Bridging the Technological Divide

by
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Well, thank you very much, Helen. And thank you and your colleagues for having put this very interesting meeting together. Let me express my regrets that I can't be here for the whole of the meeting because I think I would learn much more than I'll give in the next 20 minutes, basically, because we're at the beginning of an adventure here, in terms of e-government, but not just e-government.

E-government is an aspect of the whole issue of governance, the development of the digital revolution, and of how you address the questions of poverty and the question of the digital divide. Hence, when you come in at the question of e-government, you're coming in at a very important aspect of the whole issue of the digital and the communications revolution.

Clearly, as I'm sure must have been said by our colleagues from Chile and Andhra before, you can't look at this thing outside the context within which you're operating. E-government doesn't exist without "E." You need to have the possibility of, first and foremost, an awareness of the crucial importance of technology. This battle is the first part of the strategic issue which we're facing here today, namely the issue of why do you get into technology when people don't have enough water or have enough food, and why do you talk about expensive technological investments when people are concerned about living from day to day.

So the first part of our strategy is to say that we are, of course, concerned with the issues of basic necessities of life, and will continue to be so. But we are also saying that within the framework of the electronic or digital revolution, there is the possibility of improving the lives of people, and so you need to do two things at once. You cannot simply ignore the fact that technology has the prospect of giving a huge advantage to one segment of the world, leaving behind another segment of the world with an even greater gap to catch up.

We have literally dozens of examples. Examples not of supply-driven instances - where we're coming along with a grant, and a technological project that we can make work with a few dollars and go into an area where we can demonstrate that in a nonself-supporting way, you can impose or provide a technological solution to an issue - but where people in poverty are saying to us right from the jump, "We do not want to be left
behind. We want to be part of the revolution. We want to be part, really, of the 21st Century."

What fascinated me a few months ago when I was in Africa and talking to President Obasanjo about the new plan which the African countries are coming up with, which is a vision for the next century, there are two issues which are fast tracked before they get to getting the whole plan fully delineated:

The first is AIDS, which is manifestly the key issue, and the second is information technology, not food, not water, not gender, all of which are crucial, but information technology, and that comes from African leadership. That does not come from a bunch of consultants from the World Bank.

What do they say in terms of extending that? They say: We do not want to be behind in terms of knowledge. We want to be able to take advantage in terms of commercial applications. We want to be there and feel a part of the global community, and the way we can do that most effectively is with communications. That can be wind-up radios, it can be phones, it can be computers, it can be Internet, but it should be a mix of all of those.

We, at the Bank, as part of our strategy, are trying to put in the bids that might be helpful to developing countries. I am sure that if you haven't heard yet, you will hear a lot about the provision of knowledge through the development gateway. You will certainly hear about individual applications of technology, which abound through infoDev and through the work that we've done.

We'll no doubt talk to you about the African Virtual University and about our work at schools. We'll talk about e-medicine. We'll talk about e-trading. We'll talk about putting information online of best practice and worst practice.

As you know, in our own institution now, we have 100 offices linked by voice data and video, by satellite. We're running 800 video conferences or more each month, and it's done in all languages, with the benefit of simultaneous translation. So you can come into an office of ours now in Addis Ababa with a request for information from our now enfranchised local representative, but he can have you on the screen the next day getting information from Washington, and three days later he can hook you up in a 12-way hook-up with people that have faced that problem in the South. This makes South-to-South meetings possible and they are indeed happening every day. It happens not just through video-conferencing, but also through the Internet.

Every Saturday morning, we address the question frontally of the issue of e-government in a way that may not have been addressed this morning. Because to start with e-government, you have to have government that has capacity. You don't just need the technology to get people to file their tax returns and to have the various levels of services that are provided so adequately by our two speakers here, but we've started by saying that let's take the opportunity of using technology to help train the people that govern.
And so every Saturday morning, through the Monterey Institute of Technology, we are addressing the question of how do you train mayors and town administrators. We meet with 1,500 mayors and town administrators every Saturday morning in a course in Spanish, with materials that have been pre-distributed over video, over Internet, in seven countries. We're running courses on how to run cities and towns, how to do a budget, how to run a fire department, how to deal with water issues. It's not just some guru in Monterey teaching, but what happens is that it puts together a community so that during the week on the website, someone says, "I've got a problem with my police cars. They're Hondas, and they're not running very well, and what do I do?" And the next day he has 50 answers and probably 50 cousins and uncles who are Honda dealers of people who are operating either Hondas or Fords or something else because a community has been established.

The thing that we are learning every single day that we are venturing into the area of the digital revolution is that we cannot anticipate the utilization to which the initiatives that we take are going to be used. We are very much a learner. We are entrepreneurial, but the use of technology will really come from all of you and from the people that you serve and that we serve because they're bringing the creativity to bear on the technology.

How does this fit into e-government? E-government is a very, very important aspect of how society works. We know, in terms of our own analysis, that you cannot have effective development unless you have some preconditions for that development.

The first precondition is a trained and reasonably compensated government body. You've got to have people there making the decisions and providing the direction that have a level of competence.

The second thing you must have is a legal and judicial system which actually functions, and functions effectively, well, honestly, with integrity, and with speed.

The third thing you need is a financial system that actually functions - a financial system in all its aspects, from banking, to capital markets, to the collection of taxes, to the provision of fiscal and monetary information and fiscal and monetary management, all of which are essential to get a state running correctly.

And, fourthly, you need to fight corruption because if you are shaken down at every opportunity that you have for a government intervention for a bribe or for a take-away, we all know that that is the single greatest inhibitor to development itself.

This is before I talk about any big projects. This is before we talk about bridges or towns or even education or health, although they are both parts of the government process in so many countries. But in each of these areas, what we're learning is that the use of information technology can both accelerate, broaden the reach, and give clarity, transparency, and address the question of corruption in ways that has
been impossible, where you have lots and lots of regulation and human intervention.

I have now seen with my own eyes, and I'm sure that our colleagues have talked to you today, of many of the examples: in Brazil, the shopping mall for public services; in India, as I'm sure has been explained already; in Seoul, the open system of municipal government; in Tanzania, the eco news dealing with environment; in Asian and Latin American countries, the tele-centers, the kiosks, the establishment of many of the things that my colleagues in infoDev have been doing to make the connectivity possible for people.

When you see the connectivity and find the provision of services, the combination of a provision of government services and connectivity feeds itself in a sort of loop, so that people come back and want to be connected because the services are available.

I know in the State of Andhra, the minister was telling me that you'll have 80 million people linked by broad-band fiber optic, in eighty months. He was also telling me just a few months ago that there are 20 different services in e-government, 20 different services from birth to death, including getting a license to drive in a matter of hours, instead of six months, including transferring property in a day instead of a year with lots of bribes. These are the sorts of things which are not pipe dreams. These are elements not in the future, but today.

Now, we at the Bank recognize that, but we're concerned about the sequencing, we're concerned about how you do it, we're concerned about not rushing it. We're concerned about ensuring that you get coverage and that e-government is part of an integrated system so that you don't come in with some brilliant idea for e-government before you have the infrastructure organized, and that you bring these things along in parallel.

We also have to learn the priorities, and we all have to learn what are the easy victories and what are the less-easy victories, and we have to learn the costs. We need to do cost-benefit analysis because we're not going to cover many of our countries instantly with Internet connectivity. It would be foolish to think that's possible.

So what we are looking for, from this meeting and from subsequent meetings, is a gradually emerging plan, where we're prepared to put up funds for innovation and for implementation. We really believe that we need to work together to try and get the sequencing right, to try and get the timing right, so that we're not making grandiose claims, but that we're making regular progress in terms of achievable objectives, both with relation to governments, legal system, taxes, medicine, health, education, all of the things that government is engaged in and where we want to see how it is that the use of e-government can be a net plus and not just some adornment.

So we approach it, my colleagues and I, with a great degree of humility. Because this is a brand new area, we know that we'll make some mistakes, but what we want to do is to try and do it as a community. We mean the
sort of community that is here that can subsequently be linked, not only on our website, but in other ways, electronically, so that we can learn together and build together for the future which we believe is there.

I welcome you today not as a teacher, but as a learner, as someone who, along with my colleagues, believes that there is a need for dialogue. We have a real sense, from the instances that we have seen, that this is a highly prospective area. The pacing, the timing, the planning, and the implementation is something that will vary by country, vary by circumstance and where we need to work together to try and see how we can make effective the prospects that do seem to us to be very real and very useful.

I'm sure my colleagues will enjoy working with you at this seminar, and I will certainly look forward to some good ideas that I can then claim as my own when I speak at the annual meeting, and people will say, "God, he's got such vision, this fellow."

And when you hear my vision, you'll know that it was all of you that gave it to me. So I look forward to your visionary thoughts, your practical thoughts, and to the result of a very useful meeting.

Thank you very much.