

**Second Committee of Experts on Public Administration  
New York, 7 – 11 April 2003**

**Agenda Item III: Status and trends in the development of e-government**

Mr. Chairman,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

You have before you document E/C.16/2003/2 entitled “Status and trends in the development of e-government”. It talks about e-government in the world today and how we see our role in this area.

It is very fashionable these days to start such documents and to start such speeches by giving assurances that all this is not about “e”, that it is not about the information and communication technologies, but rather about the government. It is equally fashionable to then speak about the ICT, and forget about the government. I will try to avoid this.

You have no doubt noticed that this paper is trying to speak about world making and about the societal context that is best suited for human development. It is so, because we understand fully the power of ICT, and especially the power of ICT in the hands of public administrations. One phrase seems to end this conversation: eventually, it is a matter of political decision where and how to use ICT in government operations. In this hall - we must stress – a matter of a sovereign policy decision. Therefore, why do we in DPADM want to watch this process, measure it, benchmark and rank? Why do we want to focus in our work especially on e-democracy? Why do we want to request that you suggest to the Economic and Social Council that it should devote one of its high-level discussions to e-government and specifically to e-government and development of democracy?

When you came to this country, almost the first thing that you have encountered was a splendid display of e-government. The immigration officer swiped your passport through an electronic reader and in time that allowed him to do two-three other simple functions or perhaps chat with you, in a powerful display of G2G connectivity your data travelled to a certain number of databases and came back to him. No doubt, you liked not only the routine courtesy of the US immigration service, but also the speed with which you were able to cross the border. I know, that I do.

Now, would you like if the US government were a fully seamless e-government and your data once entered at the airport were available to all the public offices in the US, throughout the country, to be perhaps accessed also by the aggressive business sector in this US?

When you were walking towards luggage collection and customs, there was no possibility for you to stop at a computer and in a quick way register with the US immigration service you satisfaction or otherwise with the service provided. There is a

technical possibility to do it. A sovereign policy decision has been taken not to do it. If there were such an option, would you like to register your opinion in a way that cannot trace you as its author, or would you like that it is fully traceable. Again, a matter for a policy choice.

If you have arrived yesterday and took a walk in Manhattan, it is safe to bet that most of your walk was registered on surveillance cameras. These are private cameras set up by businesses for security purposes. A few years from now, when the face recognition technology progresses, someone will be able to make a movie of your walk. Today, with the existing disclosure laws, you would have no knowledge that this is happening, no influence on the content of that movie or ownership of it. Once produced, it could be filed permanently. In future, if needed, government would be able to subpoena it.

Is this a societal context in which you want to live? Is your security or the security of a business that serves you worth such a bargain with your privacy? There are no universal answers to it and quite surprisingly, a huge survey in Canada has revealed that the cancer patients there have had little objection to making their medical data stored in public health service data bases rather easily accessible on the web.

But, at least we can agree, that there is a lot to think about and to decide about. If for no other reasons – e-government investments carry an opportunity cost and the taxpayers should take this into consideration.

We make a point in the paper before you, that it matters which branches of government are digitised and why.

We make a point in the paper before you, that it matters if this digitisation empowers you, serves your human development, or not.

Market and technology are powerful transformers of human life, of the way in which we live and work. Electric light, railways, automobiles, oil and nuclear power – to name a few, have not only revamped our everyday lives, but have also had a lasting impact on governance in general. Technologies come with a bargain. And, ICT should be especially carefully watched in this respect. This technology is about the way in which people communicate – a very basic human activity. Therefore, a conscious decision is needed if we want to use ICT to communicate in the way we want – in the framework in our lives as consumers of public services and as citizens; or, do we want these technologies to suggest and then change the way we go about communication with the government. This is a big question. Some say that the battle has been lost already. We say that it is worth at least a discussion – about the meaning of world making, about the development goals that we have, about modalities for their implementation, values that we want to preserve in this process and the digitised institutions that we must have to reach where we are going in a more efficient and effective way. As you know from the paper before you, we are suggesting the conceptual framework of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, with its vision of a peaceful, prosperous and just world; with the Millennium

Development Goals; participatory governance as a modality and a set of values as a reference for decision making.

E-democracy – again following the United Nations Millennium Declaration - presents itself as a modality of choice. It can develop and deepen today's democracies all over the world, both in countries with developed and with developing economies. It can do wonders to fixing today's imperfect public spheres. It can do wonders to building up our individual deliberative resources. If we are collectively in an increased need of decision-making – not only in the context of choosing the societal context for e-government development, but also in the more general context of the increasingly complex and complicated world, we have to at least recognize the potential of e-participation and take again a sovereign policy decision what to do about it.

All these questions cannot be wished away. They will resolve itself this way or another in the life span of the generation of today's teenagers. This will create a more or less liveable communities and states.

This is why we are coming to you with these questions. This is why we believe that the Member States, not only the UN Secretariat, are interested in your discussion and recommendations.

Thank you.