

# Preface

This book aims to capture the experiences of countries in their journey toward e-transformation, and the strategic issues and choices they faced along their journey. From our own practice and observation of the aspirations and challenges of developing countries, we believe there are a lot of lessons to learn from sharing these experiences. They transcend the formal descriptions of national information and communications technologies (ICT) strategies. We attempt to capture the dynamics of formulating and implementing a strategy over a long time horizon, and to examine how some countries have learned to harness the ICT revolution, while others have been slow to adapt to a fast changing global economy.

As a new field of development, with poorly understood strategic implications for countries and institutions, ICT-enabled development raises many issues for policy makers and researchers alike. Best practices are yet to be established or codified, failures not fully recognized or examined, and expectations far exceed results on the ground. Some speak of “next practices,” even before we have learned what are the best practices today, or what worked and what did not, and why, so we can confidently and reliably embark on developing next practices. We consistently asked ourselves and our coauthors: Why did some countries succeed in transforming their economies and enhancing their global competitiveness, with the help of ICT, while for others, ICT made no difference, even though almost all countries have expressed similar aspirations about ICT and formally adopted national ICT plans? What factors made the ultimate difference in results?

Given the high risks of failures of ICT investments for transforming business, and even more in transforming government, should countries adopt a venture capital approach where the high payoffs of few ICT investments would outweigh the failures of many? Are there strategies and approaches that can reduce these risks while maximizing the transformational impacts of ICT?

In a similar vein, can we learn from failures, at least as much as from successes? Even within the same country, there are examples of successes and failures in effecting transformation in different regions and sectors. For example, both South Africa and the Philippines have had a mixed record, in contrast with their aspirations about the information revolution and bridging the digital and income divides. Were the failures to meet expectations due to design or implementation factors? Were these aspirations unrealistic in view of broader political and policy constraints? Conversely,

how did Singapore and Finland make such dramatic progress in transforming their economies, despite difficult initial country conditions and very different political systems? We are obviously not short on questions in this field. Countries are in search of ways to harness this technological revolution in all sectors and at all levels.

When it came to applying ICT, most aid agencies have focused on pilots and micro-interventions, or components of investment in other sectors. Apart from UNDP-funded technical assistance to draft a first wave of national ICT strategies and a few studies done by the World Bank, very little has been done to help countries manage this transformation at the national or cross-sectoral levels, or to put micro-interventions in the context of national e-transformation strategies. Operating at the pilot or enclave project level may have its merits in terms of selecting the “low hanging fruits,” lowering risks by focusing on “privileged particles of development,” and/or avoiding complex policy and coordination issues and sustainability challenges. But in doing so, international development agencies may have avoided entry at the strategic and transformational levels, missed on learning about the most challenging tasks facing their clients, and failed them in building local capacity for ICT integration and coordination at the national or ecosystem level.

In this book, our focus is at the national level of e-transformation. Country cases attempt to cover all components of e-transformation: policies, institutions, human resources, communications infrastructure, ICT industry, the vast array of possible ICT applications in public and private sectors, and the synergies and interdependencies among these components. These case studies also reflect the hard choices and tradeoffs that must be made in designing and implementing e-development within real-life human, financial, and institutional constraints. They attempt to capture the gap between blueprint design and implementation, and the instruments used to meet implementation challenges.

We drew on the in-depth observation of the authors who have been actors or participant-observers of the country they are reporting on. That gives these authors a position or perspective that can capture the *process* of formulating and implementing e-strategies and appreciate the roles of various stakeholders and the underlying forces and dynamics that shape both design and implementation. All cases follow a common conceptual framework, to facilitate cross-country comparisons of e-strategy design and implementation. Yet, the story is told in ways that emphasize the unique features of each country’s conditions and journey.

Initially, we thought of having many country case studies, briefly told. But as the drafts emerged, it became clear that the limits on the length of each case would deprive the readers of some interesting innovations and concrete examples of the initiatives taken, or the long-term perspective taken by some countries over a series of strategies, or the interdependencies among various elements of e-transformation. Hence, we decided to have two companion books, each focusing on four countries and a comparative analysis, done in more depth than would have been possible in one volume. This is the second of the two books. It covers Singapore, Finland, South Africa, and the Philippines, and compares their characteristics along key design and implementation parameters. A companion book covered Brazil, China, Canada, and Sri Lanka (Hanna and Knight 2011). We hope more cases will be

developed and more comparative studies will be done and published as the list of such country cases becomes longer, and country experiences get better documented and analyzed.

We owe many colleagues special thanks for helping us on our own journey in coauthoring and coediting this book. Jeannie Chua contributed the Singapore country case. Jorma Routti coauthored the Finland case with Peter Knight. Lucienne Abrahams and Arthur Goldstuck collaborated on the South Africa case, while Sherwin Ona and Estafenie Ulit coauthored the Philippines case with Nagy Hanna. We also acknowledge the valuable comments we received from: Sandor Boyson, Research Professor, Robert H. Smith Business School, University of Maryland; Irfan Haque, Special Advisor on Financing for Development, South Centre, Geneva; J.P. Auffret, Managing Director, Center for Advanced Technology Strategy. We also benefitted from generous comments of our colleagues at the World Bank: Shahid Yusuf, Randeep Sudan, and Samia Melhem. Finally, we must acknowledge the many policy makers and innovators, in part cited in the publications in the four selected country cases, as they led their countries' e-transformation.

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