

# Information Technology and Development Co-operation: A View from the DOT Force

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The French Ministry of the Economy, Finance, and Industry created the Mission for a Digital Economy in March 2001, with three objectives:

- *First*, to promote a forward-looking consideration of the issues surrounding the new information and communication technologies (NICT) economy, such as electronic trade, secure exchanges, electronic signature, taxation and public markets, as well as the spread of the internet and the digital divide;
- *Second*, to ensure a permanent discussion between the ministry's services and the economic actors, enterprises and professional associations; and
- *Third*, to present the ministry's positions to international authorities dealing with new technologies, using the best public and private experts.

The Seventh International Forum on Asian Perspectives could not better correspond to this definition of assembling the best public and private experts, and I would like to thank the Asian Development Bank and the OECD Development Centre for the honour of inviting me to speak to you on this occasion.

All of us are concerned with the issue of technological progress and investment strategies. With the recent creation of the internet, this subject concerns all countries and our mission works on these themes, particularly within a national context. Because the internet raises similar questions everywhere, our mission has been involved for the last several months in the work of the G-8 on this issue and, more specifically, in the work of the Digital Opportunity Task Force (DOT Force), known in French as the GEANT group. I would like, therefore, to develop this topic with you. As many of you know, this unusual structure was created after the Okinawa Charter, when Japan presided at the G-8 meeting, to develop several themes that the Charter had already clearly presented.

- *First*, the DOT Force was to facilitate discussions among economic development actors from developed countries, international organisations and developing nations alike. The goal of these discussions was to encourage the creation of regulatory frameworks, improve connectivity and reduce its costs, and advance in training and the creation of economic activities.
- *Second*, it was to help co-ordinate the work of different entities in development aid for new technologies.
- *Third*, it was to promote an understanding at the highest political level of the development issues that information technologies represent.
- *Fourth*, it was to better assess the contributions of enterprises and all actors of good will to reducing the digital divide.
- *Last*, it was to present its conclusions before the G–8 Summit in Genoa, in July, which our newspapers have been discussing very actively.

The DOT Force is indeed an original institution. It brings together 17 governments (the eight G–8 countries, the European Commission, eight developing countries, including India and Indonesia, who are here with us at this conference), seven international organisations including the OECD, eleven private–sector representatives and eight NGO representatives, one from each G–8 country. These 42 official delegations rapidly received contributions from local and regional communities, from other enterprises and associations, and even from individual experts. This diverse structure brings together many different and complementary experiences and has functioned quite effectively. This in itself is a first important lesson for organising international working groups on these issues. It may well be that the unusual composition of this group led it to go further than simply making an analysis of the situation, to define a set of actions by targeting from the outset practical solutions to the problems addressed to it. The group sought to work by consensus on the major directions to recommend. Three points of consensus became clear.

- *First, the NICTs offer real opportunities for reducing inequalities and beginning to create local wealth.* The DOT Force members were not utopian. They did not seek to transmit the enthusiasm of the first internet promoters. The NICTs are not a panacea and their effects are not automatic, but if they are adapted to local uses, they can help to share crucial knowledge, for example about weather conditions, health, market prices or the availability of scarce resources. Sharing knowledge makes it possible to improve production methods and facilitates greater access to mutually beneficial services. Having a community *appropriate* crucial information that affects its own development is the beginning of a virtuous cycle.
- *Second, technologies cannot resolve all problems.* The governments of all developed countries are working to reduce today’s digital divide, which is the product of a combination of factors — the state of infrastructures, access costs, regulatory arrangements, the absence of local content and the difficulty of turning

information flows into productive economic activities. For these reasons, the digital divide will grow exceptionally quickly if we are not careful. It is therefore important to create a clear framework from the outset so that parameters do not diverge and these technologies always benefit the greatest number.

- *Third, we must put an end to the either-or debates*, i.e. either development aid or financing for information technologies. These technologies are in fact part of any approach to development aid. In today's world, they underpin improvements in agriculture, industrial production, health care, education, and soon in community living. Leaders of developing countries daily confront questions more serious than IT equipment, but it is nonetheless important that they integrate the new technologies into their decisions as an aid or even as a lever for resolving certain problems. Many developed countries are already operating this way, dispatching IT expertise to every branch of their administrations. Since 1997, every ministry in France has had a representative of the new technologies, and the Prime Minister himself is responsible for co-ordinating them. International organisations are similarly organised, as they incorporate new technologies increasingly into their development aid programmes.

Having posed these principles, the group then proceeded to analyse four specific areas, identifying the state of the art, the obstacles to avoid, and the possible initiatives. The first was the national legal and regulatory context and the issue of international governance of the internet. The second concerned infrastructure and access. The third covered the development of human capital and the fourth the development of applications and services. Each area raised a different set of problems. The work showed that IT should, above all, be *disseminated* as a stimulus within communities so that they can play their role fully, depending on the specifics of each country and culture. To make this possible, the group proposed nine directions for action.

1. *Establish strategic programmes (e-Strategies) for developing an information society.* Each government must define its specific priorities and strategic programme. The regulatory and institutional framework should be made coherent as soon as possible to enable public and private actors to play their roles. The DOT Force also proposes the creation of a virtual resource centre to facilitate the exchange of solutions. France, where the regulatory plan was quickly established, would be ready to share its experience in this area with both governments and independent regulatory agencies.

2. *Improve connectivity, create widespread access and lower costs.* Here, it is important to allow the different available technologies to compete and to encourage the creation of public access points. France is committed to this idea, and we already have an aid fund for creating such access points.

3. *Improve human development, create and share knowledge.* The issue here is to encourage the dissemination of IT in schools and universities, without forgetting to include girls and boys alike, for they will all play a crucial future role in accepting these technologies into their daily lives. Enterprises in developed countries should encourage the temporary loan of some of their experts to launch these education programmes more quickly.

4. *Promote the emergence of an entrepreneurial spirit, which is key to sustainable development.* The internet lends itself well to the creation of enterprises by opening new areas of possibility, as many countries have seen — and continue to see despite the end of an era of exuberance. Enterprises can be created anywhere, so long as financing is available and all the requisite conditions exist for new, profitable companies to emerge. The experience of private enterprises in terms of incubation time should be put in the service of development, and public and private capital should be invested in these initiatives.

5. *Make it possible for all countries to participate in the international debates on the internet and IT.* The DOT Force suggests that all countries be involved in questions concerning internet governance and that they have access to the necessary expertise in order to take positions in these debates.

6. *Support the initiatives of developing countries for IT access.* Public and private support should go especially to large-scale national and regional projects designed to provide higher-speed communications access or rural development.

7. *Support the use of IT for health, particularly in the fight against pandemics such as AIDS, and infectious diseases.* The world-wide dissemination of information made possible by the internet is one of the first benefits to be expected.

8. *Support the creation of local content and applications.* This supposes that communities have access to low-cost or free (open-source) tools to develop programmes and applications in local languages that are immediately useful. It is also possible to imagine that administrations could promote the spread of the internet, once a sufficient number of public access points exists, which is also a vector for familiarising the public with these technologies.

9. *Determine the priorities of the G-8 and of the different development aid programmes, and improve the co-ordination of multilateral initiatives in line with e-Strategies.* This means creating transversal co-ordination for more effective action.

The Mission for a Digital Economy and the head of the Treasury have already proposed incorporating these nine directions into their thinking about the strategies of French development agencies. Indeed, the breadth and objectivity of these initial concrete results for using the internet for development already provide some clear indications for defining public policy.

Given the initial objectives of the DOT Force — to facilitate discussion, co-ordinate action, create awareness, bring together all concerned actors and finish in less than a year — we can be satisfied with the work accomplished thus far and particularly with the dynamism that this structure has created. We have also seen that where organisation lends itself to such an endeavour, governments, enterprises and NGOs can all work together productively on important international issues. Having been personally involved in this work, I can assure you that it was also particularly harmonious. I would like to express my wish that these proposals soon lead to concrete actions, and that it will be possible in the near future and, who knows, perhaps within the context of this forum, to monitor the concrete effects for development and for the reduction of poverty.