CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP AIDE MEMOIRE
E-GOVERNMENT AS A TOOL
FOR PARTICIPATION AND TRANSPARENCY

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DIVISION FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

Workshop organized by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) in partnership with the the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS), the National Computerization Agency (NCA), and the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs of Korea (MOGAHA).

1.   Background on the 6th Global Forum

Participation and transparency constitute the main theme of the 2005 Global Forum on Reinventing Government in Seoul, the Republic of Korea. Although not new to the global discussion of issues related to public administration and governance, this theme has recently acquired new urgency. At the same time, the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT) to operation of governments (e-government) has promised decisive breakthroughs in this area.

This urgency stems from several sources. On one hand, there is a growing understanding of the pivotal role that governments play in the system of social institutions responsible for human development. For instance, the UN Millennium Declaration (2000) that strongly focuses on human development and especially on poverty eradication names solid public administration structures and good governance as necessary conditions to achieve each of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). In the Declaration, the heads of State and Government pledged "To work collectively for more inclusive political processes, allowing genuine participation by all citizens in all (…) countries."

On the economic side, today, the three critical roles of a state are to create an enabling environment for participating effectively in a global economy so that all segments of the population are able to benefit from international trade and investment; to focus on pro-poor policies that combat poverty and enhance the capacities of the poor to participate in productive activities; and to strengthen the capacity of public institutions to promote socially equitable economic growth. For a state to achieve the goals of people-centred growth and development, both participation of people in governance and transparency that enables good governance are crucial.

Moreover, as we have entered the Age of Knowledge, with all the hopes and concerns that it brings, only genuine participation seems to constitute an adequate tool for demanding and executing the needed transformations of social institutions, so that people and information – two main assets of the Knowledge Society – can develop and the great resource of knowledge can be used to support a high level of quality and safety of life.

Transparency *per se* is often demanded as a prerequisite of an effective anti-corruption policy. However, this is only part of the picture. Lack of transparency corrupts the political system in many different ways. It makes it easier for groups with special interests to convert public value into private value; it allows public administration to continue with wrong decisions and policies; and it raises the cost of participation in the political process and changing the "management team" for the opposition and citizens. Finally, a lack of transparency also hurts the private sector, to the extent that business depends on inexpensive and open access to information to make well informed decisions about the allocation of resources.

Therefore, the pressure on governments to reform, become more transparent, and govern in a more participatory way comes from many different directions. It is only natural that the option of using ICT in various public processes, including those relevant to participation and transparency, has been embraced by many as a possible solution.

Indeed, e-government comes with many promises. It offers new possibilities for meeting good governance goals and for responding to new political challenges in the future. It seems ideally suited for revamping the organization and practices of government.

The WSIS Action Plan reflects this conviction and states: "To maximize the social, economic, and environmental benefits of the Information Society, governments need to create a trustworthy, transparent, and non-discriminatory legal, regulatory, and policy environment. Actions include: Governments should foster a supportive, transparent, pro-competitive, and predictable policy, legal, and regulatory framework, which provides the appropriate incentives to investment and community development in the Information Society; Governments need to formulate national strategies, which include e-government strategies, to make public administration more transparent, efficient, and democratic."

Furthermore, the WSIS Action Plan suggests the following actions:

- Implement e-government strategies focusing on applications aimed at innovating and promoting transparency in public administrations and democratic processes, improving efficiency and strengthening relations with citizens.

- Develop national e-government initiatives and services, at all levels, adapted to the needs of citizens and business, to achieve a more efficient allocation of resources and public goods.

- Support international cooperation initiatives in the field of e-government, in order to enhance transparency, accountability, and efficiency at all levels of government.

All this requires careful probing, as the first experiences with ICT application to participation and transparency are mixed. Electronic voting and e-mailing (in some countries, increasingly, messaging) public officials and politicians are accepted as standards on the side of e-participation, but seem to fall desperately short of the desired scope of using ICT in democracy – via, for instance, encouraging consultations among citizens and between citizen groups and politicians; and facilitating comments on policies and activities of governments, including the social outcomes of these policies and activities. On the side of transparency, one often cannot escape the impression that information published by governments with the use of electronic means is trivial, not timely, and very difficult to access and to understand.

This leads to a rather broad consensus that very much like in other areas, without sometimes deep institutional change and transformation, ICT put in the context of old structures and practices related to participation and transparency just clones them digitally and its impact on change is minimal.

However, this cannot and should not mean that discarding ICT as a vehicle for deepening democracy is advisable. We know now that such use of ICT has to be carefully put in appropriate cultural, political and social context that allows using it in a meaningful way. The specifics of doings it are not totally clear. The Workshop is structured to allow a debate of them, so that a higher level of understanding of these complex issues can be achieved.

2. Objectives & Outputs of the Workshop on E-Government

The main objective of the Workshop will be to examine in a participatory way, via discussion with the participants, contexts in which deployment of e-government applications could enhance public transparency and genuine participation of citizens in policy development and decision-making. As such, findings and conclusions of the Workshop that will identify major issues and trends in e-government as a tool for participation and transparency will complement the overall results of the Forum.

In addition, the following objectives will be pursued:

- Enhancing the knowledge of the participants of the 6th Global Forum on issues related to e-government deployment in the area of transparency and participation;

- Enriching the ability of DPADM to serve in a more knowledgeable way the Member States in the area of e-government for transparency and participation;

- Facilitating creation of networks and partnerships – among the participants, among the participants and international organizations (including UNDESA), agencies, and firms.

The expected output of the Workshop will be the Report of the Forum and the Report of the Workshop – the latter published in electronic form on the United Nations Online Network in Public Administration and Finance (UNPAN).

3. Participants

Official participants of the meeting will include experts, Korean officials, UNDESA staff, and participants of the 6th Global Forum.

4. Agenda and Venue

The Workshop will constitute part of the 6th Global Forum on Reinventing Government, to be held at the Conference Centre in Seoul, Republic of Korea. It is scheduled for one day and a half (six one and a half hour sessions), from 26-27 May 2005.

Following the opening session of the Workshop, the five main themes will be presented, which include the importance of transparency and participation in transition the Knowledge Society; transparency as part of information management; the role of genuine participation in the public value chain; the Open System of Seoul as an example of an anti-corruption tool; and presentation of results of the 2003 and 2004 UN Global E-government Surveys, as they relate to transparency and participation. The sessions will include two, maximum three, presentations by experts and general discussion. The closing session will be devoted to lessons learned.