E–Government Development in the Caribbean

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INTRODUCTION

While in theory, the benefits of e-government are numerous, global experience to date indicates that in reality they remain much more elusive. Given e-government's high impact on good governance and on the promotion of progress in developing countries, in order to better enable communities to benefit from e-government, it is important that the most adequate approach to the transition of a country or of a number of countries to the information society be identified in order for key issues to be addressed expeditiously, correctly, and effectively for an e-government that is at once as comprehensive as possible but also sustainable and meaningful.

This is particularly true for a region such as the Caribbean, which already came late to the assimilation of the industrial age paradigm and which still has to determine its role in the global information society as well as its digital age. While it is common belief that for the majority of countries e-government development is more efficiently and more effectively targeted through national programs tailored to specific needs and characteristics, this is not considered to be the case for countries in the Caribbean region.

Over the last five years, an unprecedented international cooperation for administrative reform and e-government capacity building has taken place in the Caribbean region (i.e., Anguilla, Antigua, Barbuda, the Bahamas, Bermuda, Barbados, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Montserrat, Saint Lucia, St. Kitts, Nevis, St. Vincent, the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad, Tobago, Turks, and Caicos Islands). Such an effort has involved many regional and international organizations (e.g., the United Nations, the European Union, the World Bank, the Interamerican Development Bank, the OAS, etc.); a lot of work has been accomplished to assist countries in enhancing the application of ICT to government functions in order to advance public sector reform, improve government services, enhance knowledge management and decision making, and promote economic and social development.

This international cooperation was carried out through a rich mix of ministerial consultations, working group meetings, meetings of experts, informal consultations, research and development, and country surveys. The rationale behind this kind of intervention was the conviction shared within the international community that a regional approach would permit dealing with the various issues related to e-government development more efficiently and more effectively.

BACKGROUND

Acutely aware of policies and programs already being implemented at the national level, sharing the common goal of targeting the regional need for strengthened connectivity as a tool for greater prosperity, and with the support of international actors, Caribbean countries have agreed on having collectively drafted and endorsed agendas, strategies, and action plans for e-government development in the region1. The willingness to regionally address e-government development and implementation lies in the idea of gathering countries to work with regional organizations and agencies in order to develop cooperative and collaborative programs that would permit the lowering of overall budget costs related to e-government development and to gain greater efficiency at building infrastructure (Marcelle, 2004; Carr, 2004); to avoid problems and dissipation caused by uncoordinated, overlapping, and, in some circumstances, sporadic efforts and initiatives (Lederman, Maloney, & Serven, 2005); to facilitate the availability of a unique source of information cutting across individual nations for the international donors interested in the region; to put countries in a position where they can share knowledge and expertise (Kagami & Tsuji, 2002); to achieve greater equity between rich and poor countries (Murelli, 2002); to generate a Caribbean regional pride and a constructive competitive ethos that provides countries with mutual and moral support as well as growth of self-confidence in the face of shared challenges and difficulties (Kagami & Tsuji, 2001).

Although the numerous results achieved over the past few years through regional initiatives support the previously mentioned themes, it is important to consider that there still are many voices claiming how a regional approach is likely to be too challenging in a region that, in terms of population, is comparable to Argentina but with 20% of its area, and whose surface is similar to

Ukraine but with all of the blessings and problems of being a small island (Hilbert & Katz, 2002). Those sustaining such a position argue that in a context of different economic, social, political, and business characteristics, the Caribbean region shows great levels of heterogeneity, which inevitably reinforces the national focuses and weakens the regional perspective, thus making the implementation of a regional program for e-government development a highly demanding if not unachievable task (Hewitt, 2003).

Nonetheless, both at the regional and international levels, it is widely recognized that the adoption of a regionally coordinated approach to the conceptualization and implementation of ICT policies, to the reform of the legal and regulatory framework, and to the development of the organizational and infrastructural changes can facilitate the process of addressing and reducing the digital divide and can accelerate the integration of the Caribbean into a knowledge-based society (Murelli, 2002). Furthermore, the author believes that if the regional path can be regarded as a recommendable alternative for other regions worldwide, it appears to be an unavoidable choice for the Caribbean. This is a strong conviction that was matured and reinforced through extensive and substantial experience acquired while implementing e-government initiatives teaming up with Caribbean representatives from the governments and from the civil society and with leading world experts on ICT and e-government.

Following are thoughts devoted to some of the main arguments supporting this perspective on the utility of undertaking regional alliances for e-government development in the Caribbean.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF A REGIONAL APPROACH

Lacking Assets

The lack of financial resources in a large number of Caribbean countries is one of the main compelling reasons that over the past years have induced these countries to opt for a regional approach. Common belief is that it can facilitate the pooling of resources regionally accessible or of those made available by the international community.

Besides the fact that e-government projects often are implemented in Caribbean countries, where the enabling legal and regulatory frameworks are not in place and where the necessary policies and organizational structures have not yet been adopted or established, most of the countries also deal with insufficient assets and financing.

The situation is worse when e-government development is perceived as wasteful by the scarcely aware political class or by the barely informed civil society, who argue that it requires the engagement of substantial amounts of financial and human resources but does not result in the optimization of the government's operations and does not target citizens' high priority development objectives. Such allegations often are translated into political decisions that mandate a reduction of the funding for e-government. Ironically, these claims appear to be present more commonly within those Caribbean countries where e-government development is already limited by the lack of financial resources and political support. Thus, the sustainability of the accomplishments already achieved most likely is endangered, and the chances for future development are most certainly limited.

Moreover, on the financial side, evidence shows that the situation is aggravated as a consequence of the high heterogeneity of IT and e-government-related policies, laws, and regulations existing in the region. In fact, the majority of Caribbean countries appears to have undertaken many of the tasks related to policy development and implementation (e.g., adoption of strategies and action plans), legal and regulatory framework reform, and infrastructure and hardware and software upgrade in isolation from each other. Therefore, few are the cheap and readily available off-the-shelf software packages, and the need to develop unique programs restricts even more the capability of poorer countries to place services online.

By proceeding independently of each other, Caribbean countries increased the reciprocal costs of e-government development and enhanced the chances for wasting financial and human resources. Thereby, they somehow robbed each other of the opportunity to achieve economy of scales that would decrease the per-unit cost of official government Web sites or that would decrease the official cost of developing or acquiring applications within specific areas of e-government (e.g., e-accounting, e-taxation, e-procurement, e-justice, etc.). In light of this, the pooling of resources that facilitates the lowering of the overall budget costs related to e-government and the subsequent greater efficiency at building infrastructures constitutes the first argument that explains the rationale behind the largely supported idea of the utility to undertake regional alliances for e-government development in the Caribbean.

Partnerships

Besides the need to mobilize essential resources in order to finance the establishment of an Information Society, the case for a regional approach to e-government development in the Caribbean also relates to the fact that the promise of e-government to potentially transform the way activities are run, services are delivered, interactions take

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