

FOREWORD

The Challenge of the Digital Divide

For several years now, the impact of information technology as an instrument of reform in the process of government and delivery of *comparative advantage* in public sector management, in the process of organisational change and the delivery of *competitive advantage* in private sector management, and in the process of capability development in the nurturing of *civil society empowerment*, have been widely acknowledged.

Government which, in turn, is increasingly perceived as one essential prime mover of national development in developing countries, and which continues to be the single most significant force to influence the future in the facilitating, nurturing and deployment of the new information and communications technologies, is perceived as a *catalyst* for the accelerated diffusion of information technology in a country, including *uptake by the civil society* and *stimulation of the private sector*.

The rapid development, deployment and proliferation of the new and emerging information and communications technologies (ICTs), herald new opportunities for growth and development in countries around the world. In particular, information and communications technology applications promise significant benefits such as *improved health care, easier access to public services, improved and new access to training and work, new commercial, leisure and entertainment opportunities* and, above all, *good governance*. Governments worldwide are seeking to harness the potential offered by these new technologies to create new dimensions of economic and social progress.

The majority of Developing Countries have, to date, not yet taken full advantage of the opportunities offered by the new information and communications technologies, nor adequately prepared themselves to meet the challenges. The main reasons for this lack of preparedness appear to be a 'mix' of *operational, contextual* and *strategy* problems, including, specifically the following:

- ❑ Lack of the *full appreciation* of the potentials, benefits and impacts of *IT*, against value systems and concepts of rationality for implementation of systems;

- ❑ *Deficiencies* in the *IT* physical infrastructure, hardware and software;
- ❑ Lack of *skills and capacities* to implement computerisation, electronic networking and data communications;
- ❑ *Deficiencies* in the formulation and implementation of policy frameworks for the new information and communications technologies (ICTs).

All these are factors that relate to an embedded, more fundamental phenomenon called the *Digital Divide*. The Digital Divide may be defined to be the relative differential in access to *information and communications technologies (ICTs)* **between** and **within** regional groupings (economic or political), *markets, countries, sectors (say, primary, secondary and tertiary), localities or communities, together with the consequential relative effects and impacts of the differential access.*

The Digital Divide can, therefore, be perceived to manifest in many forms, namely:

- ❑ *Between **regional groupings***, articulating the relative gap between, for example, the world's richest economic and/or political groupings and the rest of the world, including some of the least resource-endowed;
- ❑ *Between **national economies***, highlighting the gap within the context of developed, newly-industrialising and developing economies;
- ❑ Within **countries**, which are diverse and include relative differentials: (i) between and within firms, or between and within sectors, or between and within markets; or (ii) between the urban and the rural sectors of the national economy; or (iii) between different income/social groups including different age-groups; between the rich and the poor; between different gender-groups; between different literacy level groups and between different ethnic groups.

The potential of the massive presence of the Internet in the Developing Countries provide **opportunities**, real and potential, for improving the human condition in these countries as, for example, it would make it easy to have access to fundamental information and it would also make the co-ordination of humanitarian assistance in the wake of natural disaster more efficient. There are two kinds of basic information that must be held into consideration when considering benefits (real or potential) in relation to Developing Countries, namely:

- ❑ Information emanating from the Developing Countries themselves, which is useful for addressing, in the best way, supporting interventions; and
- ❑ Information emanating from the Developed Countries, which would add value to existing information and might include, for example, such information as updates on new medicines, which are useful for the doctors operating in disaster-stricken areas.

In *Breaking the Digital Divide: Implications for Developing Countries*, Elena Murelli ably and formidably succeeds in presenting an analytical exposition, a critical context, and an integrative synthesis of the various dimensions of the Digital Divide, with implications for Developing Countries. The work is the result of focused efforts aimed at articulating issues and problems within the context of the Digital Divide, and actions that Developing Countries can take in efforts seeking to facilitate progress, growth and development, within and between countries. For the Developing Countries, the rapidly widening Digital Divide must be narrowed, bridged, broken, mitigated or transcended to avoid long-term consequential effects and impacts. The pains of inaction will be greater than the trials and tribulations of action aimed at making the transition to an *information society* within a *knowledge economy*.

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