Editorial

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1 Introduction

Electronic government (e-government) is rapidly becoming one of governments' critical means for the provision of seamless services for public agencies, businesses and citizens. With the spread of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) advancements, new challenges have emerged, accentuating the perspective for making governmental services better, more cost effective, and more accessible (McClure, 2000; Gamper and Augsten, 2003). Many European local and central governments have made

substantial investments for improving e-government infrastructures and services for citizens and businesses (Tambouris, 2008). Considerable advances have been achieved in the rollout of ICT-based e-government services in many European regions, and success has already been registered: for example, the online tax returns service saves millions of hours each year for businesses and public employees. However, much remains to be done in order to record essential progress and social acceptance of e-government in areas that are lagging behind in terms of development and ICT adoption.

Having realised the importance of e-government, promoting its adoption by Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) in rural areas has been a primary challenge for policymakers over the last few years. SMEs are prevalent in both urban and rural areas, and are particularly common in rural areas (Eleftheriadou, 2008; Manouselis et al., 2007). SMEs in rural areas face different barriers to grow and operate than their counterparts in other areas (Manouselis et al., 2007). Away from many public authorities, rural (also referred to as regional) SMEs, have a difficulty in accessing physically a variety of public services offered (Ntaliani et al., 2009). They are far off the decision and policy-making centres and it is neither always feasible, due to lack of transportation, time, money or several climatic conditions, nor convenient to travel for obtaining the necessary information or for making use of the available public services (Lee et al., 2008; Ntaliani et al., 2008). ICT tools and methods aim at addressing such problems: firstly, by providing the means for public authorities to deploy and provide their services online; secondly, by facilitating rural SMEs in accessing e-services from their region (Manouselis et al., 2008). On the other hand, in many cases businesses and citizens are not aware of electronically available public services, or do not know how to effectively use them so as to reap benefits from their everyday business activities.

In this context, the aim of this special issue on e-government for SMEs in rural areas is to assess the current status as well as to outline the related major challenges and future perspectives regarding the design, deployment, evaluation and uptake of e-government services by rural SMEs. This special issue includes five papers combining applied and theoretical results, illuminating some of the important aspects of the aforementioned topics.

2 E-government for SMEs in rural areas

This special issue opens with a paper by Minyi Huang, entitled 'Rural e-government for SMEs: case studies in China'. This paper studies the efforts of developing rural e-government in China to help local farmers and SMEs to grow and flourish. Three real life case studies are used to describe the status quo of rural e-government development in China. The merits and limits of each case are assessed in terms of accessibility, usefulness and sustainability. Based on the analysis, the author highlights the need to improve IT infrastructure in rural areas by involving more stakeholders and the need to encourage data and resource sharing in the efforts of developing rural e-government to serve rural population.

The next paper 'Policy issues for e-government services for rural areas', by Biswatosh Sengupta, and Mrinal Kumar Bandyopadhyay provides a brief scenario of Indian e-Governance/Panchayat (rural government), to identify the gap and requirements for e-government services in rural areas and information kiosks for e-governance. Also, they recommend policy issues for e-government services for rural areas particularly

emphasising on the need for supporting SMEs as an alternative for the sustainable development of rural economy.

In the 'Survey of Greek e-Government services and assessment for SMEs' by Vassilios Tzoumis, Nikos Manouselis and Charalampos Z. Patrikakis, the authors analyse and evaluate e-government services for SMEs. For this purpose, a survey for e-government services in Greece is carried out. The analysis and the classification of a sample of 56 e-government services is based on e-Government Metadata Standard (e-GMS) for SMEs, through the representation of their characteristics according to specific dimensions. Furthermore, the importance and the relevance of e-government services for the business operation is examined, while all services are classified according to the SMEs' needs. Through this analysis, conclusions about the existence and relevance of Greek e-government services for SMEs are made. In addition, future improvements for the evolution of e-government services in Greece are proposed.

In the next paper, entitled 'Personalised web services for agricultural domain: a case study for recommending organic seeds to farmers and growers', Konstantinos Markellos, Penelope Markellou, Aglaia Liopa-Tsakalidi and Marina Staurianoudaki argue that the usage of recommendation systems would greatly assist organic farmers and growers in searching, classifying, manipulating and receiving personalised information about organic seeds. Specifically, the authors introduce RecOrgSeed, a model for producing interesting recommendations to organic farmers/growers. In this way, farmers/growers have several possibilities to compare products and get additional information about product related subjects, like usage guidelines and certificates. On the other hand, governmental and commercial organisations can use recommendation systems since they promise greater user loyalty, higher sales, more advertising revenues, as well as targeted promotions.

Our issue closes with Flavio Corradini, Alberto Polzonetti and Oliviero Riganelli. In their paper 'Shared services for supporting online public service delivery in rural areas', the authors propose a shared services environment to support rural authorities to deliver digital public services. The proposed environment involves suitable ICT facilities and expertise and a collaborative architecture for supporting the rural community needs. It results in the needed critical mass of sharing services and resources to avoid the exclusion of rural authorities from innovation processes because of their difficulties to get proper funds and suitable skills.

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