

An Address at the Seminar

***E-governance: Towards a new approach to
international
cooperation in the knowledge economy***

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the Inter-American Development Bank and
the Inter-American Investment Corporation

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**Maureen O'Neil, President
International Development Research Centre (Canada)**

Ladies and gentlemen:

My first obligation (and I embrace it with pleasure) is to thank our hosts for their generous and elegant hospitality—and to salute them for Italy's extraordinary leadership in advancing development through information and communication technologies.

In 2001, Italy held the chair of the G8 Digital Opportunities Task Force, the DOT Force. And having served as Canadian co-chair the following year, I can testify personally to the energy, skill and imagination that Italians have invested in this work. Italy's unique contribution to the landmark conference on e-governance in Palermo last year, and its valuable initiatives in the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, are familiar to us all. And we are grateful.

In today's earlier sessions we have explored local, national, and regional approaches to e-governance and development. Now we turn to a wider, international perspective. But I will tell you frankly that I do not place much importance on such distinctions. In fact, one of the most powerful and evident effects of these technologies—in application—is that they can dramatically alter the meanings of traditional boundaries and old borders. It is no longer always obvious what is local and what is global, or what belongs properly in the public or private sectors.

I stress this point because the redefinition of boundaries and borders finds vivid demonstration in the diversity of international networks that have evolved so quickly to consider, inform, and execute new strategies of e-governance. The G8 DOT Force is just one example. The Institute for Connectivity in the Americas is another—an innovative partnership promoting ICTs for development in ways that strengthen

democracy and create prosperity. But I am thinking also of the Global Digital Opportunity Initiative (GDOI), a public-private partnership backed by UNDP and the Markle Foundation; the Digital Divide Initiative, launched by the World Economic Forum; Connectivity Africa, another network supported by IDRC with experienced African partners; and the International e-Development Research Network (IeDRN), which is consolidating ICT policy and program expertise with crucial contributions from Italy.

And there is the critical work of the UN ICT Task Force, providing strategic direction, policy coherence, and advocacy, on the global ICT-based development agenda.

What is so striking about these networks is their quite astonishing variety of participants—governments, corporations, foundations, scholars, think tanks, NGOs, intergovernmental organizations, all collaborating in shared missions of common interests. Borders and boundaries are not what they used to be.

If you will permit me a moment of immodesty, however, I have to add that my own institution—the International Development Research Centre—has been engaged in the dynamics of ICTs and development for more than 30 years. IDRC was working with developing-country researchers to close the digital divide long before "digital divide" became such a common expression.

And what have we learned in more than three decades of ICT research? One lesson is simply this: In the term "e-governance," it's the governance that counts most. Undeniably, the technology is fiercely complicated. And it mutates at blazing speed, startling even to its inventors. But achieving and sustaining good governance—that is still the hard part.

There are, of course, two sets of e-governance questions. The first set has to do with designing the good governance of ICTs themselves. The second set of questions has to do with putting ICTs to the service of good governance—to governance that is transparent, accountable, fair, effective, and receptive to the participation of every citizen.

It goes without saying that these two sets of issues interact. ICTs that are well governed—that is, physically accessible, affordable, and responsive to human needs—can in turn accelerate development that is more democratic, more sustainable, and more prosperous.

It is clear that in the Americas—as in most parts of the developed and developing world—good governance must include the creation of legal, financial, and regulatory environments that encourage inventive and able people to build new enterprises. Environments that speed the registration of new companies, for example, and facilitate access to credit. These are the environments that stimulate the businesses that bring new technologies to market.

The objective, after all, is to make ICTs more available to more people, so that ICTs can propel real social and economic transformation. To repeat, we need to stay focused on two sets of governance imperatives: good governance of ICTs, and ICTs for good governance.

Let me illustrate. In East Africa, Ugandan authorities worked with IDRC to craft new regulations requiring cellular phone companies to install a specified ratio of rural lines for every cell phone network set up in cities. The result, several years later, is that Uganda enjoys 98-per-cent coverage with cell phones. More than that, Ugandans trade and borrow cell phones to dial into open-line radio programs—a lively new exercise of free speech in a country where open dissent used to be mortally dangerous.

To take another case: In Bolivia, the ICA and the Multilateral Investment Fund of the IDB are assessing a new telecentre network called Desatel, which is starting up an affordable phone service for the rural poor. (It's a service made possible by combining the region's existing over-supply of communications satellite space with newly-available low-cost wireless equipment.)

Another example: FIPA, the Interparliamentary Forum of the Americas, is using ICA funding to build its own Internet presence, disseminating material to promote parliamentary good practices throughout the region. And just recently, Canada and Mexico have launched a pilot project known as E-Campus Americas, an e-learning endeavour to improve performance in public services. The project begins in Mexico, with plans for extension to other countries in the hemisphere.

In these and countless other settings, ICTs can serve to make governance more open, more participatory, more effective, and more accountable.

I will end, if I may, with a small prediction. At IDRC, we expect that the next information revolution will be about producing devices that poor people can afford—devices that will mean better and more accessible health care and education, more vigorous local business, and more responsive government services.

This is where we are focusing our own resources—on ICTs that specifically address the needs of poor people. This is where e-governance has the power to promote new successes in good governance, and where good governance can generate more democratic and sustainable development.

Thank you