



## **The World Today**

### **Information and Communication Technologies ICTs: Facilitating the CSME**

**Ms. Solange Cross**

Junior Research Fellow, The UWI Graduate Institute of International Relations, The University of the West Indies, St Augustine Campus

The Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME) entails the free flow of labour, goods and capital among participating member states. The emergence of this single market illustrates the deepening of integration efforts, touted in part as the way to cope with the burgeoning global techno-economic knowledge and information societies. Often the focus of the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), within the context of the CSME has revolved around the use of such technologies as inputs, products and services. However, ICTs provide new multidimensional implications for movement of persons and skills, which must also be dealt with accordingly in the CSME.

The overwhelming importance of ICTs extends beyond this. The region must also adequately engage with ICTs in relation to capacity building and institutional strengthening in the CSME; as enabling tools in facilitating the implementation and operation of the initiative through effective and efficient coordination, to achieve its fundamental purpose of furthering Caribbean development. Creation, access and utilisation of information and knowledge are essential components, not only in the development of the CSME, but also for the region's wider development agenda. CARICOM member states need to situate the CSME in the wider Caribbean Information Society efforts; in national ICT Agendas, eGovernment strategies and initiatives.

The CSME must deal with the development of the Caribbean Information Society and the wider global information society. Internet Governance and standards, privacy, security concerns and related issues have implications for the functioning and operation, products and services of the CSME. Technology, through information exchange, virtual consultation and electronic collaboration, facilitates effective policymaking.

Legal e-frameworks (concerning data protection, electronic transactions, digital signatures, intellectual property, and computer misuse) are necessary for ICT utilisation and creating the optimum environment for access, use and resultant benefits. Simply instituting required legal and administrative requirements to facilitate the implementation of the single market aspect of the process will not translate into the over whelming success of the venture. Countries may well be fully prepared in these terms but not in those of regional and global connectivity and interoperability. If unheeded, the environment for the effective functioning of the CSME may be compromised with ensuing implications for the initiative's overall success.

The functioning and operation of the CSME requires the establishment of numerous national and regional organisations. Given the financial and human capacity constraints of the region, the effective utilisation of ICTs within such organisations is imperative not only for their functioning but that of the entire initiative. Consequently, the role of ICTs in capacity building and institutional strengthening to further pool regional resources for collaboration and coordination is vital.

### **Public Diplomacy Endeavours**

CARICOM states must engage in multi-stakeholder diplomacy to ensure that all stakeholders are not only fully cognisant of the initiative, but are also active participants, as all stakeholders, not only states, are the contributors and clients of the CSME. Engagement in multi-stakeholder consultations, information dissemination, fora for policy debate and recommendations for policy change, digital diaspora outreaches and other public diplomacy initiatives should be priorities. There is already the utilisation of ICTs for such interaction through the key attribute of websites in providing timely and accurate information on the CSME by many countries. However regional and national digital divide issues may forestall full optimisation of such technologies and must also be addressed in order for the technology to contribute to its full potential.

### **Digital Divide concerns**

Although the CSME takes into account the divergent nature of the CARICOM grouping, with respect to disadvantaged countries, regions and sectors, providing transition periods to facilitate adjustment to operate in the envisaged enlarged single economic space, these discrepancies are reflected also in the uneven benefits from ICTs, constituting a digital divide, which could intensify existing impediments and negate opportunities from the CSME initiative. Technology and user-based challenges include the physical infrastructure required; financial costs of hardware, networks, and software, the volume of information dealt with, electronic documentation and security, legality, protection, and confidentiality concerns, physical and effective access, and variance in user capacity and expertise.

Often, ICT development in these countries means bringing communications technology to places and persons hitherto devoid of such. Information access and overload are of concern. Literacy, a primarily domestic divide concern, has related far reaching consequences, serving as an impediment in terms of use and access to the technology thereby continuing the same challenges for overall development, just in a different technology. Building human capacity through robust education and training must also be targeted to combat such challenges.

Security concerns must also be addressed through strategies to ensure confidentiality of classified information; protection of information integrity; and protection of availability through variable user access systems based on the classification of documents.

Fundamental shortcomings of many Caribbean countries include a failure to instil a full appreciation of the advantages of ICTs, insufficiency in the human resources and skills required for effective ICT implementation, insufficient development of National

Information Infrastructures (NII) and overall formulation and implementation of ICT policies.

ICTs could provide the opportunity to propel the CSME initiative further on its path of Caribbean integration and development. Without its input and utilisation, the region may well continue to be hindered in its participation in the current global environment. CARICOM and its members must develop appropriate ICT infrastructures and capacities to ensure the fruition of such regional integration efforts as the CSME.