

## **Foreword<sup>1</sup>**

It has basically been during the last decade that countries in the Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) regions have repeatedly expressed their political will to use information and communication technologies (ICT) as a means to achieve their development objectives, and as a way to improve the efficiency, transparency, and competitiveness in LAC public administration. It is then when the countries began to realize the economic and social impact of ICT, and the benefits of participating and promoting national and international events in the areas of electronic government and the information society.

These efforts have been identified in a large number of events, producing declarations and recognizing the need to promote information technology in the context of economic and social development for countries of the region. For instance, the Declaration of Florianopolis recognizes information and communication technologies as the central focus of a knowledge-based economy and the foundation for new forms of organization and production worldwide. Additional international events were the Declaration of the Presidents of South America, the Summit of the Americas, and the European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Summit, in which heads of state and government of the region declared their desire to accelerate government efforts, with the participation of the private sector and civil society, to take advantage of the new opportunities offered by electronic government, the information society, and the knowledge-based economy.

The governments, concerned with the issues surrounding globalization and the digital divide, have initiated electronic-government strategies and action plans that will help create a knowledge-based society and stimulate economic and social growth for efficient, equitable, and sustainable development. The level of success or failure of these initiatives will depend on major political, technical, and administrative efforts and understanding. Due to this fact,

we describe electronic government as a complex and multidisciplinary phenomenon for which, despite the risks involved, there are a great number of benefits, including lower costs, greater efficiency and quality of service, more effective communication between citizens and government, enhanced management efficiency and transparency, as well as greater citizen participation and commitment.

It is also important to realize that the government plays an essential role in the process of change. It provides the leadership in making proper use of information and communication technology and serves as a catalyst for development and innovation in the use of ICT. Nowadays, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean launch programs to reform their public administrations and to enhance their capacity, processes, and techniques of electronic government. However, this does not mean that governments should rush blindly ahead in creating electronic government without first understanding the essential requirements and procedures for implementation. Before any program is undertaken, all the social, technological, political, economic, and environmental risks must be thoroughly considered. It is also important to understand the capacity and resources of the country or municipality where these programs will be implemented.

Working at the Inter-American Development Bank in the areas of electronic government and institutional strengthening in ICT, I have learned the importance of a good design project and that sometimes, good e-government projects go through difficult times during the implementation phase due to the lack of planning, articulation, or coordination. So, there are times when the governments, pressured by political issues and tied agendas, tend to jump into the implementation phase without the proper articulation, vision, or road map. Although it may initially take longer, it is strongly advisable that governments should start to develop their e-government strategies and methodologies on the basis of previous e-readiness studies to establish a baseline and build the road map. It is also important that governments consider giving stronger support to private investment, making joint investments, deregulating monopolies, and reinforcing the private market in the communications sector. Training is always needed to keep up with the new demands and become more competitive. Consideration should be given to allocate the budget for knowledge management and for the provision of training to senior managers in the public and private sectors so that they can establish joint strategies and policies for economic development and restructuring. Achieving progress with economic transformation will require a joint effort from all players (government, private business, and civil society). Finally, it is important that governments assess their own needs and take into account

other electronic-government experiences instead of just adopting recipes, which in turn could become a recipe for disaster.

Another important benefit of electronic government is the provision of online services to help governments and citizens interact with each other while reducing the cost of services and making them available to everyone. E-government has the potential to integrate, into a single efficient community, a whole range of social groups—citizens, providers of goods and services, contractors, other government institutions, and international agencies. When we speak about the integration into a single efficient and collaborative community, we must not think just about the capability of sending and receiving e-mail. Electronic government goes beyond that. It is also about improving managerial, administrative, and control systems and processes; it is about skills and building knowledge management and it is also about the regulatory framework and political will. The more interrelated these ingredients are, the greater the level of integration in e-government will be. In the new economy, e-government allows systems at government institutions to interact with other systems from public and private organizations and to establish effective communication and coordination. Some examples of these ICT projects that I have supported throughout the years are (a) the modernization of state programs (the Modernization of the Comptroller's General Office Programs in Chile and Colombia, the Modernization of Justice Reform Programs in Honduras and Paraguay), (b) social programs (the Citizen Security Programs in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Panama; the Primary Education Programs in Argentina, El Salvador, and Jamaica), (c) trade programs in Bolivia, Argentina, and Chile, (d) a customs program for Mesoamerica, and (e) electronic-government programs in Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Panama, and Peru. Also, many of these programs support the decentralization of functions, by distributing the load of work to the regional and municipal levels, as part of the process of reforming the government administration. This decentralization process will depend on integrated communications and platforms that will allow decentralized sectors to communicate and exchange information with each other. The IADB has been successful in promoting and supporting e-government projects in the Latin American and the Caribbean regions by modernizing the public administrations in the countries with the use of ICT, expanding the institutional and human capacity, and improving and creating new processes, policies, systems, and techniques for the benefit of the public administration and the citizens.

The above issues are widely discussed in *Latin America Online: Cases, Successes and Pitfalls*. This book is indeed one of the products that best describes the state of the art in electronic government in the Latin American region. The

studies presented in this book are an important part of the ongoing debate and search for methodologies for the establishment of e-government. It introduces the organizational, technical, and financial activities currently developed, and it puts into perspective the modernization and decentralization efforts carried out by the public administration to become more effective and transparent by increasing investment in information and communication technologies as a means to achieve greater interoperability, integrity, and applicability of ICT systems at the central and municipal levels.

Enjoy the reading!

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*Washington, DC, USA*  
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## Endnote

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- <sup>1</sup> The ideas and opinions expressed in this foreword are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB).

***Eduardo Rodal*** holds a master of science in telecommunications and a bachelor of science in electrical engineering from the University of Maryland in the United States. He is an operations specialist of the Information Technology for Development Division of the Sustainable Development Department at the IADB in Washington, DC. Since 1994, Mr. Rodal has been working in different positions of the bank in the field of information technology. His responsibilities include project preparation in the areas of ICT institutional strengthening and electronic government. Mr. Rodal has been managing and providing strategic, technical advice and backstopping in almost every country in Latin America and the Caribbean. Before joining the IADB, he worked for the Biomedical Engineering Department at the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. Mr. Rodal has participated at several workshops, seminars, and conferences, and has written several papers and reports.