INTRODUCTION

Information and communications technology (ICT) is a key weapon in the war against world poverty. When used effectively, it offers huge potential to empower people in developing countries to overcome development obstacles, address the most important social problems they face, and strengthen communities, democratic institutions, a free press, and local economies. But, a “digital divide” separates those who can access and use ICT to gain these benefits, and those who do not have access to technology or cannot use it for one reason or another.

Governments can play a fundamental role in creating an environment that will foster technology use and encourage investment in ICT infrastructure, development, and a skilled workforce. Government action is also important in spreading the benefits of technology throughout society, and governments have the power and mandate to balance the needs of their citizens for long-term economic growth and social prosperity. However, translating a vision into practical steps that fit the local context is not a simple matter. Leaders need to have a realistic appreciation for what ICT can—and cannot—do for their countries and communities, and they must lead effectively and bolster public confidence in the path they take.

The digital divide is a complex problem, presenting both practical and policy challenges. And it is apparent that solutions, which work in developed countries, cannot simply be transplanted to developing country environments: solutions must be based on an understanding of local needs and conditions.

GOVERNMENT POLICY CAN HINDER EFFORTS TO TACKLE DIGITAL DIVIDES

A range of projects are underway in developing countries to integrate ICT in a number of critical areas, including education, healthcare, government, trade, and small business support. However, these projects frequently encounter obstacles that directly or indirectly relate to the country’s policy environment. One example involves projects that rely on technology or infrastructure use that is limited by current laws or regulations, such as laws that control or ban the use of satellite, wireless, or Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technologies. Another example involves ICT projects that are hindered by a general law or regulation, such as fiscal or customs policies that limit cross-border trade in computing technologies. Another involves projects working in a particular subject area (such as healthcare) where current laws or regulations do not cover ICT use (such as privacy and data protection laws governing the handling of electronic health data).

To cross the digital divide and put ICT to effective use to improve people’s lives, countries and communities must be “e-ready” in terms of infrastructure, access to ICT, training, and a legal and regulatory framework that will foster ICT use. If the digital divide is to be narrowed, these issues must be addressed in a coherent, achievable strategy that is tailored to meet local needs.

Many national leaders have embraced ICT and are ready to promote a legal and regulatory environment that will enable its widespread use. However, at the working level, many government officials do not understand the implications of existing policies that may hinder ICT use, nor the changes they need to create a more favourable environment. Although the development aid industry generates a tremendous volume of reports, advice, and analysis aimed at helping developing countries in the policy area, developing country governments frequently report that such recommendations do not show sufficient understanding of local needs and conditions. Some governments have subscribed to e-strategies promulgated by outsiders, but at a practical level they lack the political will to drive change because they do not enjoy widespread public support for an ICT-focused approach. Often this is because government officials fail to engage stakeholders in framing the e-strategies, so they do not have public buy-in for their long-term plans. In some cases the government has partnered with the country’s business and civil society sectors to promote ICT-enabled development at the ground level, but the various stakeholder groups lack the experience and resources to give effective input.