



iGov Global Exchange: *Integrating Public Services, Engaging citizens*

Haiyan Qian
Director
Division for Public Administration and Development Management
Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)
United Nations

Singapore, 15 June 2009

Government of the Future: Understanding and Implementing E-government

Excellencies
Distinguished Participants
Ladies and Gentlemen

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation to the Ministry of Finance and the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore for inviting me to this globally leading event on such a timely and timeless topic.

I especially commend both organizations to take the lead in marking e-government as an integral developmental pillar. E-government, in some parts of the world, still operates as a stand-alone unit isolated from the whole of government. The success of Singapore's e-government model proves that integration, not exclusion is the way forward.

This success owes tribute to the visionary leadership of the Government of Singapore. The synergy it has been spearheading for the last 30 years is the wellspring of change and innovation tomorrow, in Singapore and beyond.

In this respect, I believe that *iGov Global Exchange* could not have been inaugurated at a better place. As we all know, Singapore has been the hub of technological innovation in government since its very foundation. In fact, I remember vividly that, back in 2001 during the eGovernance Forum organized by our Department in cooperation with the Government of

Italy, a then-revolutionary initiative was introduced by Singapore. That is the *online public services offered according to the life journey of citizens*.

Since then, 8 years after, only a handful of the UN Member States has embarked on a similar path.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Information Age that governments find themselves in implies a series of complex issues, which relate particularly to ICT-led public service delivery. While there are plenty of challenges, I will not be able to dwell on every single one of them today.

For instance, I will not be covering the much urgent issue of *digital divide*, nor will I talk about the hot topic of *Internet governance*. Likewise, I will not focus on the challenges of *security* and *privacy*, nor will I probe the *myriad adjustments* needed on the architectural, institutional or regulatory planes all unleashed by e-government.

Obviously, these are all very important challenges that governments of the world must address continuously according to their **individual** needs and given conditions.

What I would like to specifically explore at this conference are two much broader but fundamental challenges in e-government which, when we view from the global perspective, can jeopardize the citizen-centric public service delivery at national and local levels.

One is the issue of *understanding*, and the other is *implementing*.

On the first one, I would say that e-government still stands at the crossroads in many parts of the world today. Countries can either choose to relay it to the heavy pile of advanced tools for enhancing public service delivery, or they can embrace it as an opportunity to transform public governance.

Governments who have settled on the second path must have witnessed and experienced on more than one occasion the transformative power of e-government--in revitalizing public administration, overhauling public management, fostering inclusive leadership and remodeling civil service towards higher efficiency, transparency and accountability.

They know very well that the possibilities offered by the adequate integration of technology into governance processes are immense, and that the increasingly globalized world calls for nothing short than excellence in knowledge management for public service delivery.

Yet, does *everybody else* grasp the proper meaning of e-government? In fact, does the *United Nations* itself understand fully what e-government is and what it means for sustainable development across the globe?

Fortunately, e-government is making big headway both at the national and regional levels. The iGov Global Exchange, and the recent Bahrain International e-Government Forum 2009, which some of us attended two weeks ago, are living proves of this remarkable progress. At the international level though, the picture is a whole lot different. In fact, United Nations is not up to par with either the current capacity or the future potentialities of e-government. E-government is simply absent from its mainstream deliberations.

We could look at the series of World Summits held so far by the United Nations to see that e-government is seldom a part of the agenda. Here are few examples:

- The United Nations will have a Summit on the Economic and Financial Crisis next week. The issue is the reshaping of the international economic financial order. Neither the ICTs nor e-government are explicit policy-shapers in the agenda of this Summit.¹

¹ <http://www.un.org/ga/econcrisissummit/background.shtml>

- Again this year, the United Nations will organize a Summit on Climate Change. The issue is the building of a new climate finance architecture. Once again, e-government is largely absent as a viable transformational force in the process.²
- In 2005, the Review of the Implementation of the World Summit on the Millennium Goals was held with particular emphasis on vulnerable groups. Nowhere in the outcomes e-government appeared as a well-defined and clear-cut policy option.³
- Even the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) organized in Geneva in 2003 and reconvened in Tunis in 2005, did not make the much needed leap from the nitty-gritty of an Information Society to e-government.⁴ In fact, the word “e-government” barely made an appearance in the outcome documents of the 2005 Summit and only among several other e-words, such as e-science, e-environment and e-employment, under one of the Action Lines named ICT Applications.

This brief UN snapshot on e-government presents us with at least two stark realities:

One is that to this date, there has not been any General Assembly or Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution, nor has there been discussion about organizing a World Summit on e-government at the United Nations. Were a World Summit on e-government to take place today, governments of the world would benefit from it not only in terms of finding a common ground for understanding it as a concept but also for realizing the vast opportunities e-government can open up towards the achievement of the internationally agreed developmental goals including the MDGs.

Second is that e-government is still conceived as no more than mere Internet connectivity in the United Nations deliberations. For instance, out of a total of eight Millennium Development Goals, technology is embedded only in the final Goal on Global Partnership, and this, only as one indicator in a cluster of five others. The technology indicator of the Goal 8 mentions ICTs only in passing: “making benefits of new technologies,

² <http://www.un.org/esa/policy/policybriefs/policybrief17.pdf>

³ http://www.un.org/ga/59/hl60_plenarymeeting.html

⁴ <http://www.itu.int/wsis/index.html>

and especially of ICTs, available,” which basically measures expanded mobile phone coverage and Internet usage in the developing world.⁵

While these targets are obviously important, they hardly capture the reality of e-government, let alone properly measure it. That is because the focused attention at the UN level is on enhanced infrastructure (say, for instance, bandwidth) or on upgraded technology (say, for instance, IPv6) per se.

Competition Fallacy

A real problem that afflicts quite a number of countries and organizations today is that they do not have the capacity to make right judgment on why and when they should invest in e-government development. Why acquire e-government when you have a government? This is where the competition fallacy comes in.

Today, some of us still perceive e-government as a fad-competition where it is believed that the more technology one accumulates, the more advanced it looks amongst its neighbors. Since we are not entirely clear about the added-value that e-government can bring to the daily lives of millions of citizens, many of these acquired technologies end up being redundant--because they were not fully understood or needed in the first place. As a result, it is not only e-government project which is in shambles; so is the citizens' trust.

Digitalization Fallacy

A second problem in grasping e-government adequately is the fallacy of equating it with digitalization only. One may ask: If not adopting the most sophisticated e-business infrastructure, tools and strategies, then what is e-government?

I would argue that it is really more about content than digital tools. E-government means a new way of offering services to the citizens, who now can do online comparison shopping 24/7. When it happens, citizens vocally demand full access to all relevant information and services. Why vocally? Because now they have an exit strategy: if not online,

⁵ <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/global.shtml>

they can still go offline, which often means higher costs for both the government and the citizen.

Content is built by humans, not by technology. That is why e-government goes hand in hand with human capital. To know what content to put online, when and where to do it so that it becomes useful for citizens requires a flair for cultural affinities and societal needs. It requires a passion for knowledge and the people, and a long-term and genuine interest in learning and innovation through the ICTs. This is what e-government is all about.

The challenge of understanding is very much related to the challenge of implementing. Due to the lack of proper understanding on what e-government is about, many countries simply adopt it as a tool to help do usual business, rather than adopt it as new way of doing business. What we have found through the UN E-government Survey⁶ is that many countries still lack coherent e-government templates. Therefore, they tend to scatter patchy silos here and there to mend isolated problems rather than develop one consolidated and integrated e-government framework.

Integration Loophole:

Misconceived or half-conceived as it is, e-government can barely expand from an online display of static information to an online-offline interaction of dynamic knowledge management. The key to make the leap from one unto the other is to let go off “vener e-government,” and opt for the “real e-government.”

To achieve this goal, three simple, yet critical steps appear important to me: First, connect your online platforms with your offline processes so that institutional realignment and allocation of financial and human resources can be optimized while emerging demands can be addressed effectively. Second, continuously reinvent what you offer and how you offer it through accurate and more up-to-date information, products and services in response to the on-going changes in citizens’ needs. Third, while doing that, pursue technical and

⁶ *United Nations E-Government Survey 2008: From E-Government to Connected Governance*. New York: Division for Public Administration and Development Management, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2008. The next issue will be published in December 2009.

targeted marketing solutions and training strategies through public and private partnership so that citizens know their choices and can then make informed decisions on how to use them.

The UN E-government Survey 2008 shows that “vener e-government,” where governments pour the information online without revisiting it later to assess relevancy and performance, is quite common. Out of a total of four stages of e-government service delivery, for instance, only nine countries are placed at the top where their front- and back-end processes are well connected. 180 Member States are at the middle stages of interactivity and transaction stages, where integration and fast updating are still a work in progress.

Toolkit-ization Syndrome:

One of the biggest obstacles in implementing e-government is that there is no master plan and comprehensive design on the drawing board. Instead, e-government is seen and implemented as *patchwork mending* in a muddled government apparatus through a collection of stand-alone toolkits. The end result is a mish-mash of sometimes unnecessary, sometimes contradictory online tools adopted by stand-alone government agencies, with very little interactivity or communication among themselves and with a lot of waste of already limited resources. The irony in the toolkit-ization syndrome is that e-government does not serve to connect, but rather to disconnect the self-serving government bureaus which can go their own way with their own toolkits.

The toolkit-ization problem is also one of the prime reasons behind the lack of proper incorporation of e-government into concrete developmental policies and goals, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which all countries have committed to implement. For instance, toolkits are simply not perceived as powerful enough to eradicate poverty, combat HIV/AIDS or to eliminate gender bias, which are some of the main focused targets of the MDGs.

As you may know, the word “crisis” in Chinese, “危机”, consists of two characters, one is danger or risk, and the other is opportunity. That is to say that each crisis also provides an opportunity. Therefore, there are many reasons for us to be optimistic and positive.

Naturally citizen-centric

For once, e-government comes relatively secrecy-free and pro-citizen. Here, I am referring to the intrinsically open nature and the inherently citizen-centric core of e-government. Just compare the era of red-tape bureaucracies with the age of the Internet. Monopolizing information is much more difficult now. Endless paper shuffling is also diminishing with e-government, which is seen as simple, open and easily accessible. And this is exactly where I perceive the second opportunity of e-government.

Originally clean

Relatively speaking, e-government is still pure when compared to what the term “government” can bring to the minds of citizens across the globe. Negative stigmas usually associated with “government,” ranging from secrecy and nepotism to inefficiency and corruption are not attributed to “e-government.” In this sense, the fact that we do not have a preset understanding of e-government yet is actually a blessed opportunity to start anew and right.

Primarily knowledge-driven

Thirdly, in the information age, e-government requires constant managing, analyzing and updating data and information of the services 24/7. As there is so much to do within so little time, I see a new layer and type of public employees gaining ground in the era of e-government. This is the category of knowledge workers, who manage the content rather than create it. They are the ones who diligently and patiently update and mend information on a daily basis. E-government gives us the signals that future workers will be those who rely on the power of their minds to convert raw data into specialized and useful knowledge. After all, natural resources are bound to depletion. Only mind is not. E-government can only thrive if we invest in human resource development including content/knowledge management.

To conclude, I would like to reemphasize that:

- e-government is not merely the next step in the rationalization of government activities. It is not merely technology and is not only for the use of better-off

countries. It is the basis of the institutional transformation and capacity enhancement needed in a globalized, information-based and multistakeholder-dependent world. E-government, as such, is the inevitable trend that all countries will have to follow;

- e-government should not be used as a stand-alone tool and devoid of human talent and ingenuity. E-government and knowledge feed into each other; and
- there is an urgent need to integrate e-government into the development agenda fully.

The possible solutions to the most pressing challenges facing e-government today lie with no other than the government itself. As an international public servant, I have tried to share with you my limited public administration perspective on the global challenges and opportunities. Yet, as our Under-Secretary General for Economic and Social Affairs once said: “We are not the United Nations. We are only the Secretariat. The United Nations is represented by its Member States which we humbly serve.”

Therefore, we, the Secretariat, look forward to the venues through which you, the Members of the United Nations, will bring e-government for development to the global agenda, namely the agenda of the United Nations General Assembly for raising awareness, building consensus, sharing knowledge and promoting cooperation. After all, giving the world's citizens a more direct say in global affairs is what the United Nations strives for.

Thank you for your attention.