

**Opening Statement**  
**at**  
**The High-Level Training Seminars on E-Government**

**Guido Bertucci**

Director, Division for Public Economics and Public Administration  
The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs  
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Honorable Mr. Bassanini, Minister for Public Administration, Mr. Schioppa, Diplomatic Advisor to the Minister, Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen;

On behalf of the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), I wish to welcome all of you to these high-level training seminars on electronic government. We feel honored to cosponsor the very timely training seminars and hope that every one of you would benefit from coming here.

As you all are aware, the impact of technology on our lives is enormous and pervasive. There is no field, however, of technological progress, which has evolved more rapidly, in the past twenty years than information technology (IT). Taking shape through the convergence of semiconductors, computers, telecommunications and software technologies, the information revolution has produced rapid and sustained falls in the cost of processing, storing and transmitting information. Thus, it promises to make the information and knowledge base of humankind available anywhere, at anytime, and in any language. Humanity may soon step forward into an information society and a knowledge-based economy and polity.

During the past decade, two significant developments have greatly accelerated the globalization of information. The first is that computers have invaded millions of households. The second is the emergence and development of the Internet technologies. The former demonstrates that the role of computers has been extended dramatically, not only as a tool for institutions, but also as a household electronic appliance for information

retrieval and processing, for education, entertainment and communication. The latter leads to a great leap in the technical and human ability to access, interpret and use information. It presages the advent of a national information infrastructure (NII) and a global information infrastructure (GII) in the coming information age.

It has been estimated that in March 2000 there were 400 million personal computers and about one billion telephones in the world; 276 million Internet users worldwide with a growth rate of roughly 150,000 persons per day; 220 million devices accessing the World-Wide Web with almost 200,000 devices being added every day. Total world bandwidth (transmission capacity of computer networks or other telecommunications systems) in 1996 amounted to 200 trillion bits/sec. In 2001, there will be a bandwidth of 9,000 trillion bits/sec. It is also estimated that, ten years from now, there will be one billion personal computers and three billion telephones in the world.

Governments, organizations and business enterprises are seeking to harness the Internet to advertise and disseminate information. There are millions of websites, homepages and diverse documents on the Internet, which cover thousands of subjects. At present, web pages total 1.5 billion with almost 2 million pages being added every day. E-commerce, meaning business conducted over the Internet, grossed \$45 billion as recently as 1998. An estimate, in January 2000, projected that it could explode to over \$7 trillion as early as 2004. Information technology has greatly stimulated the globalization of information. Information flows on topics from politics and business to sports circulate among organizations, cities, nations, regions and individuals day and night.

Information technology is rapidly transforming all the sectors of the global economy. It helps to redefine such concepts as competitiveness, quality, delivery, responsiveness and innovation. Information technology has opened the way to advances in productivity by minimizing waste of raw materials, labor and time. Global information networks are rapidly transforming the ways of enterprise. In the last twenty years, both manufacturing and services have become increasingly globalized. It goes without saying that information technology is the central driver of the globalization of the global

economy. And governments have had and are adapting to the new demands by the public in general and its business base. New ways of delivering services have been invented, new rules and regulations are being implemented and studied.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, as you will find out from these high-level training seminars and the following the 3<sup>rd</sup> global forum, information technology carries in it the prospect of major reforms in the whole field of governance and public administration. In addition to e-commerce, e-government has become the most important and hottest applications area of modern information technology. Information technology has been taking shape and form in any of the following ways: more efficient and effective public administration and management; more accessible and quality government information to the public; better delivery of public services; building partnerships for interactive and participative governance; and reengineering government.

It is true that information technology opens new vistas for humankind. Information technology promises to improve our study, work and leisure. Information technology offers possibilities to broaden and to accelerate the global integration of information networks, of economic activities, of social and political and cultural pursuits. Casting a shadow, however, on these inviting prospects is the widening divide between those who can access and actively participate and those who have no access to global information networks. This is the *digital divide*. Currently, more than 98 per cent of global Internet protocol bandwidth, at the interregional level, connects to and from North America, while the level of bandwidth between the regions of the South is negligible. In an environment of economic globalization, the divide between developed and developing countries has been compounded by the distance separating the information-rich from the information-poor and the networked from the isolated . As a matter of fact, the advent of increasingly information-intensive activities and disparities in access to information technology are likely to *widen the gap* and make developing countries, the least developed and geographically isolated countries especially, more vulnerable to marginalization.

On a more positive note, however, modern information technology offers both countries and individuals dramatic opportunities to *leapfrog* into the future, speeding up their economic and social development. While many developed countries have spent enormous sums investing in information technology, many of the resulting information technology products and services have now become available at prices that may soon be affordable to enterprises and households in the developing countries. The current trend of information technology towards distributed processing and network computing is also very much in favor of developing countries because it provides them with low cost and low risk, as well as high benefit, strategies to develop their information capacity and thus participate in the global information society. By means of wireless technology, for example, it may soon become possible for developing countries to build up quickly basic data communications networks and information infrastructures with less investment, without wiring thousands of miles of cables.

The paradigm of a knowledge-based economy is not an impossible dream for the developing countries. It is important to note that bridging the digital divide is not simply an issue of building information infrastructure, nor of buying and handing out computers and modems to everyone in a society. Specific policy choices, the ability to absorb new technologies and success in creating a national IT culture are also important variables.

These critical prerequisites highlight the crucial role that only States can play. The initiative must come from duly empowered governments acting in cooperation with civil society. Governments need to articulate a vision and a strategy based on the situation in their respective countries. They must then galvanize the needed political will, commit the resources and mobilize for action that will eventually lead their countries to integration in the process of globalization and the emerging information-based global system. With a keen sense of priorities, governments must be aware of the advantages and pitfalls of information technology. Notwithstanding the widely acknowledged potential of information technology, evidence of its impact is still limited, particularly in developing countries. It is also instructive to note that IT-based concepts such as *e-government* and *e-commerce*, in which all internal activities as well as external relations with partners are

conducted substantively through electronic means, have yet to become a widespread reality. The problems in achieving and measuring the immediate impact on productivity and competitiveness are common to both the public and private sectors.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, in view of this, the high-level training seminar is focused on the important issues in the development of e-government. It aims, not only at fostering the appreciation and awareness of the advanced state of the art of the e-government, but also to provide you with information that, hopefully, will assist you in the design of your country policies to achieve your goals and implement your development strategies. We wish that the training seminars would provide platforms for you to exchange visions, strategic plans and practical experiences in e-government development and will assist you to explore the strategies for bridging the digital divide in this aspect.

In closing, on behalf of UNDESA, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Italian Government for sponsoring this event and giving us the opportunity to collaborate on this effort. We would also like to thank all the co-sponsors of the training seminars, including SSPA-Italy, FORMAZ-Italy, SDA Bocconi-Italy, IISA-Italy, CENSIS-Italy, ICOM-Italy, CONSIP-Italy, Demos-UK, AIPA, the University of Malta, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Italy, the Italian Treasury, the Ministry of Agriculture of Italy, and the Department of Public Administration of Italy for their contributions. I would like to also extend my thanks to the supporting staff for their efforts and for the excellent way they have organized these training seminars. We have no doubt that the outcome of these training seminars will be extremely beneficial not only to all participants here but also to other countries and enterprises with whom these training seminars results will be shared. On behalf of the United Nations as well as myself I wish these training seminars all the best.

Many thanks.

