

مركز البيدر للدراسات والتخطيط

Al-Baidar Center For Studies And Planning



Research Paper

Are Electronic Government Portals Heading Towards Activating Interaction and Participation? – Ur Portal as a Model–

Ali Adnan Muhammad



The use of information and communication technology in the aspect of governance has increased in recent years as it provides governments with tremendous opportunities to develop governance, management, and communication with the public. Governments have sought, in particular, to employ information and communication technology to develop the level of transparency, and many initiatives have emerged in this regard such as, (Open Government Partnership). The issue of providing government services electronically has also received a lot of attention, and the World Bank and other international institutions have played a major role in encouraging the trend towards electronic governance. Iraqi government has launched an electronic portal through which services are provided to citizens through a website launched in September 2021 called (Ur Gate for Government Services).

On the other hand, the newly formed Iraqi government has adopted a governmental program mainly concerned with providing services to citizens. The governmental program referred to “mobilizing” the energies of state agencies to provide services¹. Therefore, developing e-government portals, Ur portal in particular, would fulfill a large part of the government’s ambitions to provide services to citizens.

What is Ur portal?

Ur Portal is a website launched by the Iraqi government that allows citizens to access electronic services provided by state ministries and departments not associated with a ministry. The portal represents a single window to provide one-stop services to citizens. It is considered one of the basic elements in an e-government strategy. This portal is supervised by the National Data Center in the General Secretariat to the cabinet².

The portal includes (356) services provided by the various departments of the government. It also provides a simplified explanation for each service with a link directing users to the service. The portal also demands the creation of an account

1. Iraqi government program <https://www.pmo.iq/mnhaj.htm>

2. <https://ur.gov.iq/>

for users to benefit from its services. The portal currently includes (791,281) registered accounts³.

End User Experience

I personally used the portal and tried some of the services it provides. Despite my lack of experience in information and communication technology, I encountered some technical problems as an end user which are the following:

1- I did not receive the confirmation SMS on my phone number and this had me repeating the account creation process more than once.

2- A lot of services are provided within the official websites of the ministry or the entity that is not associated with a ministry. In many cases, I had to create another account within the websites of the actual department providing the service.

3- Complaints are still issued via e-mail in a lot of ministries. Some ministries/departments lack even a link or e-mail for issuing complaints. This reveals the slight level of interest in providing this important service for citizens.

Participation and Interaction

Interaction and participation play an important role as determinants of the success of e-government service portals. The growth rate of these factors indicates the success of the performance of a government website. The United Nations e-Government Statistics has indicated in its definition of e-participation that it supports information-sharing, enhances citizens' opportunities to express their opinions, and develops participation in decision-making. The United Nations, in its survey on e-participation, questions whether there is a strategy or policy for digital inclusion as well as a national policy or strategy for electronic participation⁴.

3. <https://ur.gov.iq/index/charts>

4. <https://desapublications.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/2022-09/Web%20version%20E-Government%202022.pdf>

In academic literature, interaction and participation are referred to as synonyms in the context of electronic governance. Participation aims to activate the role of the citizen in the decision-making process by providing information electronically and giving way to electronic consultation. Most countries in the Middle East have recorded low rates of participation compared to developed countries according to the results of the statistics conducted by the United Nations. Research has investigated interaction and participation from different aspects. Some presented an intellectual and conceptual research works on interaction and participation such as, the meaning of participation, the desire to participate, and the classification of participants. Other studies have examined factors affecting participation. Some of which concluded that confidence in government performance, quality of services, and the widespread use of government websites are the most influential factors in promoting interaction and participation in government websites. In addition, technical factors, such as content presentation method, user interface, website design can play a major role in the promotion of interaction and participation as well⁵.

The promotion of Participation and Interaction in Ur Portal

The very low number of accounts registered within the Ur portal indicates that there is a real problem with participation rates. The National Data Center, which is the executive department responsible for the policy of transformation, digital inclusion and participation, seems to be making great efforts in this field despite the variety of obstacles encountered. Large quantities of citizens still prefer to deal face to face due to their lack of technical experience with e-governance. Poor internet quality and limited income might also contribute to reducing the number of users or potential users.

However, Ur portal itself contribute to the low percentage of participation as it fulfills only a small part of electronic governance. This reduces the chances of promoting interaction and participation. The portal acts as an interface or a single window that collects websites that provide government services to citizens, so a lot

5. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2772503022000135>

of services are not being delivered through Ur Portal itself. In addition, the portal does not provide much information about the decision-making mechanism. As just one example, most of the services available within the portal lack the means of guidance that provide the citizen with access to the procedures. These could be provided using multimedia, such as videos or pictures, to guide the citizen through the procedures of an application for a service. Also, the portal does not provide a service to track the progress of an application in many of its services. This restricts the powers of the user, the citizen, and therefore decreases the intention of citizens to participate or interact.

Means of Development

To begin with, promoting interaction and participation requires upgrading the electronic portal from being a single window to provide services to a portal of interaction that grants users access to available information about government departments. The portal could also provide the utility to submit proposals, inquiries, and complaints to increase the interaction. This would allow the National Data Center to utilize its stored data of users into researching the factors influencing participation and initiate policies of inclusion to the less participating groups.

Technically, it is possible to allow citizens to log in into any department's website or system via their Ur portal account. This would facilitate the process of account creation into all governmental service-provider websites. For example, a citizen pursuing a service within the website of the Ministry of Higher Education, or the Ministry of Labor can log in with his Ur account to apply. This would increase participation and interaction within Ur portal.

On the other hand, the National Data Center is responsible for developing a policy for digital inclusion to ensure the participation of all groups that may suffer from digital isolation. Many citizens suffer from their lack of knowledge and experience within the online atmosphere. This exposes them to digital isolation. The government must develop strategies to ensure the inclusion of all society in its digital transformation plan. For example, Ur portal data indicated that (95%) of the

devices used to access the portal are mobile phones. This suggests that developing Ur portal as an application for mobile phones would increase participation and play a great role in digital inclusion.

Finally, information and data sharing with citizens about state departments is the most important goal and the most prominent service provided by government online portals. This achieves a high level of transparency and true citizen participation. It also highlights the high sense of responsibility and accountability of the government towards its citizens. Therefore, Ur government portal can play a role in increasing the level of transparency in state institutions by providing the opportunity to share data and grant the rights to access information to citizens.

Research Identity

Researcher Name: Ali Adnan Muhammad

Title of Research: Are Electronic Government Portals Heading Towards Activating Interaction and Participation? - Ur Portal as a Model-

Date of Publication:

Note: The opinions expressed in this research do not necessarily reflect the views of the center, but only the opinions of its author.

About center

Al-Baydar Center for Studies and Planning is a non-governmental and non-profit organization established in 2015 and registered with the NGO directorate in the general secretariat of the council of ministers in Baghdad.

The center seeks to contribute to developing the state and its institutions, by proposing ideas and practical solutions to the main problems and challenges facing the state, including improving public sector management, policies, and strategic planning, using reliable data and best practices. The center engages the relevant authorities in the state with regular meetings to support this objective and utilizes the support of international organizations dedicated to assisting Iraq's development. The center also seeks to support economic reforms, and sustainable development and provide technical assistance to the public and private sectors. The center also seeks to support the development of the private sector to provide job opportunities for citizens through training and upskilling, in a way that reduces dependence on government institutions and contributes to supporting and diversifying the country's economy.

The center aims to utilize the vast amount of potential in Iraq's human resources by organizing programs to prepare and develop promising young people, including leaders capable of proposing, adopting and implementing visions and future plans that advance society and preserve its value-system based on the commitment to a high moral standard and rejection of all types of corruption.

All rights reserved to Al-Baydar Center for Studies and Planning

www.baidarcenter.org

info@baidarcenter.org