



Department of Economic and
Social Affairs United Nations

**Conference on ICT and E-
government for Regional
Development and Integration in
Central America**



Government of Honduras
Office of the Vice President

**Proposal for a Central American Task Force on E-government
A Framework for Action**

Introduction

E-government, the application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) within public administration, provides government, the citizen and business with a set of tools that can potentially transform the way in which interactions take place, services are delivered and public administration reform and good governance goals are met. The strategic use of ICTs in government can result in a more inclusive, effective, efficient, transparent and accountable public administration, which will be key to improved economic development and competitiveness and meeting the Millennium Development Goals. Moreover, in enhancing the quality, delivery of and access to public services through ICT, especially in education, health, social security and social welfare, government can better achieve poverty reduction, redress inequality, and promote sustainable development. E-government can facilitate better coordination and cooperation between different levels of government – including a redefined role of local government - and government agencies, better integration and coordination of social and economic policy, streamlined government structure and business processes, consolidation of common internal services and reduction of transaction costs, and enhance capacity for data production, information sharing and knowledge management. Equally important, e-government, when viewed as part of a broader focus on e-governance, can offer new channels for participation and engagement in the political process, greater consultation in the decision-making process, and enhance the prospects for deepening democracy. Indeed, the importance of e-government as a development tool has been receiving increasing recognition at the national level, as well as at the international level in events such as the Palermo Conference on E-government for Development held in April 2002.

At present, e-government is not equally pronounced within Central America and there is a risk that inequalities in critical success factors such as levels of leadership, policies, laws, regulations, strategic public investments, education, including ICT education, and connectivity may further increase without deliberate actions and improved coordination. A regional approach to e-government development, undertaken in a phased manner, can help to address these disparities, enhance the capacity of the less digitally advanced countries, and to build a better knowledge infrastructure for the 21st century. In realizing the opportunities of the Knowledge Society, and confronting the challenges in doing so, regional cooperation and integration has proved to be a goal within almost every region in the world. Central America is no exception. The work of SICA, through COMTELCA, and the Plan Puebla Panama have both focused on laying the ICT infrastructure for the knowledge society through regional cooperation on regulatory frameworks and connectivity. In this regard, they are also helping to lay the foundation for ICT applications at the national and regional level, including e-government. Yet, the importance of e-government and the specific challenges associated with its implementation warrants a separate and more focused effort at cooperation.

At the highest level regional cooperation can raise awareness, facilitate dialogue, build political consensus, develop a common vision for realizing e-government opportunities and identify critical bottlenecks to doing so. With regard to the implementation of this vision, cooperation can allow for greater harmonization of national efforts in strategy and policy development and implementation, the

establishment of regulatory frameworks, the development of open standards, and ensuring interoperability at the national level, between countries and between regional organizations. Issues pertaining to social capital development, especially where human resources are often limited and difficult to retain, can also be addressed on a broader scale. Given the relatively small size of Central American countries, regional coordination may further serve to overcome limited market size and reach critical mass and economies of scale. The challenge of financing may also be addressed by resource mobilization and pooling of resources, where appropriate, at the regional level. Regional cooperation can additionally help bolster the region vis a vis global Internet governance issues by giving Central America a stronger voice in international negotiations on these issues.

A regional approach also encourages additional forms of practical cooperation and sharing of experiences. Regional programmes may be developed, and mechanisms created for knowledge exchange on e-government good practices and lessons learned - critical to capacity building and successful implementation of e-government applications - and for facilitating replication of successes at the national level. In addition, developing a common approach to ICT and e-government development may also mean improved prospects for mainstreaming these applications into other regional initiatives and strategies and facilitating cross-border data flows on a number of development issues. Indeed, Central American regional integration schemes and organs could potentially benefit from e-government applications. E-government in particular offers a channel to enhance decision-making, consultative and collaborative processes, encourage participation by multiple stakeholders in regional activities, and enhance intra-institutional communication between regional co-operation institutions and their constituents as well as link national and regional orgs that work on similar objectives. In responding to the challenge of implementation of regional decisions at the national level and monitoring and evaluation of activities, e-government applications provide a powerful means of management and analysis, as well as enable general exchange of experiences. Moreover, e-government methodologies and tools can be used to strengthen the capacity of regional institutions and governance regimes and increase their effectiveness, efficiency and rationalization of resources.

Ultimately, regional coordination of e-government development and implementation, and its application to regional integration efforts, can allow for a smoother, more coherent and more equitable transition to the knowledge society and can help accelerate government reform, modernization efforts, democratization and the meeting of development challenges at the national and regional levels. Moreover, e-government as supported by regional cooperation can potentially lead to greater resiliency and a more attractive investment climate at the national and regional level. It is in this context that UNDESA and the Government of Honduras are proposing the creation of a Central America E-government Task Force to serve as a mechanism for ongoing coordination and promotion of Central American e-government strategy, policy and project planning, development and implementation. The Task Force is considered a key outcome of the Conference on ICT and E-government for Regional Development and Integration, organized by the Government of Honduras and UNDESA with support from the Government of Italy and in collaboration with the Inter-American Development Bank.

Task Force Objective and Mandate

The longer term goal of the Task Force is the strengthening of the institutional capacity of the Central American governance system, especially that of regional, central and local government institutions, to improve policy making, coordination and delivery of public goods and services using ICTs, in partnership with all stakeholders, complying to high standards of integrity, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, accountability, and responding to the needs expressed by their constituencies.

The primary mandate of the Task Force will be the creation and implementation of a Regional Strategic Plan of Action on E-government in Central America (SPA) which will work towards these ends. Formulation of the SPA will involve identification of opportunities, challenges, needs, and priority areas

where regional cooperation can make a difference and add value. Moreover, specific actions and activities to advance e-government at the national and regional will be agreed upon and pursued.

Strategic Areas of Support

Within the framework of a Regional Strategic Plan of Action, international experience points to a range of key activities which have been undertaken by bodies charged with co-ordination and integration of ICT and e-government at the regional level. The following are illustrative of the possible initiatives to be undertaken by the proposed Central America E-government Task Force.

Guidelines for National E-government Strategy and Action Plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General guidelines (perhaps based on several models rather than one size fits all) on the design, development and implementation of e-government strategies and action plans at the national level. Elements to be considered as integral to a national e-government strategy would include: aligning strategy with public sector reform and good governance goals, leadership and vision, awareness, organizational and cultural factors, human capacity development, infrastructure, knowledge management, and data standards and interoperability. Critical success factors in implementing action plans (advice on the “how to”), such as sequencing, scaling, achieving quick wins, taking a staged approach, and financial sustainability may also be examined. Analytical policy, legal and regulatory frameworks E-government readiness assessment methodology and analysis of readiness at national and regional level Create targets for common basic online public services
Observatory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exchange good practices and lessons learned from within and beyond the region Network to serve as discussion forum Reports on national and regional activities Country profiles Regional coordination
Capacity Building Initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification of training needs Seminars & training for policy makers or government officials Organization of twinning and exchanges
Analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy Briefs Identify trends, opportunities and challenges within the region
Regional Programming
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify programming priorities and determine where regional action and a common approach adds value. Pilot regional projects (examples from other regions include ASEAN Regional Information Exchange (ARIX), Regional ePayment Gateway Solutions, Tourism Portal, ICT Job Bank, Interchange of Data between Administrations (IDA) – a Pan European e-government initiative, Open Source Software initiatives)
Monitoring, Evaluation and Benchmarking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create guidelines on monitoring and evaluation of e-government activities Identify indicators and benchmarking methodology

Standard Setting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Guidelines or standards on data exchange ▪ Address interoperability of government networks and of information systems of regional organisations
Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Resource mobilization and partnership building ▪ Support integration schemes and organs in integrating ICT and e-government applications in their work and within their area of competence ▪ Coordinate regional position vis a vis global initiatives and fora

Task Force Composition

It is proposed that the Central America E-government Task Force is composed of a Special Designee, with sufficient knowledge and experience on e-government, nominated by the Vice Presidents of each Central American country and the Dominican Republic. It is also important that key regional organizations such as SICA and its members, e.g. COMTELCA and ICAP, participate in the Task Force. In order to ensure that hemispheric and international best practices inform the e-government activities in the region, it is recommended that international organizations also participate as observers in the Task Force. These could include the United Nations system, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the World Bank and the European Union. Also, taking into account the support and experience of Italy, it is recommended that the Government of Italy participate in the same capacity as the international organizations. The Task Force could incorporate other actors as members of the Task Force. The Government of Honduras, with the support of UNDESA, will act as the Pro-tempore Secretariat of the Task Force.

Next Steps

It is proposed that the Task Force be constituted within several months of the Conference on ICT and E-government for Regional Development and Integration, and possibly before the Latin American Conference for the World Summit on the Information Society which will take place in the Dominican Republic at the end of January 2003. The inaugural Task Force meeting will address issues such as the precise mandate of the Task Force, the elaboration of its terms of reference, identification of financing mechanisms, and development of a blue print of the work plan- including the objectives of the second meeting of the Task Force and interim activities- and the cooperation processes to implement the work plan. The result of this meeting should be communicated to the Forum of Central American Vice Presidents to which the Task Force will report.