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*SEEKING TRANSFORMATION THROUGH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY:  
STRATEGIES FOR BRAZIL, CHINA, CANADA AND SRI LANKA.*

SPRINGER, BERLIN

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*NATIONAL STRATEGIES TO HARNESS INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY:  
SEEKING TRANSFORMATION IN SINGAPORE, FINLAND, THE PHILIPPINES,  
AND SOUTH AFRICA.*

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These two books, compiled and edited by Nagy Hanna and Peter Knight, represent a welcome contribution to the ICT and development literature. The editors, seasoned executives of international development aid programmes, with the help of associated authors more familiar with individual countries' specificities, propose a comprehensive and practical framework for the analysis and management of e-transformation programmes. The unfortunately still-growing number of large, unsuccessful national ICT initiatives only increases the need for this type of book.

According to the authors' definition, "e-transformation is about the effective diffusion and use of ICT and about the deep structural and capability changes in the economy and society that accompany ICT use and diffusion" (Hanna & Knight, 2012, p25), and comprises several key, interdependent elements:

- an enabling policy and institutional environment, shaped by a shared vision, long-term strategy, and institutional leadership;
- an affordable and competitive information infrastructure;
- a dynamic ICT industry and innovation system that can adapt the technology to local needs and capture export opportunities;
- a broad ICT literacy and technical education, as well as techno-entrepreneurship to harness and master ICT potential;

- a coherent investment program to apply ICT to modernising the public sector;
- and incentives to promote the effective use of ICT for developing the private sector and empowering civil society [Hanna & Knight, 2012, p29].

Institutions leading long-term e-transformation strategies are, therefore, at the heart of orchestrating and implementing all elements of the transformation process.

This framework, which is defined in greater detail in the first book, is used as a guideline for describing each of the cases, and provides the means for the comparative analysis and evidence for the conclusions.

The authors propose an “integrated framework for understanding the holistic nature of e-transformation and for designing strategies to take account of key interdependencies among its elements” (Hanna & Knight, 2012, p4). This integrated framework can be summarised under the following core components:

- Integrating into development strategy
- Coverage, coherence, synergy
- Leading, institutionalising and engaging
- Balancing central direction with local
- Balancing long-term and short-term objectives
- Innovating, adapting and learning
- Balancing ICT as enabler and (economic) sector
- Emphasising digital inclusion (Hanna & Knight, 2011, p231)

This rich framework of analysis refrains from trying to identify simple causal relations between ICT strategy and its implementation and the countries’ e-transformation, and therefore eschews the pursuit of simplistic “quick-fix” solutions.

The fact that the authors present their conclusions in the form of lists of factors should not distract from their basic concern with the social and political processes that shape the outcomes. These processes are highly contextualised, depending on specific country (even regional) economic and historical conditions, institutions and political leadership.

The orientation towards such long-term processes also saves the authors from the pitfall of proposing a normative factor model, but rather leads them to present their conclusions in the form of enabling conditions that have to be considered in the rich and varied context of the countries studied.

This is why these books could not have been written without the detailed analysis of the individual countries' ICT histories. It is also why it could have come only from authors with such long and extensive international development experience.

Given the comprehensive character of the framework, the authors are able to apply it to a diverse group of countries, both in terms of social and economic development and in ICT history and e-readiness, allowing them to compare developed countries (Finland, Canada, Singapore) with emerging economies (Brazil, China, South Africa) and developing countries (Sri Lanka and the Philippines).

The proposition of a comprehensive framework – and the demonstration of its applicability to such a diverse group of countries in terms of their availability and use of ICT resources and social and economic development – is one of the major contributions of these two collections. The same model also allows the consideration of the sometimes huge in-country diversities.

Recognising the countries' efforts, and producing a frank and critical assessment of the outcomes and effects of the process, is a challenging goal, made less subjective only by having a consistent and comprehensive framework.

The chapters demonstrate thorough research, drawing on multiple sources and informed by the knowledge that could only come from someone very familiar with the idiosyncrasies of each country.

In their chapters on the individual countries, the authors stress the importance and the effects of integrating the ICT strategy into the national e-transformation or development strategy, and therefore make their contribution to the ongoing debate on the effectiveness of ICT investments.

Although the fundamental lessons seem to be rather simplistic and straightforward:

- committing to long-term objectives, coherence and continuity;
- promoting leadership, institutions, shared vision and human resource development;
- pursuing diffusion and inclusion;

it is not the “what” or the “why” that matters most to the authors (and obviously also to the practitioners) but the model-driven discussion of the “how” – which this reviewer sees as the main and distinctive contribution of the books.

That is where context enters the discussion: the political and institutional aspects, national and global issues, technological infrastructure, economic resources, and human resources.

By analysing the relationship between the countries’ situations, and by stressing the need for integration of the ICT strategies, the authors avoid the pitfall of “one size fits all” normative prescriptions, and allow for the variety of economic, political and institutional situations.

This approach goes beyond the usual static assessments and e-readiness measures and allows capturing the political context and institutional dynamics, with ongoing formation of coalitions, negotiation of priorities, leadership and implementation trade-offs within real-life human, financial and institutional constraints. These are critical aspects of strategy design, implementation and sustainability.

The books’ concluding chapters show the authors’ concern with demonstrating the usefulness of their framework, in addition to the description of each country’s approach and results.

In this sense the books also contribute to theory building. They therefore extend their usefulness beyond the reader’s interest in specific countries, and lead to a deeper understanding of the complexities of the subject. ICT and development policymakers, government officials in charge of implementation, development programme sponsors and evaluators alike should find in these books useful conceptual frameworks and actionable guidelines for their activities.