Chapter XII

Realigning Governance:
From E-Government to E-Democracy

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author acknowledges that over the last few decades, information and communications technologies (ICTs) have progressed at a remarkable pace. By the mid-1990s, the new technology had been used to engineer a major transformation of the private sector, reshaping markets and the basic building block of the modern economy: the corporation. Likewise, enthusiasts predicted that the public sector was about to go through a similar transformation. A new era in government was said to be dawning. For some, electronic- or e-government promised to transform government operations leading to major "efficiency gains" in service delivery. But e-government is proving more difficult and costly than first thought and the expected benefits have been slow to materialize. With some notable exceptions, the efficiency gains have been mixed. The boom in e-commerce was short-circuited by the dot-com bust. Is the bloom coming off the e-government rose? This chapter tries to shed more light on the pertinent issues and reflect a broader vision that e-government is about the transformation of government. A firm commitment from decision makers to think through the issues and steer the right course is critical or e-government could easily lose momentum or veer off course.

SETTING THE STAGE
Toward a Broader Vision of E-Government

Over the last few decades, information and communications technologies (ICTs) have progressed at a remarkable pace. A quarter of a century ago, huge expensive systems that filled several floors of an office building were needed to perform tasks that can now be done by a handheld calculator. The growth in raw computing power has been awesome and it continues to increase exponentially.

By the mid-1990s, the new technology had been used to engineer a major transformation of the private sector, reshaping markets and the basic building block of the modern economy: the corporation. In 20 years, we have gone from centralized multinationals with regionally defined markets, to "borderless" corporations organized around "just-in-time" production in a global economy.

Only a few years ago, enthusiasts predicted that the public sector was about to go through a similar transformation. A new era in government was said to be dawning. For some, electronic- or e-government promised to transform government operations leading to major "efficiency gains" in service delivery. Others prophesied of a coming boom in e-commerce that would revolutionize how business was transacted and make information services the basis of the new economy. Government, they said, had a major role to play in creating the infrastructure. As a result, governments in OECD countries have been revving up for e-government. Many have committed themselves to major ICT programs, especially in service delivery.

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But e-government is proving more difficult and costly than first thought and the expected benefits have been slow to materialize. With some notable exceptions, the efficiency gains have been mixed. The boom in e-commerce was short-circuited by the dot-com bust. Is the bloom coming off the e-government rose?

That conclusion would be hasty. Indeed, the policy community is not well-equipped to hold an informed debate on the question. The prevailing vision of e-government has been influenced too much by early successes in online service delivery and misleading analogies with the private sector. It fails to do justice to the scope of the transformation implied by e-government or the opportunities and challenges it poses. Before we pass judgement on e-government, we need greater clarity on what it is and where it may lead. This chapter tries to shed more light on the issues. It sets out a storyline that helps us arrive at a richer, more complete account of e-government — a broader vision of the terrain.

Before we pass judgement on e-government, we need greater clarity on what it is and where it may lead.

In that vision, e-government is about the transformation of government. Indeed, it may well be the biggest transformation since the democratic revolutions of the late 18th

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