Conference on ICT and E-Government for Regional Development and Integration in Central America

20-22 November 2002
Tegucigalpa, Honduras

AIDE-MEMOIRE
I. BACKGROUND

There is now wide consensus that information and communication technologies (ICT) are central to participation in the emerging knowledge economy and society, hold enormous potential to accelerate economic growth, promote sustainable development and empowerment and reduce poverty. There are specific benefits to be derived across a wide range of sectors, including education, health care, natural resource and agricultural management, disaster response, entrepreneurship and economic development, governance, and socio-cultural issues.

In the context of government reform and good governance, when used appropriately, ICTs can be an instrument for democracy building, stimulating broader participation, partnership building, and promoting transparency and accountability. In particular, e-government technologies and practices may improve substantially the capacity for reengineering public administration, allow for greater coordination among different branches and different bodies of government, and can result in a transformation in the relationship between governments and citizens and governments and businesses. It may also dramatically enhance the delivery of public services. E-government applications can lower the cost of reform and increase its effectiveness in unprecedented ways and are noteworthy for their potential to improve the fiscal position of governments, increasing confidence of investors, trade partners and donors, and winning the greater trust of the public at large. E-government can further serve to increase access to information about the ways in which governments operate and help drive knowledge acquisition and utilization. Moreover, it can enhance economic development by reducing red tape, bureaucratic barriers, opening procurement and promoting small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The most valuable among e-government applications empower people, raise their capabilities, and expand their access to life choices and opportunities. Finally, e-government can help drive the broader ICT agenda and national knowledge infrastructure.

Yet, while vast opportunities exist, so do considerable challenges and, indeed, much of the global community has yet to fully benefit from this revolution and the dynamic developments taking place as a result of these technologies. For benefits to be maximized, much work remains to be done in terms of building the basic knowledge infrastructure, national capacities and implementing applications that directly touch people’s lives.

This understanding underpins the activities of the United Nations and the Secretary General, as well as those of the G8, which aim to bring the benefits of ICT to all people in the world and put them at the service of poverty reduction. To these ends, two international initiatives were created: the United Nations ICT Task Force and the G8 Digital Opportunity Task Force (DOT Force). Both represent unique partnerships whereby all relevant stakeholders - public, private and civil society - work to identify critical priorities and coordinate efforts. Moreover, the value placed on ICT as a development tool has found further support in the Millennium Declaration, which resolved to ‘… ensure that the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies, are available to all…’. In addition, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) is leading the organization of the 2003 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the aim of which is to develop a common vision and understanding of the Information Society and to formulate a strategic action plan.
The United Nations ICT Task Force, building on the Millennium Declaration, refers to e-governance and e-government as priority action areas and has established a working group on ICT Policy and Governance, as well as one on National and Regional e-Strategies, in which e-government is a component. In addition, in its Action Plan presented in 2001, the DOT Force made reference to the importance of e-government and e-governance in several instances and called for the creation of an E-government Plan of Action, which was subsequently formulated under the leadership of the Government of Italy and with the support of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), and presented at the 2002 Calgary Dot Force Meeting and the 2002 Kananaskis meeting of the G8.

At the 2002 Palermo International Conference on e-Government for Development, organized by the Government of Italy in collaboration with UNDESA, participants recognized that the growing integration of the world economy and the increasing importance of knowledge in people's work and life create new expectations and demands with relation to government operations. The Conference confirmed that as governments undergo transformation to respond to this challenge, introduction of ICT to their operations can prove revolutionary if put in the context of broad government reform and a transformation process that aims at increased efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and accountability of government operations.

That harnessing these technologies and employing them for the benefit of all is important to the development of Latin American and Caribbean countries has become increasingly clear. ICTs and e-government have been put on the agendas of multiple regional fora including the OAS Summit, the Latin America and Caribbean Forum for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), and within the work programmes of regional organizations and groupings like the ECLAC, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Central American Integration System (SIAC), MERCOSUR, and the Rio Group. Indeed, the Florianopolis Declaration, emanating from the 2000 Regional Meeting on ICT for Development and convened by the Government of Brazil, acknowledges that information and communication technology represents the central foundation for the construction of the global, knowledge based economy and, therefore, constitutes the basis for new forms of organization and production on a global basis. It also recalled the “shared aspirations of the Latin America and Caribbean countries to become full fledged members of the information society”.

II. CONTEXT

ICTs, and particularly e-government, are seen as key drivers in national development and efforts at enlarging their application are being pursued by all countries in Central America to varying degrees. Yet qualitative and quantitative surveys indicate that challenges remain in harnessing these technologies and building the requisite infrastructure and culture for their use and appropriation at the national level. In addition, the political momentum behind transformation of government and governance through e-government is not equally pronounced within the region and there is risk that inequalities in levels of leadership, policies, laws, regulations, strategic public investments, education, including ICT education, and connectivity may further increase without deliberate actions and improved coordination.

Indeed, in the face of globalization and the cross-border nature of many development challenges, increasing attention is being paid to the pursuit of regional initiatives and
integration. ICT and e-government applications can both benefit from and contribute to greater regional integration.

A regional approach to ICT and e-government development can help to build a better knowledge infrastructure for the 21st century. At the highest level it can increase dialogue, build political consensus, and develop a common vision for realizing digital opportunities. With regard to the implementation of this vision, it can allow for greater harmonization of national efforts in strategy and policy development and implementation, the establishment of regulatory bodies and frameworks, the development of open standards, and ensuring interoperability. Given the relatively small size of Central American countries, regional coordination further serves to overcome limited market size, reach critical mass and economies of scale. Issues pertaining to social capital development can also be addressed on a broader scale. The challenge of financing may be mitigated by regional coordination in resource mobilization and through pooling of resources where appropriate. In addition, developing a common approach to ICT and e-government development may also mean improved prospects for mainstreaming these applications into other regional initiatives and strategies. A regional approach also encourages cooperation on practical initiatives through regional programmes, serves as a platform for knowledge exchange on e-government good practices and lessons learned, and facilitates replication of successes at the national level. Moreover, where there are disparities in levels of ICT and e-government development, regional cooperation, approached in a phased manner, can serve to build the capacity of less digitally advanced nations. It can additionally help bolster the region vis a vis global Internet governance issues by giving Central America a stronger voice in international negotiations on these issues.

Central American regional integrations schemes, particularly the Central American Integration System (SICA) and its economic, political, social and environmental subsystems and organs, could potentially benefit from e-government applications and further the vision for a region of “peace, freedom, democracy, and development”. Towards these ends, ICT in general, and e-government in particular, offer a channel to raise awareness on important regional issues, facilitate dialogue, enhance decision-making processes and encourage participation by multiple stakeholders in regional activities. In responding to the challenge of implementation of regional decisions at the national level and monitoring and evaluation of activities, e-government applications provide a powerful means of management and analysis, as well as enable general exchange of experiences. Moreover, e-government methodologies and tools can be used to strengthen the capacity of regional institutions and governance regimes and increase their effectiveness, efficiency and rationalization of resources. Examples can be seen in the Central America Logistics Corridor and Information Network, the Immigration Information System and in the Central American Five Year Plan for Vulnerability and Disaster Reduction. There are in addition numerous potential applications to point to in the areas of, among others, transport and trade, aid coordination, science and technology transfer and improved research and development, social cohesion, reduction in crime, and enhancement of security.

Programmes for putting ICT and e-government in the service of development should be integrated and mainstreamed into national and regional development strategies, as defined and implemented on the basis of national priorities and on the principle of national ownership. Ultimately, regional coordination of ICT and e-government development, and their application to regional integration efforts, can allow for a smoother, more coherent and more equitable transition to the knowledge society and can help accelerate government
reform, modernization efforts and the meeting of development challenges at the national and regional levels.

In this context, the Government of Honduras, through the Office of the Vice President, and UNDESA, with the support of the Government of Italy and in collaboration with the UN ICT Task Force and the Inter-American Development Bank, have decided to organize a conference on ICT and E-government for Regional Development and Integration in Central America. The conference will be held in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, from the 20-22 November 2002. It will draw together national, regional and international efforts in this area and will identify new mechanisms for regional cooperation.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE CONFERENCE

The objectives of the Conference are to raise awareness of the opportunities offered by ICT and e-government for economic and social development at the national and regional levels; present and explore in particular the possibilities of e-government for enhancing democracy and a more transparent, efficient and effective government better able to deliver public services; and to discuss the challenges that Governments confront in application of e-government and ICT in general, as well as national and regional strategies for their development.

At the same time, the conference provides a platform for representatives and leaders of Government, civil society organizations and the private sector from developing and developed countries to exchange ideas and experiences on the application of ICT and e-government to render regional integration efforts more effective and successful.

Finally, practical actions for follow up will be identified, including a proposal for the creation of a Regional E-government Task Force, which can provide advise to SICA and whose mandate might include the creation of a regional framework for cooperation on e-government and identification of priorities for mainstreaming ICT and e-government into regional integration efforts, development of an e-government strategy and action plan to guide national efforts, preparation of national e-government profiles, elaboration of specific recommendations on institutional development, policy harmonization and convergence, identification of mechanisms for cooperation between all stakeholders and opportunities for joint programming, and promotion of capacity building initiatives such as training, analysis, and exchange of experiences and best practices.

This event will also serve as a key input on the theme of e-government to the UN ICT Task Force Latin America Network, as well as the forthcoming Latin America Regional Preparatory Conference for the World Summit on the Information Society taking place in January 2003.

IV. THEMES FOR DISCUSSION AND ORGANIZATION MODALITY

Structure of the Conference

The conference will open with keynote addresses and plenary sessions in which the broader use of ICT and e-government to promote the development process and regional
integration will be discussed. During these sessions, participants will present their ideas and experiences with respect to the use of ICT for regional integration.

The second day will be dedicated to plenary sessions in which best practices and experiences on related themes, including those identified below, will be presented and discussed. Presentations will be made by representatives of developing and developed countries.

On the third and final day, the elements and principles of a regional plan of action on ICT and e-government in support to regional integration will be presented and discussed.

The themes of focus during the conference include:

- **Regional Strategies for ICT and E-government**: Experiences within Central America and other regions on regional cooperation on e-government and ICT strategies, policies and projects, covering issues such as leadership and vision, legal and regulatory frameworks, human capital development, connectivity and organizational change, will be presented and discussed. Examples of mainstreaming ICT and e-government in other regional bodies, strategies and initiatives will also be examined.

- **National and Regional E-Government Applications and Programming for Economic, Political and Social Development**, including:
  - ICT applications in the areas of migration and demographics
  - ICT, customs and regional integration
  - Use of e-government applications at the local and municipal level in the context of regional integration and in the framework of bilateral and trilateral border development

- **A Regional Action Plan on ICT and E-Government for Central America**: Discussion of elements and principles of a regional e-government framework for cooperation and action plan, including identification of regional priorities and realities, the creation of an E-government Task Force and elaboration of its mandate, enhanced collaboration between private and public sectors, and resource mobilization and financing mechanisms.

**Participants**

It is expected that more than 50 participants will meet in Tegucigalpa to participate in the event. Invitees will include Vice Presidents and Ministers from the region, representatives of international and regional organizations, representatives of other developing countries, and bilateral agencies, representatives of private sector and civil society, experts and staff of the United Nations and experts from regional and academic institutions.
A provisional list of States and institutions to be invited includes:

**Regional Participants**
- Belize
- Costa Rica
- Cuba
- Dominican Republic
- El Salvador
- Guatemala
- Honduras
- Nicaragua
- Panama

**Observers**
- Canada
- Italy
- Mexico
- Spain
- United States

**International and Regional Organizations**
- Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CBEI)
- Central American Institute for Public Administration (ICAP)
- European Union (EU)
- Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)
- Latin American Economic System (SELA)
- Central American Integration System (SICA)
- Central American Secretariat for Economic Integration (SIECA)
- United Nations, Department for Economic and Social Affairs
- United Nations, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)
- United Nations, ICT Task Force
- World Bank
- And others to be invited

**Official languages**

The official languages of the Conference will be Spanish and English.

**V. Outcomes**

The results expected from the Conference include:

- The creation of a Central America E-government Task Force to further define and implement an Action Plan on E-government for Regional Integration.
• The promotion of participatory mechanisms for the formulation and implementation of ICT and e-government policies in relation to regional integration.
• The identification of practical support mechanisms to regional integration through ICT and e-government.
• The identification of the key points for the effective and efficient use of ICT in the region with the objective to improve the management of public administration and services.
• The review of direct experiences of Central American countries with the introduction of ICT in public administration and governmental processes.