

# Digital International Governance

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## INTRODUCTION

Up to 1980, *development*, which had been defined as nationally managed economic growth, was redefined as “successful participation in the world market” (World Bank, 1980, quoted in McMichael, 2004, p.116). On an economic scale, specialization in the world economy as opposed to replication of economic activities within a national framework emerged as a criterion of “development.” On a political level, redesigning the state on competence and quality of performance in the discharge of functions was upheld, while on an ideological plane, a neo-liberal and *globalization project* was to the fore.

The quite evident failure of development policies in peripheral countries, on the one hand, has contributed to the debate on the need for reform of governing institutions in the world (de Senarclès, 2004); and, on the other, has pushed them, de-legitimized as they are, in the direction of finding new strategies and solutions. In the 1990s, considering their leading role in government reform, international organizations such as the United Nations Organization (UN), the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) classified e-government as a core issue on their agenda.

Innovation through information and communication technologies (ICTs) (social and economic advancement among the peoples of the world has become increasingly tied to technology creation, dissemination and utilization) is at the core of the renewed focus on the role of the state and the institutions in this process. Redefining the state—functions, responsibility, powers—as regards world-market priorities and logics, has become a strategic ground for international organization intervention, and ICTs are a strategic tool to achieve these aims.

## BRINGING THE STATE BACK IN

While during the 1980s, the government reform movement had concentrated on deregulation, in the 1990s, it focused more on the reform of core state functions and the building of state capacity. Even though that during this decade for first-world countries, efficiency and the extensive introduction of information technology (IT) for government were fundamental, and the efforts of developing countries

were more on building state capacity, decentralization and fighting corruption, differences were not absolute. Converging reform strategies have been widespread.

In the developing world, the impetus for reform of the state came, more often than not, from the development institutions on which those countries relied. Thus, the reform movement involved the re-creation of the state along lines that would help, not hinder, the newly created market economies. Starting in the 1990s, the institutions for development turned their attention and their funding to governance issues. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the OECD all developed extensive programs offering financial resources to countries interested in developing state capacity.

Rethinking the state’s role in development is a prerequisite for the *structural adjustment programs (SAPs)*. This is a shift in bank-lending policies from providing assistance for developmental concerns to aid for comprehensive policy reform. The World Bank’s premise for the shift was that post-colonial development states were overly bureaucratic and inefficient on the one hand, and unresponsive to citizens on the other. This strategy is a way of rebuilding states, through institution building. In this phase of bank involvement, the states are committed to the redefinition of the government’s economic priorities. The state sheds its accountability to its citizens, who lose input from their own government.

The UN—recognizing that the state has a key role in the development process and in making globalization work for all in alleviating poverty and income inequality, advancing human rights and democracy—commissioned a report from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The *World Public Sector Report* reviews major trends and issues concerning public administration and governance and is published regularly every 2 years.

Moreover, the UN, under the auspices of its Development Programs section, established a program in Public Administration and Civil Service Management Reform. In recent years, it has coordinated external assistance in promoting a professional civil service, transparency, the use of ICTs and other areas of government reform in more than 90 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) countries.

Their funding policy did not seek to recreate the bureaucracies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rather, their recommendations were couched in the language of new public

management and in favor of reinventing government movements that were popular in first-world countries. For instance, the World Bank declared in its 1997 *World Development Report*:

*[State capacity] means subjecting state institutions to greater competition to increase their efficiency. It means increasing the performance of state institutions, improving pay and incentives. And it means making the state more responsive to people's needs, bringing government closer to the people through broader participation and decentralization.* (Kamark, 2004, pp.18-19)

One implication of this strategy is an expanding trusteeship role for the multilateral agencies that subordinates national policy to the demands of the global economy. Development is namely about policy reform in which ICTs become one of the main implementing tools for organizational and institutional consolidation (Heeks, 2002). This was the prevalent approach throughout the 1980s and '90s. It reflected the spirit of the time and was summed up in the formula *Washington Consensus* (Williamson, 1993); that is, universal convergence on specific principles seen as a shift from bureaucratic centralization to market logics on the one hand, and the establishing of a new way of framing development issues and policies for development on the other.

The UNDP and the UN Conference/Council for Trade and Development (UNCTAD), however, denounced the ever-wider gap between different countries. The responsibility for shifting the approach and the agenda of the international organizations, however, did not lie with these dissenting "voices," but rather with the total or partial failure of e-government for development projects. These failures come at a high price for the world's poorer countries; that is, those very countries which, according to the prevailing paradigm, should have gained most advantage from e-government policies (Heeks, 2003).

## DIGITAL GOVERNMENT OPPORTUNITIES: MANY VOICES AND ONLY ONE REFORM AGENDA?

In the light of the data on the evident inefficiency of development schemes and programs in action, towards the end of the 1990s, a broad-spectrum rethinking policy on strategies to adopt on the part of the international organizations was implemented. Inevitably, e-government policies were affected, too. In a recent study, the UN declared (2004):

*At present, the disparities in access to ICT-related development for the future are remarkable and are likely*

*to become greater, at the current rate of technological advancement. The challenge for development today is to find ways and means to surmount the inequality in development benefits from new technologies. The new paradigm of development requires a re-visitation of the way countries think about ICT and e-government. It needs innovative approaches to government and the public sector; business and the citizen; and culture and society. In other words, a holistic approach is required which fully exploits the centrality of ICT for the vision of a future knowledge society.* (p. i)

The UN *Global E-Government Readiness Report 2004* emphasizes this necessity to elaborate new strategies.

*The new imperative of development is to employ ICT applications across the board for creation of economic opportunities and human development. It is not a matter of choosing between traditional programs to further health, education or ICT, but choosing the most effective way for ICTs to help in the delivery of development goals. If disparities are to be removed in the collective global march towards a knowledge society, free access to information and knowledge must become a way of life for all* (p. ix)

Even the World Bank (1997) and OECD (2001, 2003a, 2003b) have adapted their strategies in the direction of a *state-friendly* approach. In the report *Information and Communication Technologies: A World Bank Group Strategy* (2002a), the necessity is underlined for "a shift in the approach to the sector" given that realizing the new vision involves broadening the Bank's established agenda (p. ix). The new strategic agenda envisages the broadening of the World Bank's action range to cover the entire information infrastructure sector. The G-8 Okinawa charter on the global information society concluded that the World Bank Group has an important role to play in this area: as a catalyst in improving access to ICTs and promoting their use for stimulating economic growth, increasing equality and reducing poverty.

The challenge has been to show that growth, liberalization and globalization are still good for the poorer countries, but in a multi-dimensional understanding of both causes and consequences of poverty in which the bureaucratic machine plays a crucial role.

Most recent developments are moving in the direction of convergence between international organization strategies, as emerges from the joint proposals and schemes for identifying medium-term goals for global development, tools for achieving it and for progressively assessing outcomes. All of them, not least that of the *Development Contract* (Emmerij, 2004), have as their reference point the proclamation of the *Millennium Development Goals* at the

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