Chapter III
International Organizations, E-Government and Development

Oreste Ventrone
University of Naples Federico II, Italy

ABSTRACT

Following the diffusion of e-government in the high income countries, international organizations, notably the UN, OECD, World Bank, have promoted the implementation of e-government practices in developing countries. However, the little research conducted in the field show that the overwhelming majority of e-government projects end up in total or partial failure. Despite the recognition of the need to take into account local specificities and to get the locals involved in the process, e-government in developing countries still appears essentially as a mere transfer operated by donor countries’ firms with Western technologies. Moreover, as these technologies are mostly proprietary, they prevent institutions and users from developing countries to modify and adapt the tools to their particular needs and lock them in a position of permanent technological dependency. The causality chain between e-government, good governance, and democracy, if at all plausible, looking at history should be probably read the other way around. In fact, some scholars consider the contribution of e-government to overall development irrelevant, if not negative, in such that it diverts funds from higher priorities.

E-government, which initially developed in the United States in the 1990s, and gradually spread to other technologically advanced countries, has rapidly become globalized thanks, primarily, to the substantial involvement of international organizations in the elaboration, dissemination and promotion of government practices based on the utilization of information and communication technologies (ICTs), notably the Internet, worldwide.

The United Nations (UN), with resolution 73/1998 of the Plenipotentiary Conference by
its agency, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), gave way to consultations amongst UN agencies which led to the resolution being discussed in ITU’s Council session of 2001 and adopted by the General Assembly in its 90th plenary session and which endorsed the holding of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held in two phases: in Geneva from 10-12 december 2003 and in Tunis in 2005. This resolution (56/183) stated “the urgent need to harness the potential of knowledge and technology for promoting the goals of the United Nations Millennium Declaration”, according to the conviction of

[...] the need, at the highest political level, to marshal the global consensus and commitment required to promote the urgently needed access of all countries to information, knowledge and communication technologies for development so as to reap the full benefits of the information and communication technologies revolution, and to address the whole range of relevant issues related to the information society, through the development of a common vision and understanding of the information society and the adoption of a declaration and plan of action for implementation by Governments, international institutions and all sectors of civil society. (United Nations, 2001)

Alongside the unique nature of the organizing agency (ITU) as the only UN agency based on the cooperation between governments and the private sector, the fundamental novelty of WSIS was the official participation, for the first time, of civil society at a UN summit. This was indeed regarded as an ‘historical event’.

The number of international organizations that have joined the debate on e-government - conceived as a crucial set of tools to foster development - includes the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), World Trade Organization (WTO), G8 and various other regional or sectoral multilateral and private institutions.

The World Bank, for instance, dedicated its 1998/99 World Development Report (WDR), Knowledge for Development, to the role of knowledge in the development process, deemed more important than capital itself. The WDR recognizes the difficulties involved in closing the knowledge gap between developing and high-income countries as the latter constantly push the knowledge frontier outward and the gap in knowledge creation remains greater than differences in income. At the same time, it notes that developing countries need not reinvent the wheel - or the computer, or the treatment for malaria. Rather than re-create existing knowledge, poorer countries have the option of acquiring and adapting much knowledge already available in the richer countries. With communication costs plummeting, transferring knowledge is cheaper than ever. Given these advances, the stage appears to be set for a rapid narrowing of knowledge gaps and a surge in economic growth and human well-being (World Bank, 1999, p. 2).

The Bank has since launched a new Web site and a number of initiatives and publications concerning e-government and, more generally, e-development, thus rapidly becoming one of the most influential institutions on the subject, not least because of its direct funding capability. However, ten years after these first steps, the overall balance of e-government in development is a mixed one, while technical implementation remains problematic and even its very logic still appears highly controversial.

**TECHNICAL IMPLEMENTATION**

E-government in high-income countries has developed gradually, through a process of progressive,