government initiatives in developing countries are multi-layered and complex. Based also on the research question, a multiple case study methodology was justified to be the most appropriate one, combined with an interpretivist paradigm for exploring a new and complex area. This was discussed in Chapter Four. Specific attention was paid in this research to the consistent combination of theory, fieldwork, methodology, analysis, and reporting as discussed earlier in Chapters Four and Five. Although the initial rigorous planning in terms of research methodology might have taken a long time, it saved more during the research fieldwork and analysis.

The research strategy for the study of internationally assisted e-government projects or other case studies in changing environments suggested here was called *'Activity-based parallel case study research'*, as explained in the research strategy section in the beginning of Chapter Five. This meant that the two case studies were dealt with in the field during the same time, and not one after the other, adjusting the collection of the research evidence to mirror each other on the go. The first reason was that in a transition country or environment, change is fast, and collected evidence from one case could become impossible, after a short delay, to be acquired in other cases, thus making the comparative analysis according to the plan fail. This does not make the research design plan unimportant, but instead suggests a higher level of flexibility in the field, based on the immediate replicability of fieldwork activities for all case studies during a short period of time.

Interviews, documentary reviews, surveys and finally observations were used in this order of importance in this interpretivist study as discussed in Chapter Five. Taking such a mixed methods approach contributes to have rich evidence and triangulations, but certainly has its limitations, which became more evident during the fieldwork. Limited access, contradicting pieces of evidence from different sources and difficulties in practically

applying and replicating them for each of the two cases were only some of them. However, the use of mixed methods as applied in this study provided a very rich triangulated evidence for the two e-government projects and their analysis. Furthermore, it was realised that a contingency approach in researching case study projects in a changing environment increases the possibility for new findings and interpretations that could feed back on the theory as it happened in this study.

In conclusion, the methodology of this study suggests a model for investigating institutionalization in a changing environment of e-government case study projects. Patterns, norms, templates, and homogenization were identified through institutional structures and assistance, institutional processes, and projects and finally institutional integration and sustainability. The methodological contribution of this study is suggesting a research design informed by institutional theory for a developing country, a transition context, and complex project situations with many actors and stakeholders. The use of multiple research methods and a high degree of research rigor attempted in this research needs to be complemented with a flexible research approach in the fieldwork and analysis, which would allow a critical interpretivist paradigm to feed back to the theory.

9.1.3   INFORMING PRACTICE

In the case of electronic registers of businesses and the National Registration Center, the historical problems included market reforms, corruption, and weakness in the rule of law that hinder development. The planned solution was an e-government system that follows Europe's and even best global practices that would offer time and cost savings, while increasing transparency, accountability, reliability, and access. The function of e-government reforms in a small developing country like Albania, according to these statements, is their homogenisation according to international best practices and their efficiency.

Similarly, according to the General Directorate of Civil Status in Albania, the historic problem with the Register of Civil Status was its outdated hard-copy format, and its limitations in election processes and identification documents. The planned e-government solution aimed to support Albania in its democratization efforts and establishment of the rule of law.

From the discussions in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight, to answer the research question from a practical perspective, the institutionalization process in both cases involved two stages. The first is institutionalizing the patterns of work that are expected to lead the reform. This is done on a policy-making sub-level concerning strategic decisions and on an implementation sub-level concerning projects and joint ventures. The second stage is institutionalizing the established reform system. This also consists of two sub-levels: one to institutionalise the new structures including actors, and the other to institutionalise the new behaviour and attitudes the users are expected to have. The following chart summarises these ideas that can be valuable for practitioners and policy-makers:
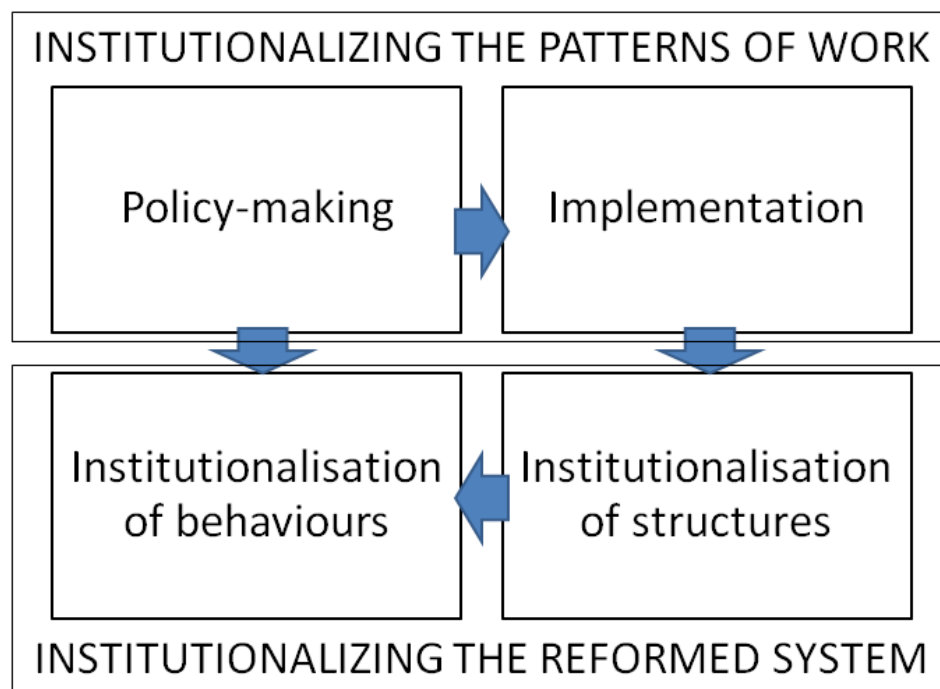
FIGURE 49: INSTITUTIONALIZING PATTERNS AND SYSTEMS IN PRACTICE

This diagram is my interpretation of successfully implemented e-government projects for practitioners. As discussed in the final parts on institutional integration in Chapters Six and Seven, but also throughout Chapter Eight, the institutionalization of new systems like in the case of e-government gives rise to new actors and forces wanting to take ownership of the new control areas, structures, and processes. The level at which a reform is generally institutionalized is not necessarily representative of the level of power acquired over it by different actors over time. Internationally assisted projects, for example, are initially controlled by local-policy makers and donors, but later, when the project is implemented,

local experts in specific areas take control over the systems. Unless the policy-making actors are able to understand the operational level, it is this second one which in the long run can take control over the policy level.

To preserve their controlling power and leadership on a higher level, policy-making actors could decentralize organisations on lower levels. In this research this was found to be done by outsourcing, deskilling through standardised procedures and information technology, and fragmenting operations that could empower technical staff. This is contrary in nature to the centralisation and homogenisation processes suggested by neoinstitutionalism. Yet, from this study it becomes evident that the institutionalization of some actors and their roles is done at the cost of institutionalization of reforms that they control. This is necessary to preserve their existing power by controlling the speed of institutionalization, and a takeover from other actors or expert groups.

It was also evidenced in this study that expert groups, like the local information technology specialists maintaining the systems in the two case studies in Chapters Six and Seven, will at some point try to take more control over them. This process is followed by a transition from normative to executive actors, from expert opinions to embedded rules, from foreign capabilities to internal capabilities. For this to happen, the people and organisational structures managing internationally assisted e-government initiatives need to look beyond projects. The adaptation of this choice needs to be planned and accounted for contingencies in a transition context. The discussion here is about the values that the new system is promoting, and the values of existing institutions in a society. If there is contradiction between them, like in the case of formally imposed rules through information technology and an informal society, resistance is eminent and need to be handled firmly from the beginning. If this is overlooked, the new e-government systems risk failing, not because of their weak performance or project management problems, but because they ignore the users that need time to adapt.

Comparing bilateral and multilateral assistance represented by USA and EU, in Chapters Six and Seven respectively, this study suggests that although they follow different paths for designing, implementing, and institutionalizing reforms, they can coexist and both be successful. The efficiency of internationally assisted projects and the sustainable

institutionalization of e-government reforms in practice, depend, as a conclusion, on the ability of the new institutions to fit and coexist with the old ones by building on them.

The alignment of actors in time and their reputation are important elements in the institutionalizing of changes through projects, as recognized by this study. Their expertise and availability of resources are also important, but as tools to refine and affirm their institutionalized position given in the network. Although projects are temporary endeavours with unique goals, in e-government reforms, their stakeholders and organizational actors have usually a long-term institutionalized relationship between them. In an informal context of a developing country like Albania, the reputation of a preferred actor to champion a new institution can be more efficient to secure the institutional acceptance of changes than its expertise in the area. Such is, for example, the case of international organization and their assistance in e-government projects. They can be better trusted than the government of the countries to push forward the reforms. However, for the sake of institutional sustainability, the latter will be expected to control the systems after the projects are over.

To conclude this section, in practice, the sustainable co-existence of conflicting institutions is difficult to happen without a change in perception on the value of this process in a system. Sometimes this could suggest that change and reforms are not necessarily beneficial if seen under the perspective of sustainability. Among all the actors and stakeholders, end-users are those that need to be heard more from the early stages of planning. The holistic view over old, new, and coexisting institutions in internationally assisted e-government projects is an important factor for their sustainability in practice. However, this process might need time and adjustments which are necessary to strengthen their institutionalization.

9.2   RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) and Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) were adapted in the beginning to guide this research. This combination, not attempted before, was done for a reason: to give meaning and guide new constructs and interpretations. However, the research limitations here are first of all not due to missing

theoretical and methodological frameworks on internationally assisted e-government projects, but exactly the opposite of that.

9.2.1   THEORETICAL LIMITATIONS

In this study it was not easy to bring together the logical decision-making suggested by Rational Neoinstitutionalism (DiMaggio 1998) with the irrationalities of human discussions and ideas explained by Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008). In this sense, the two theoretical approaches are contradictory in some of their values, even though they are based on a common body of knowledge: institutionalism. Although the two approaches were used to complement each other as explained earlier, their contradictions could limit the consistency of some interpretations offered here.

It was argued previously in Chapter Three that a combination of two theoretical frameworks is better than using a single theory. However, two issues emerge in this case: the first is related to the differences between what the two institutionalist approaches keep in focus, and the second concerns their selectivity of attention about the discussed issues. Rational Neoinstitutionalism focuses a lot on structural forces while Discursive Institutionalism on interactions and ideas. In this sense, the two theoretical approaches appear to complement, rather than contradict each other, in many ways, by directing their attention in two different perspectives. However, the failure of any of these two theoretical approaches to explain institutional change alone guided this study from the beginning.

The most important challenge is related to what the two theoretical frameworks do not consider. Such are, for example, the debates about institutional power, conflict, and reconciliation. Rational Neoinstitutionalism tries to explain them through logical decision-making in institutionalized environments, while Discursive Institutionalism suggests that they are formed through discussions between the actors. This study, based on only two case studies, is limited to inform the theories, but what it provides is an original interpretation of concepts like institutional power, change, conflict, and reconciliation.

9.2.2   METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

The analysis of even a single case study could potentially offer valuable insight to theory; however, in order to justify a stronger contribution of this research, it could have been

extended to a larger number of cases than the two e-government projects. Taking an interpretivist position accounts for this limitation from the beginning of this exploratory study. On the other hand, the high level of detail provided for both cases, which are representative for internationally assisted e-government reforms worldwide, makes the findings of this study relevant and important. The research question that sets the aims from the beginning was also selected with the case studies in mind. As a consequence, this whole thesis tries to remain focused within its boundaries. Its final constructs and discussions, however, are presented only as possible interpretations.

One of the main methodological contributions of this study is the activity-based parallel case study design explained in Chapter Five. However, this approach also has a number of limitations. The consistency between the cases, and their comparability in terms of data collected, was in great part ensured by focusing on parallel activities, actors, structures, and processes at the same time for each case. The two cases were not identical and neither was the data that could be extracted from them. For example, USAID and MCC produced an extensive report and many studies for their assisted project. The National Registration Center, OSCE, and Statistics Norway on the other hand, did not produce any such document for public use, and the minutes of the periodic meetings between the project stakeholders were confidential.

The differences between the two case study projects provide reasons for some bias during their analysis, which was minimised through triangulation of methods and sources. Even in this case, different methods could lead to contradictory evidence, or more often, their application could be limited by restricted access. At the same time, it is exactly the differences between the projects that make the cross-case comparative analysis interesting, generating valuable results that can possibly inform theory, methodology, and practice.

9.2.3   RESEARCH BIAS

The research bias in this study is, first of all, the result of a single perspective of only one researcher: building the research framework, collecting the evidence, and interpreting it. A direct limitation from this bias is related to the limited attention to a given object of study at a given moment. To minimise this bias, based on two institutionalist approaches, a theoretical and methodological framework was built to guide the analysis. In this context,

structuring the research according to a certain perspective and format assures the validity of the study and a better understanding by the external audience, but with the price of a less creative articulation of ideas. Nevertheless, talking from an interpretivist perspective at this point, the views on institutional sustainability presented here do not have to be accepted by all, although there is enough information provided for the replication and testing of this study in similar settings.

In terms of evidence and primary data, the research bias could come also from the units and sub-units of analysis being studied; when their perspectives become predominant over the others. The research limitations in this case are also based on a restricted consideration of external forces outside the predetermined unit of analysis. Regardless of the importance of such other forces, focussing on a limited number of problems is required to set the study boundaries.

Not all the voices in the two case studies could be heard, and certainly not all their values could be perceived and analysed. The silent actors still remain silent within the boundaries of this study, but active in real life. The veil of missing information covering invisible actors from this discussion need to fall before any research finding and policy guidance can be conclusive on the institutional sustainability of e-government reforms.

9.3 AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The analysis and interpretation, so far, suggested a number of areas for future research and practice. This final part will group them in three major themes that emerged in this research. They build on the answers to the research question of this study, expanding it towards the ethics of international assistance, participatory project management, and sustainability as an institution.

9.3.1 THE ETHICS OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

Is international e-government assistance ethical? If yes, according to which ethical perspective? If not, how can it be made ethical? How are ethical approaches related to the institutionalization of reforms? Thinking on the research question and its answer as a result of this study, these questions emerged as possible areas of further investigation. The

analysis here needs to go deeper by critically analysing the acceptance of procedures required by the two reforms.

Ethics is about organising concepts of right and wrong. Meta-ethics investigates the origins and meanings of our ethical principles; normative ethics looks at moral standards that regulate right and wrong behaviour; applied ethics addresses specific moral issues that can be controversial (Fieser 2009). Ethical approaches have been applied in some similar areas, including information and communication technologies for development (Unwin 2010), or e-government computer ethics (Ramadhan, Sensuse & Arymurthy 2011) in their general sense. What is still missing is a closer look at the ethics of international assistance in general, and that of e-government projects for developing countries specifically.

The project nature of international assistance adds another level of complexity to these questions. The Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct by the Project Management Institute (2006), for example, is not sufficient to address this conceptual discussion. The different actors, on the other hand, are not valueless. On the contrary, they often represent contradictory interests and ethical values as evidenced in the sessions about conflict, change, power, and politics in Chapters Six and Seven.

The sustainability of internationally assisted e-government institutions has some ethical implications that need to be investigated further. These different values were found to be associated with institutional structures, processes, and actors. Sustainability in the context of this study is associated with the dominant approaches accepted and institutionalized in each reform. However, this view needs to be tested further and possibly advanced through further research.

9.3.2   PARTICIPATORY PROJECT MANAGEMENT

How can end-users engage more in public administration reforming projects? How does the participation of different actors influence power structures in e-government projects? How can information technology projects change the participating actors in changing environments? These questions emerged after interpreting the findings of this study using Rational Neoinstitutionalism and Discursive Institutionalism. They are about understanding, researching, and interpreting complex multi-stakeholder projects in public

administration reforms. The findings and interpretations of this study, rather than answers, are more of a starting point for these questions.

Previous research on e-government discussed in the literature review in Chapter Three is particularly focused on participatory policy-making through information and communication technologies. However, citizens and end-users remain unorganised in their attempts to influence policies through e-government tools, or even through down governments using online social networks. The lead policy-making actors remain a handful of power structures at a central level. Their policy changing tools are often projects. Yet, the process and implications of participatory project management is not thoroughly researched nor clearly understood.

This future direction requires more focus on evolving identities of actors touched upon in this study. End-users and citizens do not necessarily have to radically change the state power structures or destroy them. Instead, from a practical perspective, this study suggested that they can try to engage more within the existing frameworks of change which are the reform projects. If, and how, this is possible needs to be researched further.

9.3.3   SUSTAINABILITY AS AN INSTITUTION

How can the institutionalization of structures and processes not lead to sustainable integration? How can informed decisions be made about the future sustainability of our current actions? Is governance sustainability a desirable outcome, and for whom? These and many related questions start where the analysis of this thesis ends, but also from its assumptions and boundaries set from the beginning of this study.

Making sustainability a strategic paradigm and looking at it as an institution, rather than continuing to consider it a strategic outcome, is a new suggestion, not only for future research, but also for future practice. Before attempting to institutionalise any project output, governmental reform, or organizational change, sustainability itself needs to be institutionalized as an idea. This might sound like a rational decision that is happening now, especially in the context of environmental sustainability. However, in the context of governance and institutional sustainability, more research is needed to evaluate the validity of this assumption and its applicability in practice.

Following a reverse logic from the conclusions of this study to its initial question, the concept of sustainability was associated with stability, an underrated value in transition countries. Failures to fully institutionalise changes and reforms, on the other hand, could be associated with failures to learn and reflect from past mistakes and practices. The causes of these situations need to be further investigated, starting from the picture on the sustainability of interventions through projects discussed in this research.

Sustainability, in any case, is projected to emerge locally, within a conceptual context of research or within an environment of practice. The disregard for the historical and institutional knowledge on both a micro and macro level, as the ones considered in this research, can undermine the constructionist process of learning how to learn for the different stakeholders. The starting point can be the reflection on the personal lessons of the past and present, or the collective and regional lessons of actors with similar characteristics in time.

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11 APPENDICES

11.1 APPENDIX A: TOP 100 CODES FOR EACH OF THE TWO CASE STUDIES BASED ON OCCURRENCES

	Electronic System of Business Registration (based on 95 primary documents)		Electronic System of Civil Status (based on 68 primary documents)	
1.	public communication	56	IA nature	32
2.	IA involvement	50	integration of systems	31
3.	system benefits	45	system development	29
4.	interorganisational relations	43	strategic coordination	25
5.	standard procedures	41	system's functioning	23
6.	system functions	40	consultation meetings	21
7.	system development	38	local capabilities	18
8.	centralisation	36	actors network	17
9.	legal changes	33	IA purpose and priorities	16
10.	evaluation statistically	32	system benefits	16
11.	change implementation	31	evaluation by IA	15
12.	system integration	29	strategic objectives	15
13.	evaluation by government	25	strategic structures	15
14.	IT infrastructure	25	division of powers	14
15.	evaluation by international indictors	24	problem handling	14
16.	past negative	23	taking ownership	14
17.	processing time	23	centralisation	13
18.	local capabilities	22	partnerships	13
19.	simplifying procedures	22	political will and issues	13
20.	change resistance	21	evaluation by government	12
21.	interoperability	21	learning from abroad	12
22.	limited human capability	21	NGOs in IA projects	12
23.	historical background	20	evaluation criteria	11
24.	power division	20	IA coordination	11
25.	project goals	20	informal contacts	11
26.	unstandardized procedures	20	limited information	11
27.	change in services	18	actors roles	10
28.	evaluation by users	18	key persons	10
29.	limited financial capability	18	local decision-making	10
30.	public relations	18	standardisation applied	10
31.	system limitations	18	strategic planning	10
32.	work structure	18	avoiding answers	9

33.	learn from local practice	17	evaluation of IA	9
34.	learning from others	17	sustainability	9
35.	problem handling	17	system security	9
36.	strategic change	17	training assistance	9
37.	strategic coordination	17	EU projects	8
38.	intermediary role	16	government obligation	8
39.	outsourcing	16	identifying priorities	8
40.	power transfer	16	interorganisational relations	8
41.	strategic goals	16	local partnerships	8
42.	communication problem	15	project goal	8
43.	corruption problems	15	strategy by government	8
44.	IA on communication	15	change implementation	7
45.	informal engagement	15	conflict of interests	7
46.	public outreach	15	contingency action	7
47.	system independence	15	discarding responsibility	7
48.	consultation meetings	14	EU integration	7
49.	contingency management	14	evaluation by users	7
50.	group consultation	14	historical background	7
51.	legal-IT integration	14	integrated planning	7
52.	marketing of systems	14	legal change	7
53.	no other way	14	legal coordination	7
54.	processing costs	14	legal on identification documents	7
55.	best practices	13	respecting local opinions	7
56.	evaluation by IA	13	technical transition	7
57.	political will	13	catching up with development	6
58.	transparency	13	control of operations	6
59.	EU integration	12	dissemination of experiences	6
60.	government decisions	12	diversity	6
61.	change management	11	IA from EU strategy	6
62.	evaluation by comparison	11	IT infrastructure	6
63.	evaluation by results	11	legal on system of addresses	6
64.	legal enforcement	11	limitations to admins	6
65.	life of its own	11	limited local capabilities	6
66.	sustainability	11	outsourcing	6
67.	dissemination opportunity	10	problems with system	6
68.	evaluation standardisation	10	change acceptance	5
69.	matching priorities	10	EU as a standard	5
70.	need to catch-up	10	evaluation and reporting system	5
71.	strategy-making	10	IA conditions	5

72.	avoidance of responsibility	9	IA on strategy	5
73.	IA on specific areas	9	improvement need	5
74.	institutional capacity building	9	IT project components	5
75.	international integration	9	limited financial capabilities	5
76.	legal coordination	9	past negative	5
77.	limited trust	9	problem detection during change	5
78.	local capabilities' building	9	respecting authority	5
79.	one stop shop	9	service to people	5
80.	online solutions	9	standardisation missing	5
81.	rejection of authority	9	transfer of power	5
82.	changes not yet completed	8	Albanian best practice	4
83.	decentralisation	8	chain of control	4
84.	limited access	8	communication limitation	4
85.	strategic evaluation	8	division of responsibilities	4
86.	analysis by IA	7	election process	4
87.	change in local institutions	7	financial issues	4
88.	change to new	7	IA benefits	4
89.	conflict of interests	7	IA institutionalization	4
90.	decision workgroups	7	IA involvement	4
91.	evaluation agency	7	innovation	4
92.	importing experiences	7	institutional creation	4
93.	innovation	7	IT as enabler of change	4
94.	institutionalization of processes	7	limited accountability	4
95.	international recognition	7	limited trust in local capabilities	4
96.	limited time	7	lobbying	4
97.	local involvement invitation	7	local hybrid experts	4
98.	organisational structure	7	matching interests	4
99.	political goals	7	rational efficiency decision-making	4
100.	reference models	7	regional co-operation	4

11.2 APPENDIX B: ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR THE TWO CASE STUDIES

Translated from Albanian:

The electronic system of businesses' register has replaced the commercial register in the court. It started to operate with the creation of the National Center of Registration and was developed with assistance from the United States of America, Millennium Challenge Corporation and USAID together with other systems for businesses in Albania.

The electronic system of civil status has gradually replaced the old hard copy book registers. It is developed with assistance from the European Union, OSCE, the Austrian government and other international partners. Part of it is also the new national system of addresses.

Questionnaire for the Electronic System Business Register in Albania (N=109)	Questionnaire for the Electronic System of Civil Status in Albania (N=279)
1/10. Gender	**1/10. Gender**
• Male	• Male
• Female	• Female
2/10. What is the area of your business?	**2/10. Age**
• Construction	• 1-18
• Communications	• 19-25
• Industry	• 26-35
• Services	• 36-50
• Trade	• 51-70
• Transport	• 71+
3/10. What is your representation role in the business you are involved with?	**3/10. Do you have?**
• Accounting specialist	• An ID card
• Financial specialist	• A biometric passport
• Owner	• Received a certificate lately
• Manager	• None
• Legal representative	
• Other representative	
4/10. Where is your activity based?	**4/10. Where have you applied or will apply for them?**
• In Tirana	• In Tirana
• Not in Tirana	• Not in Tirana
5/10. What do you think is the main purpose of the National Centre of Registration and the electronic registry of businesses managed by it? (you can choose	**5/10. What do you think is the purpose of the electronic system of civil status? (you can choose more than one)**

more than one)	
• Store business records of companies electronically	• Stores citizens' records electronically
• Issue business identification numbers and certificates NIPT	• Facilitate identification procedures for citizens
• Serve as a one-stop-shop for business registration needs	• Make it easier for the government to control citizens
• Make it easier for the government to control businesses	• Assist the issue of biometric ID cards and passports
• Be a connecting platform for electronic public services to businesses	• Improve voters' lists and elections
• Meet the European Union standards	• Is related to the European Union standards
• Other_____	• Other_____
6/10. What do you think about the services of the new system of electronic register of businesses? (improved/same/worsen)	**6/10. What do you think about the services of the electronic system of civil status? (improved/ same/ worsen)**
• Processing time	• Processing time
• Processing cost	• Processing cost
• Security of personal data	• Security of personal data
• Corruption	• Corruption
• Information technology system	• Computer system
• Qualification of staff	• Qualification of staff
• Premises of services	• Premises of services
• Clarity of rules	• Clarity of rules
• Role of politics	• Role of politics
• Development of new services	• Development of new services
7/10. Who do you think should evaluate the system and offered services?	**7/10. Who do you think should evaluate the system and offered services? (you can choose more than one)**
• European Union and OSCE	• European Union and OSCE
• The government	• The government
• The party that made the system	• The party that made the system
• International organisations	• Independent international organisations
• Independent local organisations	• Independent local organisations
• You as user	• You as user
• Other_____	• Other_____
8/10. What do you think about the involvement of international partners in the development of electronic systems for	**8/10. What do you think about the involvement of international partners in the development of electronic systems for**

public services in Albania? (you can choose more than one)	public services in Albania? (you can choose more than one)
• I trust international partners' experience more	• I trust international partners' experience more
• We need foreign aid because we don't have the financial capacities ourselves	• We need foreign aid because we don't have the financial capacities ourselves
• We need foreign aid because we don't have the human capacities ourselves	• We need foreign aid because we don't have the human capacities ourselves
• The systems are more sustainable if developed with international partners	• The systems are more sustainable if developed with international partners
• Our EU integration depends on our international partners	• Our EU integration depends on our international partners
• Our capabilities are growing and developing well	• Our capabilities are growing and developing well
• International assistance creates dependability and should be interrupted	• International assistance creates dependability and should be interrupted
• The goals of international partners and our government's are matched	• The goals of international partners and our government's are matched
• Other_____	• Other_____
9/10. What would you like the electronic system of businesses to be related to more in the future? (you can choose more than one)	**9/10. What would you like the electronic system of civil status be related to more in the future? (you can choose more than one)**
• Tax office	• Health insurance
• Local authorities	• Social insurance
• Public procurement	• Health records
• Business licences	• Banks and financial services
• Employees health insurance	• Electronic voting
• Employees social insurance	• Business records
• Banks and financial services	• Criminal records
• Courts and legal records	• Education records
• Personal qualification records	• Employment records
• Online applications	• Online applications
• International use	• International electronic systems
• Other_____	• Other_____
10/10. What would you change in the current system and why?	**10/10. What would you change in the current system and why?**

11.3 APPENDIX C: QUESTIONNAIRE ON THE REGISTER OF CIVIL STATUS AND ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS IN ALBANIA

Translated from Albanian:

This questionnaire is for the electronic register of civil status, electronic services, the use of information technology in the public sector and international assistance in Albania.

Register of Civil Status and Electronic Government Systems in Albania (N=771)
1/10. Gender
• Male
• Female
2/10. Age
• 1-18
• 19-25
• 26-35
• 36-50
• 51-70
• 71+
3/10. What is you main activity?
• Employed in the private sector
• Employed in the public sector
• Employed in non-profit organisations
• Employed in international organisations
• Business owner/self employed
• Student
• Retired
• Unemployed
4/10. Your last operation in the premises of civil status is related to?
• ID card
• Biometric passport
• Certificate
• Change of records
• Correction of records
• Registration of records
5/10. What do you think about the services of the new electronic system of civil status? (improved/ worsen)
• Processing time
• Security of data
• Situation with corruption

• Computer system
• Qualification of staff
• Premises of services
• Clarity of rules
• Role of politics
• Communication
6/10. What do you think about international assistance and the development of electronic systems in Albania? (Yes/No for each question) This question and the following ones are for the development of e-government systems in general in Albania and not for the civil status only.
• I trust international partners' experience more
• We need it because we don't have the financial capacities
• We need it because we don't have the human capacities
• The systems are more sustainable if developed by international partners
• Our EU integration depends on our international partners
• International assistance impedes the development of our own capabilities
• The goals of international partners and our government's are matched
• Every reformation tool is justified by the need for development

7/10. At what level should be more involved for the development of electronic systems?

	Strategy	Implementation	Evaluation
Government			
Donors			
Businesses			
Citizens			
Law			

8/10. What would you like electronic systems to be more about in the future?

• Social and health insurance
• Health records
• Electronic voting
• Online payments
• Taxes
• Licenses
• Online applications
• Addresses
• Property
• Other_____

11.4 APPENDIX D: SOME PHOTOS FROM THE OBSERVATIONS