# United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration
# Fourth Session, New York, 4 - 8 April 2005
# United Nations Secretariat, New York

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**Presentation of highlights in the UN Activities on Public Administration in the area of Knowledge Management (April 7, 2005)**

Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished Members of the Committee,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 2004, the story of the Division's activities in the area of knowledge management has been the story of five clusters of ideas. These ideas have been developed within our Division and now inform our various activities, including our advocacy and training efforts as well as our advisory services to the Member States.

**The first cluster of ideas has been about e-government and what makes it meaningful.** We have decided to put the discussion about e-government in the context of public value creation and attach the public value creation to the policy framework of human development. We took the clue from the 2000 UN Millennium Declaration and called it world making.

This cluster of ideas has been developed around the 2003 World Public Sector Report, but throughout 2004 it has fed into many of our activities and still remains the guiding framework for our present and future ideas in e-government development. It has underpinned the construction of the E-government Readiness Assessment Methodology

at the country, ministerial and civil society level. The key question in that methodology remains: "What is the compelling reason to deploy e-government?" and the answer to this question is tied in the methodology to policy development that would serve the needs of the people. We believe that by developing and propagating these ideas we have served the world community well. There seems to exist a large demand in the world for making sense of the swelling wave of e-government development and the vintage point offered by UNDESA seems to be accepted by many. The Report has been translated locally into Ukrainian and Vietnamese and parts of it have been translated in Brazil into Portuguese. And, while there are governments that are opting "not to know" and approach us with ideas about e-government development that are not based on any deep understanding of the most meaningful use of e-government applications in their developmental situation; and opt not to conduct any survey of their e-government readiness to remedy this; and, while there are donors ready to fund the e-government application of the beneficiary country's choice, as long as it is the application that the donor is committed to promote – we find a lot of acceptance and appreciation for our normative work in this area. We have ended in 2004 the long-standing cooperation with the Caribbean countries and Government of Italy with country e-government assessments that followed our methodology and led to adoption of the Strategy and Action Plan for E-government Development in the Caribbean. Our cooperation with the Central American countries and in the Arab Region is also drawing on these concepts. And, at the request of the Government of Mexico, we have reviewed the whole e-government program of that country with the aim to identify ways to make it even more meaningful than it already is today.

**The second cluster of ideas has been about measuring the standing of countries in the world in e-government development.** With publication of the first UN Global E-government Survey in 2003, but even more with publication of the second Survey in 2004, DPADM / UNDESA has become the recognized and accepted organization for ranking countries in the world in the area of e-government development. Our ranking of countries according to the E-government Readiness Index, Web Presence Index and E-participation Index has become an accepted global standard. The methodology adopted for this survey is based on the above concept, which ties e-government deployment to public value creation, and public value creation to human development. It incorporates also technical stages of sophistication in development of e-government on line. It is objective. It has universal outreach. Throughout 2004, it has been challenged many times by the interested Member States and scholars who always have ended their challenge convinced by its logic and objectivity.

We have found the Survey and the resulting ranking of the Member States to be an invaluable advocacy and training tool. Countries want to know what is determining their ranking and what measures they should take to improve it. Brazil wants to cooperate with us in developing the methodology. Russia wants to apply it to measuring progress in e-government development internally, by using it to compare the progress achieved in its provinces.

We believe that the biggest contribution of the Survey to-date is its ability to prove that imagination and commitment to using e-government in human development-sensitive areas is a game open to all, regardless of the level of their GNP per capita. This is demonstrated by very high ranking, much above the ranking of many donor countries, of some of the developing countries from South America or of the countries with economies in transition from the Eastern and Central Europe. And, the Survey has proven that despite all the politically correct rhetoric, globally, only 6% of the 178 countries with e-government presence on line provide meaningful information and facilities to encourage e-participation. This does not include even all the OECD countries but – remarkably - extends to some of the developing countries and countries with economies in transition. Indeed, the Survey has become a useful mirror for all e-government developers.

Then there have been also efforts not only to apply previously developed concepts, but to come up with fresh ones, hopefully for further follow up in the future.

Thus, **the third cluster of ideas** belongs to this category and **has been about networked government.** We devoted to this issue the Ad Hoc Group of Experts Meeting on E-governance and Changes in Administrative Structures and Processes held in Seoul, Korea in July 2004. We do not believe that we have reached full understanding of it yet. However, similarly as with knowledge management within public administration – the subject of our next Ad Hoc Group of Experts Meeting scheduled for May 2005 in Shanghai, our probe of networked government has intended to start a dialogue that clarifies and cuts through the fog of hazy definitions and open-ended interpretations. At

this stage we have intended to demarcate the parameter for a future UN research and debate. We have come out of this meeting with an understanding that in the networked government, the state is but one actor in an informal network of organizations in which the sum total of the organizational efforts in the network constitutes some form of activity that the state wants done and that would not necessarily happen by itself within the framework of the free market state. After "founding" the network, the actors within it act with considerable independence and the traditional state plays a diminished role (sometimes limited to the power of the purse). In many a situation, this is more efficient and can result in creative and innovative solutions to complex problems in a way that traditional, rule-bounded, one-size-fits-all government cannot.

At the same time, we understand now that the concept of networked government may be supported by ICT or may be entirely detached from it. Indeed, for many, networked government represents a model for public administration, regardless if it is supported by technology or not. We have also come to an understanding that the networked government may or may not promote the notion of public value and good governance. At its worse, it can serve to reinforce, in a malignant or benign manner, existing inefficient and ineffective government practices or can introduce new "ways of doing business" that embrace private sector actors only, with little regard for the public interest. Transparency and accountability problems can be exacerbated by the use of networking arrangements, and one has to be careful to appreciate that "n-government" may not necessarily equal "good government", and assuring that "n-government" becomes "good government" requires special social arrangement, by and large non-existent yet.

**The fourth cluster of ideas has been about the "digital divide", its true meaning and its impact on development.** We have never felt comfortable with the term "digital divide". Indeed, framing the problem of ICT "have-nots" as "digital" in its nature calls for a "digital" solution and this – though it prevails in global discussions of the issue – in our opinion, trivializes the challenge at hand. Thus, the 2004 UN Global E-government Readiness Report deals with the issue of what in reality constitutes a lack of access for opportunity or the "access-opportunity divide", what defines it, what governs it and where are the countries of the world placed in terms of their access to ICT. It stresses that meaningful access to ICT goes beyond connectivity and even beyond education-related issues to embrace digital, human, economic and social resources and relationships: content and language, literacy and education, and community and institutional structures. It defines the real access as the equilibrium level of access whereby an individual has the requisite availability of technology, educational skills; culturally appropriate and relevant content in his/her language of choice – all at an affordable cost.

Furthermore, the Report proposes taxonomy of countries according to their access opportunities. In doing so it proposes the Access-for-Opportunity Framework: a structured rethinking about accelerating real access for all. Tracking the relative progress of Member States in implementing their ICT and e-government programs, the Framework contributes to a better understanding of the various facets of the digital divide and the lack of real access. Within this Framework, the Model of Access-Acceleration maintains that the technology infrastructure needs to reach some threshold level in a given nation for access to start accelerating, but only as long as other access-supporting economic, social, educational, and cultural elements are in place.

We believe that all these ideas constitute a very useful basis for policy dialogue with the Member States. Judging by their initial reaction (the Report is on line for four months only), there is a substantial interest in these concepts and we will be ready to present them in international forums or in bi-lateral talks throughout 2005 and beyond.

And finally, Mr. Chairman, **the fifth cluster of ideas has been about knowledge, knowledge creation and policies that governments should pursue in their quest to effectively lead their citizens to the Knowledge Society.** This major effort in research and concept building has resulted in a study "Understanding Knowledge Societies" that will be published in mid-May 2005.

The cornerstone of this cluster of ideas is the conviction that sometime at the end of the 20th century, in a generic way, by using ICT and shared spaces for knowledge production, humanity has mastered the skill to mass-produce and mass-utilize knowledge.

This conviction has led us in at least three logical directions.

First, the generic skill of mass-production of knowledge has created a tension between technology (ICT) and techniques to mass-produce knowledge and society. This tension can be solved only by appropriate transformations of social institutions. As such transformations would require creating space for limitless development of people and information – two main assets of any society pursuing transition to the knowledge society

- democracy should serve as the vehicle for making such transformations happen. We would have to adjust or rather to develop the currently existing social institution of democracy though; and, the currently existing social institution of the market too. We would have to rethink and remodel the patterns of wealth distribution in a society and correct the use of public power and public resources. We would have to rethink the capacity of the markets to mass-produce – as the case is likely to be - negative externalities that would have adverse effect on the quality and safety of human life.

Second, it must be realized that the generic skill to mass-produce knowledge converts the whole society, all people everywhere – even the poor people, hitherto treated as dangerous deviants - in potential participants in shared spaces for knowledge creation. And, it allows that not only one kind of knowledge can be produced – for example the knowledge "to do", the basis for technological innovations, but all kinds of knowledge, that is the knowledge "to be", "to co-exist" and "to maintain developmental equilibrium".

Third, we would maintain that all those kinds of knowledge around the knowledge "to do" not only can be produced, but must be produced in a society that is capable of mass-production of knowledge. It is so as they must counterbalance the mass-produced knowledge "to do", which - led by the market alone - is capable to bring to the market a huge quantity of products with high risk factor and put in jeopardy the fate of the biosphere, human life and life in general.

We know of governments that have already adopted the goal of transition to the knowledge society. We know of communities that want to build Knowledge Cities. We believe that a global debate of the issues involved is imminent. We have developed the study to inform that debate and – as the United Nations - to be ready for it in 2005 and beyond.

Thank you.