

Information is one of the most valuable resources of government. Governments are finding, however, that the information needed to plan, make decisions, and act is often held outside their own organizations, collected for widely different purposes, and maintained in disparate formats and systems. This is why governments are increasingly turning to interoperability as a strategy for maximizing the value of information. Interoperability allows government managers to work at the same time, with the same information integrated from multiple sources. It has the potential to support the transformation of organizational structures and communication channels among numerous organizations working in different locations.

The growing support for interoperability as an infrastructure investment transcends political partisanship and crosses policy areas and institutions as well as continents and oceans. This support stems from an increased understanding of the potential public value of more effective interoperability. Interoperability capabilities, when available, allow information to be used to meet the priorities of government; to track the spread of disease across regions, to pay health benefits to workers who live and work in different countries, and to monitor air quality in border regions. The following case vignettes are provided to illustrate how interoperability has contributed to government transformation in the areas of services improvement, efficient and effective operations of government, and the development of stable and vital economies.

Increasing the legitimacy of government through transparency and efficiency. Financial management systems are key links in the flow of revenues to the government and the flow of expenditures and services back to the public. Improving financial management, therefore, has the potential to produce significant returns in terms of both greater internal efficiencies and enhanced value to the public. These were the goals of the Austrian Federal Budgeting and Bookkeeping System project initiated in 1997 by the Minister of Finance and supported by the Chancellor. The goal of the project was an interoperable federal government budget and bookkeeping processes. By 2005, one of the results of the interoperability initiative was that the Ministry of Finance successfully consolidated 85 bookkeeping units across the federal government into one federally owned, but privately operated, agency. These improvements reduce the burden of financial support on the public—taxes, fees, etc.—and ease the burden of compliance with rules and policies. Better financial information can make government budgets and expenditures more transparent, and thus more legitimate and acceptable to the public.

Increasing the value of government to citizens through enhanced services. Canada's Service New Brunswick (SNB) is well-known internationally for its expertise in providing multi-channel single window citizen access to government services, as well as for developing and maintaining geographic information databases. SNB's award-winning approach provides one-stop-shopping for different government services on behalf of provincial and municipal government agencies. It also provides a linkage to the Canadian Federal Government in a joined-up government model. As a crown corporation operating outside of, but in partnership with Canadian governments, SNB represented a new model for sharing resources and managing programs.

Transforming government through modernized, integrated, and world-class practices. The Merkava Project in the Government of Israel restructured the financial, logistics, and human resource components of government wide administration into an interoperable system. An interoperability framework was used as a way to implement a much more standardized and modernized government operation and an enhanced management infrastructure on which to build improved services.

Interoperability as a priority is also gaining support as a consequence of new understanding of the cost to society when interoperable systems are not in place. This new understanding has realized through the examinations of several national and international crises that required governments to coordinate and work together both within and across governmental boundaries and with civil society and the private sector.

Missed opportunities for collaboration. A post-tsunami lessons learned report released by the Government of Indonesia and the United Nations⁽³⁾ noted the many missed opportunities for coordinated response among national and international responders. The consequence of this was a myriad of coordination problems resulting in each responder providing what they could based on an internal setting of priorities rather than a shared understanding of needs.

Weak systems for processing and using information. The 2004 bipartisan **9/11 Commission Report** presented a sobering characterization of the U.S. public sector's current ability to leverage information. It emphasized that a weak system for processing and using information is stymieing the U.S. government's ability in leveraging the vast amount of information it has access to.⁽⁴⁾

These insights and experiences together and the growing concerns about global health, financial, and other crises has pushed interoperability and transparency to the center of the debate about governments' abilities to respond to these events.

Incalculable human misery. At a November 2007 meeting of the World Health Organization, interoperability and transparency were identified as “essential” to the efforts of the member countries to “increase country capacity in surveillance, early detection, diagnosis, and reporting of cases – both animal and human.” The cost of not being prepared to share information, to coordinate our responses, and to work together, is well understood, “If we are unprepared, the next pandemic will cause incalculable human misery.”

From a global and local perspective we know the future presents many challenges. The president of an association of U.S. local government health officials, speaking before U.S. state legislators in early 2004, testified that “while we can't predict future challenges, we know they will be there. We know they will be difficult, surprising in complexity, and growing in frequency and severity.” He emphasized that the infrastructure of local public health units needs to be further strengthened to meet the increasing challenges and emerging public health responsibilities in our communities. Information must be shared and systems must work together at new levels.

(3) Post-Tsunami Lessons Learned and Best Practices Workshop; Report and Working Groups Output, Jakarta, Indonesia, May 2005, Government of Indonesia, United Nations.

(4) National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States **The 9/11 Commission Report** (Washington, D.C.: July 2004).