United Nations

UN study finds e-government use spreading fast, but with scattered effect

(Mexico City, 4 November) Online government — highly touted at the onset of the Internet revolution — has slipped somewhat from public attention since the end of the dot-com boom and since international security concerns heightened post-September 2001.

But governments nevertheless have been scrambling in the meantime to install e-capabilities, with the number using Internet services in some capacity or another increasing from 143 UN Member States in 2001 to 173 (or 91 per cent of all Member States) in 2003, according to the **UN World Public Sector Report 2003: E-Government at the Crossroads**, released today.

E-government in specific, and adoption of information and communication technologies in general, have become part of the political agenda of many countries in both the developing and developed world, the authors of WPSR '03 note. But its growth has not gone entirely smoothly.

While sweeping vision can propel digital development, a too-grandiose approach may result in failures or expensive white elephants, and despite the Internet's reputation for economy of operation, new systems can be costly. Because of a high rate of failure of specific e-government projects in developed as well as developing countries, bricks-and-mortar public services need to be maintained even as digital applications are increasing, the report cautions.

In most countries, only about one in five of those with Internet access or fewer engages in government on line, the authors estimate. Security and privacy issues can discourage use. The report expresses particular concern about lack of access by women and by the poor and other disadvantaged groups, and the UN Millennium Declaration campaign for reducing poverty and meeting basic human needs is suggested as a framework for e-government prioritization.

Some developing countries rank high in e-government

The UN study presents for the first time ever rankings on a national and regional basis in two major categories: e-readiness (provision of government services and products online combined with the extent of telecom infrastructure and public education in the country) and e-participation (the degree to which government opens itself to interaction with its citizens over the Internet).

Global E-government Readiness Ranking 2003: Top 10 countries		
	Country	E-government Readiness Index
1	United States	0.927
2	Sweden	0.840
3	Australia	0.831
4	Denmark	0.820
5	United Kingdom	0.814
6	Canada	0.806
7	Norway	0.778
8	Switzerland	0.764
9	Germany	0.762
10	Finland	0.761

While it is not surprising to find the United States and several Scandinavian countries high among the leaders in e-readiness, it is notable that three developing countries — Singapore, the Republic of Korea and Chile — are among the top 25.

In the category of e-participation, the United Kingdom edges out the United States for first place, and three of the top ten governments are from developing countries — Chile, Mexico and Argentina. After the top-ranked 15 countries, the level of e-participation afforded declines steeply, and only 15 governments allow on-line services for comment on policy issues.

"Many governments turn to Internet-based services as a way to cut red tape or to spread digital infrastructure", said Jose Antonio Ocampo, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, at today's launch in Mexico City. "But we also see the Internet as a means of advancing and consolidating transparency and democracy into the overall practice of public administration. For that reason, we attach great importance to the category of 'e-participation' in our global survey and analysis."

E-participation index 2003, Top 10 countries		
	Country	E-participation Index
1	United Kingdom	1.000
2	United States	0.966
3 (tie)	Canada	0.828
3 (tie)	Chile	0.828
4	Estonia	0.759
5	New Zealand	0.690
6	Phillippines	0.672
7 (tie)	France	0.638
7 (tie)	Netherlands	0.638
8	Australia	0.621
9	Mexico	0.603
10 (tie)	Argentina	0.586
11 (tie)	Ireland	0.586
12 (tie)	Sweden	0.586

The UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs provides technical assistance to developing and transition countries through its Division for Public Administration and Development Management, the sponsor of the World Public Sector Report. With the Mexican government, the United Nations is co-hosting the Fifth Global Forum on Reinventing Government, taking place 3-6 November in Mexico City.

The launch of *UN World Public Sector Report 2003* coincides with the Fifth Global Forum and comes two months before the World Summit on an Information Society, which will take on similar issues related to e-governance, transparency, freedom of information and bringing down the digital divide. The Summit, organized by the United Nations, is scheduled to take place 10-12 December in Geneva.

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