Electronic Government and Electronic Records: E-Records Readiness and Capacity Building

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Discussion Paper

Governments are increasingly recognizing the importance of *information* for good governance and the need to manage and use information effectively. High quality information enables governments to make decisions and take action to improve education and health care, stimulate economic development, ensure justice, protect the environment, provide security and achieve other governance objectives.

Trustworthy and accessible records are authoritative sources of information and evidence that support these objectives and sustain fundamental democratic values, including:

- the protection of human rights and the rule of law;

- accountable and transparent government processes and leadership;

- wide public participation and a meaningful voice in government decisions.

Good record keeping is essential for governments and public institutions at all stages of development but is particularly critical for developing countries. Poor record-keeping systems are a major barrier to institutional, legal and regulatory reform; anti-corruption strategies; poverty reduction and economic development.

Records in electronic form are becoming especially critical as developing countries embark on *e-government* strategies. E-government refers to the use of information and telecommunications technologies (ICT's) to enable government to deliver its programs and services more effectively and efficiently, to increase the efficiency of internal processes (such as those supporting financial and human resources management), and to increase the participation of citizens in their own governance (such as through citizen consultation and feedback, electronic voting, etc).

The management of electronic records poses special challenges that include:

- the lack of awareness about the importance of e-records and the dangers associated with their loss (eg the loss of evidence, risks to entitlements);

- the lack of accountability for the management of e-records (who is responsible for protecting their integrity and authenticity?);

- complex, fragmented and incompatible information systems and standards (eg, computer systems, metadata standards);

- fragile, quickly changing record media, formats and storage systems (the e-preservation challenge);

- unconnected or poorly integrated paper and electronic records and duplicated e-records (where is the complete file, the right version?);

- the lack of e-records skills (among both users and information managers);

- limited collaboration among information professions (records managers, archivists, librarians, IT specialists, web content managers, etc.)

These challenges are greatest in countries where resources are scarce, records management systems are weak and technology tools (eg electronic records management software) are unavailable. In terms of managing electronic records well, however, we are all "developing countries".

As governments recognize the close relationship among good governance, record keeping and the expanding e-world, they are increasing their efforts to strengthen the necessary *framework* of values, policies, standards, systems and people that enables *e-records readiness*. E-records readiness is the capacity to create, manage, share and use electronic information (and related technology) to improve governance as well as sustain international trade and innovation; improve global security and support other activities in our increasingly inter-connected and inter-dependent world.

The e-records framework (or *infrastructure*) needed in this environment includes:

- *wide awareness* of the value of records by political leaders, public servants, citizens and NGOs;

- effective *laws* and *policies* to guide information management, such as, "Public Records" laws, archival legislation, access and privacy laws, policies on documenting business activities and decisions, etc.;

- *governance and accountability arrangements* that provide organization and leadership for records management programs, assign responsibility and encourage close collaboration among records managers, archivists, librarians, program managers, information technology specialists, etc.;

- consistent and effective *standards and practices* for life-cycle records management processes such as creating, organizing, classifying, storing, protecting, retrieving, retaining, destroying and archiving electronic and paper records;

- *trained staff* including all civil servants and information managers who are positioned to influence and guide change;

- cost-effective *computer-based systems*, applications, etc. to create, manage, distribute and use records in all forms;

- adequate *budget, space and supplies* for managing and protecting both paper and electronic records.

Governments and organizations are working to put this framework in place through their individual efforts and with assistance from other bodies. Models are being developed for assessing records management capacity and performance and new standards and tools are available. Major international initiatives are underway to raise awareness of the importance of information and information technology management. As examples, the G8 Nations *Okinawa Charter on the Global Information Society* (and related initiatives) and NEPAD (*New Partnership for Africa's Development*) both focus on improving governance in the e-world. Organizations such as the World Bank and the International Records Management Trust are raising awareness, stimulating collaborative efforts, and providing tools, training and strategies to improve *e-records readiness* in developing countries. A new international standard for records management (ISO 15489) identifies clear goals for both public and private sector organizations. The challenges, however, are complex and progress is sometimes slow.

With this and future e-discussions, the Internet provides a valuable forum to share experiences, concerns, ideas and solutions that reflect the needs, resources and opportunities in different countries. The goal is not *perfect* solutions or *best* practices but meaningful improvements in how information and technology can be managed and used to improve governance and the quality of life.

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