Chapter XVI

Policy Initiatives in Jamaica and their Impact on the Development of ICT

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ABSTRACT

The chapter explores the diffusion of information and communications technology (ICT) in the country of Jamaica, and within the context of the national strategic plan for information technology. Further, it utilizes the concept of institutional intervention to discuss some policies and initiatives undertaken in support of the plan. Within this framework, the impacts of managed interventions via collaborative projects between government and international agencies on the adoption of Internet technologies by small and medium-sized enterprises are also examined. The aim of the authors is to indicate that as far as developing countries are concerned, governments can affect the diffusion and adoption of ICT through policymaking but more positive outcomes can be realized through managed interventions.

INTRODUCTION

New technology offers an unprecedented chance for developing countries to 'leapfrog' earlier stages of development. Everything must be done to maximize their peoples' access to new information networks (Annan, 2000, heading III, para. 5).

Bilateral and multilateral assistance will continue to play a significant role in the building framework conditions for IT development. International financial institutions are well placed to contribute in this regard by formulating and implementing programs that foster growth, benefit the poor, as well as expand connectivity, access, and training (World Bank, 2001, p. 2).

The two quotes above set the agenda for this chapter. In the first, Kofi Annan the United Nations secretary-general in his millennium report singled out the crucial contribution of information and communications technology (ICT) to economic development. In the second, the World Bank in its contribution to the G-8 Okinawa Charter drew attention to the key role to be played by the global community in assisting developing countries to narrow the digital divide. These twin ideas of economic development using ICT with assistance from international institutions are explored in this chapter in the specific context of Jamaica. As a developing country in the Caribbean region, Jamaica is an interesting case as it is one of the first developing countries to prioritize information technology in this way. In 2000, the Jamaican Government introduced clear IT policies to assist economic growth and implemented these through initiatives funded in part through international assistance. Included in these initiatives were measures for smaller businesses—an important part of the Jamaican economy. In 2006 it is possible to reflect on these policies and initiatives in terms of progress made and future possibilities.

The background to the Jamaican Government's initiatives lies in the wider debate about technology, its contribution to economic growth, and the role of government. The advent of the Internet and its subsequent proliferation into most aspects of society and commerce has propelled information and communication technologies to the forefront of innovation. Its ubiquitous nature and the varied business opportunities it presents are potentially beneficial to all citizens and to all organizations irrespective of size or location. Therefore, it is not surprising that ICT is proposed as a key element to economic development and a means to the alleviation of poverty among the world's less developed countries. The debate is not one sided and opponents continue to argue that investment in information and communication technologies will have little impact on productivity and growth, if unaccompanied by institutional and economic reform, especially in the case of developing countries. Microsoft's Bill Gate's comment reinforces this reality:

Let's be serious. Do people have a clear view of what it means to live on a $1 a day? ...There are things those people need at that level other than technology ...About 99% of the benefits of having a PC come when you've provided reasonable health and literacy to the person who's going to sit down and use it (Steinberg, 2003, p. 46).

As in most situations, the truth lies somewhere between these two positions and is where this debate is situated. The pervasive nature of ICT demonstrates its value as a vehicle through which innovations are effectively diffused and enables organizations to be creative in the development of new products and services. Although the scale of its contribution to economic growth and productivity continues to be discussed, it is clear that ICT is accepted as an enabler and a driver of globalization. Governments and businesses are increasingly reliant on information and communication technologies, and the elimination of

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