Foreword

This is a timely and important book. It will be valuable to many different readers: Presidents and Speakers of chambers and other political leaders of legislatures; Members of Parliaments; Secretaries General and Clerks; Directors of ICT; civil society organizations; the media; international donors; academics; citizens.

It is timely because this is an important stage in the development of ICT in parliaments. It is widely recognized that today’s parliaments must be able to make effective use of technology to perform their most critical legal and constitutional responsibilities. The review of proposed legislation, the oversight of the government, and communication with those they represent require legislatures to have tools that give them access to the most relevant information and the ability to reach out to citizens in meaningful and interactive ways. In today’s world, transparency, accountability, and accessibility are demanded. And at the same time, citizens increasingly have access to the means to share their views with each other and to express those views to their representative bodies. The growth of the internet, of affordable mobile technologies, and of social media is making it possible for citizens to know what is happening in the civic sphere and to be heard. Unfortunately, it is also a time in which parliaments are not trusted, in which they are held in low esteem, and in which their relevance and even their legitimacy has been questioned.

Technology is not the answer to these challenges, but it does have the potential, for parliaments that have the political will, to help them carry out their mandates more effectively, to become more transparent and accountable, and to engage their constituents in real and useful exchanges. The emphasis on the word “potential” is deliberate because the fact is that parliaments are still learning how to use technology to achieve these goals. Despite the establishment of some important international standards, such as those that relate to parliamentary websites, accessibility for persons with disabilities, and document markup languages, there is a need for much more sharing of experiences and a much greater knowledge of best practices, especially as they relate to legislative bodies. We know that well-designed websites can help private companies sell their products more efficiently; we are still learning how to design parliamentary websites to better serve both members and citizens. We know that social media can be a powerful tool in election campaigns and in political movements. We are still learning how to use social media to help parliaments carry out their representative functions more effectively.

And this is why this book is important. It presents valuable conceptual frameworks for understanding these issues, and it provides in depth cases studies with much practical information and lessons that will be of interest to all. It has intellectual integrity because is describes what has worked well and what has not worked well. We often learn more from our failures than from our successes, and in this regard, the book has much to teach. It asks about the realities and myths of e-participation. It poses the question of how differences in cultural values and norms may affect the use of technology in a society. It raises questions that we cannot yet answer and it encourages us to learn more, to understand better, and to share with each other.
It has breadth. It looks at the websites of parliaments and at the websites of members. It looks at a number of regions of the world. It looks at developed countries and developing countries. It considers the roles of organizations outside of parliaments that affect the way legislatures use ICT. It considers the needs of different groups, both internal and external to the parliament, who depend on access to its information. It confronts the digital divide and does not assume it away at some future time. It does not say “this is the way to do it.” It says, in this country, under these circumstances, with this level of technical development, this is what worked well and this is what did not.

Effectively employing technology in parliaments is hard. It seems easy to go to a website, click on a link, and learn something interesting or do something useful. But a website that is easy to use and to understand, that has the most current information, and that empowers people through more timely access is difficult and challenging to build. It requires technical infrastructure and skills, good management, informed Members, and strong leadership. Similarly, participating in a forum on an important policy matter requires little of the user other than a level of interest sufficient to be engaged and access to the necessary technology. But managing such forums so that they result in information that is useful to members and to parliaments as they consider issues of critical importance to the country is hard to do, and the truth is that we are still learning how to do it well.

But we are learning more everyday and with more books such as this one, our knowledge and understanding will continue to grow significantly. This book is a helpful guide for those legislatures that aspire to meet the definition of an e-parliament as espoused in the first World e-Parliament Report “An e-parliament is a legislature that is empowered to be more open, transparent, and accountable through ICT. It ...empowers people, in all their diversity to be more engaged in public life by providing higher quality information and greater access to documents and activities of the legislative body” (Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, 2008).

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REFERENCES