G-8 Collaborative Initiatives and the Digital Divide: Readiness for e-Government

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Abstract

At the G-8 Kyushu-Okinawa Summit in July 2000, the industrialized nations acknowledged the advancement of the private sector in information technology (IT) and committed the organization to the Global Digital Divide Initiative of the World Economic Forum Task Force. The Task Force outlined nine initiatives and a set of concrete action plans for implementation, which may achieve e-government readiness in developing countries. Major cultural variables, however, threaten to impede or thwart the facilitation of e-government even though many countries promote e-government policies. To examine the G-8's first effort to implement collaborative policy initiatives of the private, public, and non-profit sectors to eliminate the global digital divide, this paper will explore the relationship between six cultural variables and the implementation of the Digital Initiative to alleviate the digital divide and effect e-government readiness in developing countries.

1. Introduction

At the G-8 Kyushu-Okinawa Summit in July 2000, the eight industrialized nations—Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, the United States, and Russia (the newest member)—acknowledged the advancement of the private sector in information technology (IT) and committed the G-8 to the Global Digital Divide Initiative of the World Economic Forum (WEF) Task Force, an independent, non-profit organization. To direct international efforts to promote closing the digital divide and increasing digital opportunities, the Task Force—consisting of thirty-four representatives of IT corporations, university centers, and intergovernmental organization—outlined nine principles as categories of initiatives: (1) the G-8, with developing countries and high-level, collaborative effort, to assume a leadership role in promoting a positive plan of digital opportunity for assisting developing nations; (2) collaborative, digital opportunity agendas of international organizations, business communities, civil societal groups, and philanthropic organizations are as helpful as individual programs; (3) governments may enhance their capacity to attain digital opportunity by creating frameworks, subject to high-level administration and direction, to facilitate forward-looking national strategies; (4) the shift to knowledge societies will require universal education and technology training; (5) new commercial financing is significant for entrepreneurship to prosper; (6) civil society's digital empowerment is a main base of development in the age of information and technology; (7) achieving global digital opportunity requires pro-competitive telecommunications policies; (8) expanding infrastructure and affordable Internet use for organizations and the general public will necessitate pro-competitive Internet policies; and (9) global electronic commerce pro-competitive policies will catapult the shift to active, long-term, self-sustaining economies of the information age [12].

The Task Force also outlined a ten-point, concrete action plan to implement the nine initiatives. The first five points of the action plan emphasized strategies for the G-8 governments to institutionalize and coordinate the global digital initiatives. The sixth point of the action plan offered strategies for advancing “education, entrepreneurship and empowerment” [12, p. 34]. Items seven through ten of the action plan recommended strategies for G-8 countries in governing the ICT sector to advocate access and use.

In response to the Global Digital Divide Initiative of the World Economic Forum Task Force, the G-8 Okinawa Summit launched the Digital Opportunity Taskforce (dot force), a collaboration among government, international organizations, industry, and the non-profit sector, to examine concrete steps to integrate the various efforts to bridge the international digital
divide and prepare a report of recommendations for the next G8 Summit in Genoa, Italy in July 2001. The G-8 collaborative initiatives seek to prevent furthering widening of the digital divide between information technology-advanced countries and developing countries and create digital opportunities for both. This coordinated effort, we maintain, has the potential to assist developing countries in attaining e-readiness necessary for leaders and citizens to participate in the digital opportunity of e-government, which is defined here as the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to facilitate service delivery, citizens’ participation, intergovernmental relations, educational developments, cultural exchanges, business and commercial transactions, and trade negotiations in multi-sectoral, multi-level, domestic and international arenas. To be sure, a bevy of definitions of e-government or digital government has begun to surface in the evolving literature. Some of the representative studies are Milward Brinton and Louise Snyder [4], Brown University [32], Janet Caldow[6, 7], Sharon Dawes et al [9], Deloitte Research-Public Sector Institute [10], Heeks [16], and Sung-Don Hwang and Younghoon Choi [17]. The definition in this paper emphasizes the multi-sectoral, multi-level emphasis on e-government from a national and international perspective. The multi-sectoral focus encompasses e-business and e-commerce as integrated aspects of e-government. The multi-level focus emphasizes the various levels of government in which countries operate: international, regional, subregional, national, mid-level (provincial, state, prefecutal), local, and community.

Although the G-8 collaborative initiatives offer a potential plan for countries to attain readiness for e-government, certain cultural factors, we argue, may stifle the transition to e-government in developing countries. These factors may also impede e-government reforms in developing countries in attaining e-readiness necessary for countries to the potential proliferation of ICTs and the failure of some governments to meet the e-readiness criteria of existing assessment measures; (3) identify factors that may impede or thwart the facilitation of e-government even though many countries advocate e-government policies and attain digital dividends via the coordinated, collaborative initiatives; and (4) generate testable hypotheses for future studies on the significance of culture in the use or adaptation of ICTs in various environments and contribute to the broader literature on the social and political shaping of technology [26] and the impact of culture on development [16].

2. Dot force collaboration

The Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society defined the dot force as “a high-level task force” to coordinate the G-8’s efforts to expand its international approach to the digital divide, consider the best manner to engage the participation of stakeholders in bridging the digital divide, review inputs from other sectors, and report the findings and activities of the task force before the 2001 G-8 Summit in Genoa, Italy. It also mandated the dot force to seek measures for concrete plans on four priorities: “Fostering policy, regulatory and network readiness; improving connectivity, increasing access and lowering cost; building human capacity; and encouraging participation in global networks” [28]. The inaugural dot force consisted of forty-three representatives of four main stakeholder constituencies: government (17), international organizations (7), business groupings (11), and non-profit organizations (8). (Figure 1 illustrates the stakeholders of the G-8 dot force.) Each of the G-8 countries appointed representatives from its government, private and non-profit sectors. The G-8 invited nine developing countries—Bolivia, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Senegal, South Africa, and Tanzania—to represent the developing world. China, however, did not attend any of the meetings. The country “expressed gratitude for its invitation” but did not confirm its participation, leaving open the option of attending in the future [22].

The international organizations included the World
Figure 1. G-8 Dot Force
Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Telecommunications Union (ITU), Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCED), and the European Commission. The business community stakeholders comprised representatives from the World Economic Forum, Global Business Dialogue on e-Commerce, and the Global Information Infrastructure Commission. Guiding the stakeholders of the dot force is a secretariat housed in the World Bank in Washington, DC. The World Bank and UNDP jointly staff the dot force with Bruno Lanvin of the World Bank as Executive Secretary. The World Bank Information for Development Program (infoDev) coordinates contributions to fund the secretariat [35, p. 4]. Per the suggestion of Japan as the host nation, the Asia Pacific Telecommunity (APT), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and e-Asean (association of Southeast Asian Nations) attended the first meeting as ad hoc members in the non-stakeholder international/multilateral sectors to reflect the Asian viewpoint in the discussion.

Collocated and virtual meetings facilitated the formal and informal interactions among dot force members. As the site of the G-8 2000 summit, Japan hosted the inaugural dot force plenary meeting on November 27, 2000. The organization held its second plenary meeting on March 1-2, 2001, in Cape Town, South Africa and its third plenary meeting on April 23-24, 2001, in Siena, Italy, alternating one of the invited developing country participants and a G-8 country for plenary locations. Stakeholder groups held separate consultative meetings in the interim of the plenary sessions. The developing countries, for example, met for enhanced consultation in Pretoria, South Africa. Other stakeholders solicited civil societal organizations (CSOs) and the broader community to participate in digital divide discussions and incorporated the feedback into their dot force input. For example, the New York-based Markle Foundation, as a non-profit stakeholder seeking to garner community input on the dot force mission and draft report, created the DIGOPP Online Working Group from February 12 to April 20, 2001 (www.edc.org/GLG/Markle/dotforce/). The Canadian Civil Society Consultation Workspace, another example of outreach to broader audiences, hosted a consultative input site in English and French (www.bellanet.org/dotforce/).

Following responses garnered from plenary sessions, stakeholder meetings, informal consultations, and electronic forums with broader audiences over five months, the dot force prepared its final report and action plan for the Genoa Summit. The report’s proposed Genoa Plan of Action recommends using concrete and creative action to implement real results.

Action Point 1 of the nine-point proposal advises the G-8 to “help establish and support developing country and emerging economy national strategies” [11, p. 13]. According to the report, countries would generate their strategies based on consultations among the public, private and non-profit sectors. Mirroring the WEF Global Digital Divide Initiative, the action plan calls for strategies committed to creating a pro-competitive regulatory and policy framework, with emphasis on institutional policymaking and self-regulatory frameworks. Interested countries could receive help in conducting preliminary e-readiness assessments to move forward in developing strategies. In this lead point, the dot force highlights the role of “eGovernment” and “eGovernance.” It recommends that countries’ strategies acknowledge the significance of “eGovernment” for efficient and effective government and the importance of “eGovernance” for building institutions, achieving transparency and accountability, and enhancing democratic governance. To foster implementation of Point 1, the dot force advises creating an International eDevelopment Resource Network of multi-sectoral stakeholders to offer support, resources, and expertise via a decentralized, open process including regional conferences and virtual information sharing.

Action Point 2 advocates improving connectivity, increasing access, and lowering costs via competition among multiple technologies. To ensure affordable and sustainable access to ICT, the dot force emphasizes using public and community facilities such as Internet cafes, community networking centers, post offices, and elementary schools with adequate training provided to users. Action Point 3 recommends training, education and knowledge sharing, especially via ICTs on site and distance education programs, to strengthen human capacity development. The dot force, again, stresses the importance of focusing on “eGovernance” and its benefits of “enhancing democracy, transparency and government accountability” to increase “the eAwareness of senior policy makers” [11, p.16]. In Action Point 4, the dot force outlines recommendations for fostering “enterprise and entrepreneurship for sustainable economic development” [11, p.16]. Action Point 5 advises the support and encouragement of all developing country stakeholders from the government, private, non-profit, civil societal and academic sectors to gain a better understanding of the Internet and other ICT policy issues and to increase effective, universal participation in appropriate global forums. Action Point 6 recommends creating and supporting specialized initiatives that address the particular challenges of least developed countries (LDCs) in achieving sustainable solutions for ICT. Not forsaking concern about HIV/AIDS and other health issues to enhance digital opportunities, the dot force advises the promotion of ICT in health education, care delivery, awareness campaigns, knowledge sharing, and research.
reporting in Action Point 7. Action Point 8 encourages national and international support for localized content and ICT applications, emphasizing local languages and heritage. Dot force, again, encourages fostering “eGovernment,” this time as a mechanism for providing a bulk of online content and state-owned information that is not classified or private. Action Point 9 proposes integration of ICT into development assistance policies and programs of G-8 and other organizations in future development plans and country strategic initiatives. It also recommends enhancing coordination of bilateral and multilateral initiatives and approaches on ICT to avoid duplication of efforts and to enhance efficient and effective implementation of plans.

3. Benefits of collaborative policy initiatives

The coordination of bilateral and multilateral initiatives, as recommended in Action Point 9, highlights one of the main benefits of establishing the dot force. It offers a mechanism for directed cooperation on global issues, bringing together representatives from the public, private and non-profit sectors and incorporating segments of the civil society. This cooperative effort not only has allowed overlapping, multiple sectors to work together to create a seamless, cohesive plan to address major global issues but also has suggested a crucial shift in international cooperation among the sectors. A second advantage of the dot force collaboration is the collective effort to link closing the digital divide and creating digital opportunities to means for addressing the other challenges—e.g. health, education, poverty, and debt—facing developing countries. The Genoa Action Plan reaches beyond using ICTs merely to adopt ICTs. It proposes integrating and adapting ICTs to meet the needs of the countries.

A third asset of the dot force mechanism is its incorporation of the developing countries as stakeholder and consulting constituencies. As contributing players with consultation feedback deliverables, developing countries have been part of the process and not just recipients. Inclusion of developing countries enhances the credibility of the dot force and its resulting plan in the developing world. At its inception, the dot force membership promoted the need for inclusion of the developing world in the planning stages and digital dividends. Dot Force Executive Secretary Bruno Lanvin has reiterated the importance of inclusion [22, 23].

These assets of the dot force, however, have not been without criticism. Prior to the establishment of the dot force, CSO Jubilee 2000 burned a laptop in protest at the Okinawa Summit. Press reports criticized the focus on the digital divide at the expense of other pressing issues of debt, poverty, infectious diseases, and illiteracy. Some skeptics questioned the existence of a digital divide; they viewed it as an extension of the longstanding North-South divide and assessed any collaborative initiative as a move to benefit a collective, global elite. Dot force participant Shumpert Komen [20], in his letter to dot force colleagues, summarized a view of the digital divide as a horizontal instead of vertical conflict between “Davos Man,” (referring to the annual meeting location of the World Economic Forum) representing a corporate, global elite and “Seattle Man,” (referring to the location of the civil societal protest against the World Trade Organization during its meeting) representing a growing, global civil society of netizens and concerned individuals. The G-8 Genoa Summit in July 2001, resulted in heightened violence and the death of one protestor.

Response to the dot force process and report and its impact as an advisory body or epistemic community (defined as a transnational body of knowledge-based experts who interact with each other and advise their decision-makers on related issues) on the G-8 will unfold in coming years after the Genoa Summit and as the G-8 Summit 2002 in Canada prepares to emphasize the development of e-government.

As a fourth benefit, the dot force initiative highlights the global significance of e-government in closing the digital divide and building digital opportunities among developing countries and emerging economies. Although not defined by the dot force, e-government—as presented in the dot force report and plan—is a means for “internal efficiency and effectiveness” and is associated with “enhancing democracy, transparency and government accountability” [11, pp. 14, 16]. Most important, the dot force Plan of Action advises countries to establish national “eStrategies” which must acknowledge the benefits of e-government. The Plan of Action describes “eStrategies” as “a powerful tool to pursue development goals” requiring “the highest level of national political commitment” and resulting from consultative interactions among the public, private and non-profit sectors [11, p. 13]. The dot force recommends support for countries requiring assistance in developing the “eStrategies,” particularly by conducting a preliminary e-readiness assessment. The assessment could gauge a country’s progress in moving toward a networked society and attaining the digital dividends of e-government and other capabilities.

4. Readiness for e-government

Collaborative initiatives stemming from the dot force Plan of Action or similar programs may assist developing countries in assessing and achieving the e-readiness status necessary for leaders and citizens to participate in the digital opportunity of e-government. Ideally, countries are able to plan their “eStrategies” following an assessment revealing the particular course for the country and the extent of external assistance required to incorporate the
use of ICTs into the country. Numerous e-readiness assessment tools, methods, guidelines, and results abound. Based on its study of assessments, Bridges.org [3] finds that at least eighty-four countries have been assessed using one of the instruments, sixteen countries have been assessed by five different organizations, and many countries have not had any e-readiness assessments. While the assessment indicators vary, most tend to measure ICT connectivity, ICT use and integration, training, human capacity, government policies and regulations, infrastructure, security, and economy. Bridges.org [2] lists a few studies expanding to explore historical background and socio-cultural and political variables such as ethnic homogeneity, population density, political openness, political structure and culture, and key players.

While some of the assessment studies have begun to examine cultural variables, we advocate the need to expand the cultural indicators and conduct quantitative and qualitative, longitudinal research to better understand culture’s relationship to achieving e-government. We contend the cultural variables are beyond mere factors of e-readiness that governments can easily alter to improve digital opportunity and move forward with e-government. These variables reflect patterns of behavior that may thwart or impede the establishment or progress of sustainable e-government, one of the significant “eStrategies” for achieving digital benefits and closing the digital divide.

Cultural variables may also help us to understand e-government as a multi-level and multi-sectoral global phenomenon. Many of the developing and developed countries alike have promoted national commitments to e-government to make domestic and international operations more efficient and competitive in the information age. The author’s research on the global reality of e-government reveals the proliferation of e-government policies in countries as diverse as Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Eritrea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The countries, however, vary in the conceptualization and level of e-government and the implementation of e-government policies. Information-technology advanced countries of the United States and the United Kingdom have introduced e-government policies to improve service delivery, citizens’ participation, information sharing, and commercial transactions, but digital divide issues of geographic region, race, and gender remain. Small countries such as Singapore and Malaysia have viewed e-government and the information age as a means to level the playing field between large and small countries in regional groupings and the global arena. Although small countries may not have the traditional warfare weaponry, they can gain power as information-rich countries. In shifting to e-government, however, these countries may face challenges to authority from a more empowered citizenry. In other cases, countries lacking the ICT infrastructure view their position in the information age as having the advantage of moving forward without having to dismantle existing infrastructure. All of the countries, however, have had to address the issue of changing the mindset of citizens and decision-makers, creating new laws, and ensuring security in transitioning to an e-government paradigm.

Other comparative studies of e-government find discrepancies in the level and implementation of e-government in a global or national setting. The Global Survey of E-Government, a joint project of the United Nations Division for Public Economics and Public Administration and the American Society for Public Administration [31], finds different e-government levels among the 189 UN Member States based on five categories it has identified for measuring a country’s e-government progress: (1) the emerging web presence of the country, with static information available to users and others via one or a few national websites; (2) the enhancement of web presence in the number of web pages; (3) interactive web presence, allowing for formal exchanges between users and government; (4) transactional web presence, permitting formal transactions online and easy access to services according to their needs; and (5) fully integrated web presence, allowing total integration of online services via a single portal. Accenture’s [1] comparative study of 165 government services, spanning nine major service sectors in twenty-two countries, reveals a gap between the e-government rhetoric countries tout and the e-government reality countries practice. The gap has closed, however, since last year’s study primarily because of organizational changes, new leaders, and advanced service offerings in e-government. Even within countries, differences exist. The Brown University comprehensive examination of e-government in the U.S. [32] offers one of the first in-depth analyses of state and federal-level e-government and outlines differences in web presence, interactivity, language, and other factors. To be sure, existing comparative studies of global e-government assist us in identifying different stages of e-government. An expansion of cultural factors, however, will help us to address patterns of behavior that may affect the establishment or progress of sustainable e-government in the developing world resulting from the G-8 initiatives.

5. Cultural variables

The six cultural variables explored in this preliminary study do not comprise an exhaustive list. While other factors are significant for understanding the direction of e-government in countries, we highlight six major ones affecting multi-level, multi-sectoral development of e-
government in the global arena and requiring further study. As Figure 2 illustrates, other factors in the scheme of G-8 digital divide initiatives affect the development of e-government and other digital dividends.

5.1 Policy discourse culture

As countries seek to establish the “eStrategy” of a pro-competitive regulatory and public policy environment for e-government, we must examine the nuances of policy-making. Some previous assessment models have included measures of one or more parts of the policy process of initiation, formulation, implementation, evaluation, and decision. We propose the need to highlight policy discourse, which refers to the way policy participants frame, define and discuss issues in the formulation juncture of policymaking. A longitudinal analysis of policy discourse, we hypothesize, will reveal presuppositions of the players, sectors, debates, and approaches involved in formulating e-government and eStrategies. For example, in countries with public monopolies of information or telecommunications ministries, a close examination of policy discourse may indicate the likelihood of transition to private control or may indicate a ministerial conflict inhibiting policy formulation. It may also imply a decentralization of regulatory policies from central control to local areas. Such changes may suggest the development of subnational levels of e-government that may offer more local services to citizens than a centralized system. An analysis of the pattern of policy discourse behavior may also reveal a subtle framing of e-government that opposes formulating policy to facilitate localized e-government, private influence, or any changes in the traditional political environment. In such a case, e-government policies may stagnate after formulation and not reach implementation. Most important, achieving transparency, accountability and democratic governance, as strongly recommended by the dot force, does not become an option.

5.2 Legal culture

Countries promoting e-government initiatives must have complementary legal cultures to accommodate the new paradigm of using the Internet, telephone (conventional public or private), fax, palm pilot, computer, and digital phones in domestic and international governmental interactions. Potential investors from stakeholder groups will be concerned about host countries following a rule of law. As the dot force Action Plan stated, e-government should ensure accountability. A country not practicing a rule of law may lack accountability. In the international arena, global e-government interactions must address transboundary issues of ICTs, e.g., jurisdiction, copyright, censorship, cybercrime, security, trust, and Internet governance [19]. While some countries are exploring soft infrastructure or cyberlaws for ICTs, other countries do not enforce a rule of law. A country’s legal culture may not support yielding sovereign power to participate in this arena and may not practice a rule of law protecting its citizens and stakeholders.

5.3 Democratization culture

For countries to participate in the digital dividend of e-government and other outcomes, opportunities of the ICTs must reach countries’ citizens and other sectors of the civil society. As the dot force report states:

“Governments will have to establish the environment within which the new technologies can spread to their citizens, and enable cooperation with other components of civil society, in particular, business, non-profit organizations and local communities [11, p.10].

Earlier theoretical analysis [27] and practical studies [8] on inclusion, especially among the “have-nots” of local communities, emphasize the need for the Internet and other ICTs to reach the community level. Although the dot force report and the WEF Global Digital Divide Initiative both highlight the importance of inclusion for empowering citizens and enhancing democratic values, we maintain these factors pose a threat to governments that fear losing power and authority. A country may tout the importance of democracy and the advantages of e-government, but we must examine the democratic culture political leaders advocate and allow in the country. E-readiness assessments must ask if the country is a liberal democracy, semi-democracy, or a democracy with special characteristics as defined by the leaders. China, as an example of a special-characteristics democracy, may advocate civil societal inclusion to a certain extent but at the same time restrict total inclusion to guard against challenges to authority from perceived disgruntled groups. Falun Gong and other movements have used the proliferation of the Internet, fax machines, digital phones, and CB radios to form a triangular network of transnational support in cyberspace to challenge the laws and practices of national leaders [5]. To prevent this undermining of power, countries may advocate e-government initiatives and civil empowerment, but have a democratic culture that impedes or restricts local communities or CSOs from using ICTs connecting them to the international arena. These countries, therefore, develop expansive intranets that do not bode well for
multi-level, multi-sectoral interactions between and among governments in the global setting.

5.4 Diversity culture

Diversity culture is another factor affecting countries’ level and implementation of e-government as one of the major eStrategies for closing the digital divide. To build human capacity, countries must assess the traditions, customs, values, orientations, and attitudes associated with diversity and the impact of this diversity on the policies and strategies to achieve e-government and other digital dividends. To be sure, the Okinawa G-8 Communiqué, WEF Global Digital Divide Initiative, and dot force plan acknowledge diversity, but action beyond words requires close examination of diversity culture indicators—geography, poverty level, race, ethnicity, language, education, literacy (traditional and digital), gender, disability, and religion. These factors, we argue, are significant in technology-advanced countries and the developing world. In Canada, the United Kingdom, and the U.S., numerous community networking programs and initiatives acknowledge digital gaps along the lines of a combination of race, education, language, geography, gender, and disability.

5.5 Communications culture

We maintain the establishment and progress of sustainable e-government and other digital dividends are related to the communications culture of the countries in domestic and international interactions. Communications culture refers to the pattern of tools, protocols, architectures and languages of communication practiced in a society. E-readiness assessments must evaluate these dynamics of communications in a country. Although e-government studies often emphasize the use of the Internet, personal computers, and public kiosks as tools of ICTs, regions of some countries heavily rely on or benefit from fax machines, public phones, CB radios, or digital phones. Also, the forms of communication—e-mail, electronic discussion, virtual meeting and conference, and voice mail—and the extent of their use may affect e-government policies. In the consultative stages of the dot force, developing countries acknowledged constraints on their participation and regional dialogue because of limitations in resources, capacities, and geographic location [29, 30].

Even as countries achieve higher levels of connectivity, training, and ICTs to facilitate virtual interactions and collaborations, a lack of evaluation and development of cross-cultural protocols (netiquette, symbols, and ethics) may thwart interactions and collaborations or exacerbate e-conflict and e-road rage resulting from cultural faux pas.

This lack of effective communication stifles virtual interactions because communication is a crucial step in building trust and reciprocity for social capital in virtual collaborations [24]. The Dot Force initiatives and multi-cultural computing programs (e.g., the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), and e-governance centers (e.g., the Indian Institute of Management) that address architectural communications—web design, computer language, Internet codes, and open-source software—advocate the importance of creating applications appropriate for developing countries and emphasizing local language content to facilitate empowerment, participation and training.

Another aspect of communications culture that future research must address is the potential impact of shifting language use and dominance on the Internet, e.g., the calls for non-English domain names and Accenture’s projection of Chinese as the language of the Internet by 2007.

5.6 Trust culture

The study of trust in e-government usually focuses on issues of security and privacy in trusting the government with information provided or shared online. Trust culture, we contend, in assessing international, collaborative initiatives and the establishment of e-government, refers to leadership trust, public-employee trust, and civic trust. Participating in the digital opportunity initiatives requires many countries to shift to a new paradigm of using ICTs for government operations and interactions. Among developing countries, political leaders remain skeptical of the contributions of ICTs to development and the motives of G-8, corporate and philanthropic stakeholders at the forefront of the initiatives. Notwithstanding appeals from United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan for developing countries to participate in the digital opportunity initiatives, lack of trust among leaders, we contend, stems from a history of multinational corporate exploitation of developing countries, the long-standing North-South division of haves and have-nots before the advent of the Internet, and the perception of the Information Highway as a “dirt path” (Panos Institute) for developing countries. Some countries fear a revisit of the multinational corporation era via corporate and philanthropic support.

Including developing countries among the dot force stakeholders may have had the intention of allaying trust issues, but participating developing countries voiced concerns about an unequal number of delegates from G-8 (three) and developing countries (one). In addition, developing country stakeholders and developing countries not invited to participate as stakeholders questioned if collaborative initiatives would offer rich nations and corporate giants financial advantages. The Group of 15
nations, meeting in Indonesia in May 2001, even discussed putting forward its own digital divide plan.

Public-employee trust affects the response of public administration workers to the shift to e-government. Public employees may be especially threatened by online services replacing their job responsibilities. To be sure, this trust factor exists in technology-rich nations that have implemented extensive e-government policies. In developing countries with a dominant public sector, however, public employees find themselves in the midst of rising unemployment, new skill requirements, declining job security and benefits in a shift to privatization or private-public cooperation likely to occur with the emergence of pro-competitive information and telecommunications.

Civic trust culture refers to the pattern of behavior of the people and civil societal organizations (CSOs) in trusting the public, private and corporate sectors in bridging the digital divide and citizens’ trust of governments in providing accurate information and using the information against them. Voices on websites of CSOs have criticized the idea of a multi-sectoral stakeholder taskforce and have questioned a sincere effort to close the digital divide and address the other challenges of debt, poverty, illiteracy, and health.

6. Summary

The G-8 dot force has presented a comprehensive, multi-sectoral plan to coordinate international initiatives and assist countries in achieving sustainable e-government and other digital dividends. The effect of G-8 collaborative initiatives on the course of e-government and digital outcomes for developing countries is influenced by the intervening variables of G-8 individual commitment, regional and subregional support, G-15 digital divide plan and action, crisis reaction of the country, other development aid couched as ICT or other development assistance, current status of ICT telecommunications and regulatory policies, ICT access and connectivity, and human capacity and by cultural factors affecting a country’s development in the use of ICTs in government.

The cultural factors do not comprise an exhaustive list but are sufficient to enhance awareness of a need for longitudinal, qualitative and quantitative analyses of countries to assess e-readiness and to speculate on the development of e-government. The cultural factors, coupled with other assessment indicators, are crucial for policy makers and researchers to answer the following questions in assessing countries’ readiness for e-government and moving forward with the dot force plan: How does the country define e-government? What does the country want to achieve through e-government? What are the speculative outcomes of the country’s e-government policies? How can the country break out of traditional and hierarchical ways of thinking and patterns of behavior that may impede or prevent cooperation across departments and levels of government and with business and non-profit sectors domestically and internationally? Must a country break out of traditional and hierarchical ways of thinking and patterns of behavior to achieve e-government? How can the country adapt the integration of ICTs into the transition of shifting mindsets and e-development? How can the country benefit from the International eDevelopment Resource Network in establishing, planning, implementing, and evaluating “eStrategies,” including e-government? What can technology-advanced countries learn from the developing world in e-government? The G-8 must address the role of culture to answer these questions.

7. References


