THE ELECTRONIC DIMENSION OF THE CARIBBEAN SINGLE MARKET AND ECONOMY (CSME)

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Introduction

I do not intend, by this paper, to overlook - or to understate - the many actions that have been taken to import an electronic dimension into the affairs of CARICOM, and by extension, the CSME. These actions are evident in several policy statements, action plans and utterances of decision makers, inside and outside of the region. By these initiatives, our leaders have demonstrated their acceptance of the view that information and communication technology (ICT) can be a tool, not only for development, but for the reduction of inefficiency and waste, in administration and in commerce.


Prior to this in February 1997, the Heads of Government adopted the Charter of Civil Society, inter alia, which committed member states to “respect encourage and promote the existence of a diversity of sources of information as a means of ensuring greater public access to information” (CARICOM 1997: 13-14). The Heads also affirmed their commitment to good governance and the provision of the “appropriate environment for its exercise and discharge” (ibid.: 17).

In January 2003, the United Nations sponsored the first Digital Diaspora Network for the Caribbean, which is aimed basically at promoting ICT development in CARICOM (http://www.unitaskforce.org). Both CARICAD and the UWI Centre for International Services in Barbados have also done extensive studies and reports aimed at achieving the use of ICT in Caribbean business and affairs, generally. (See particularly, Centre for International Services, Guidelines for Electronic Commerce in the Caribbean Community, 2003).

In October 2003, the Honorable Dr. Keith Mitchell, Prime Minister of Grenada, in a compelling speech to graduates at the University of the West Indies, informed them that ICT should be used as a strategy for economic development of Caribbean countries (http://www.caricom.org). This is a recurrent theme in his island’s policy statement, entitled, “ICT – A Strategy and Action Plan for Grenada, 2001-2005”. (http://www.caricom.org).

Other CARICOM governments have also taken determined steps towards exposing their
peoples to ICT. The Trinidad and Tobago government in December 2003 unveiled its "National Information and Communications Technology Plan for Trinidad and Tobago" (code-named, "Fast Forward"), with the stated goal of propelling Trinidad and Tobago into the "global information age by providing all citizens with affordable Internet access ... as well as maximising [their] potential to develop into a knowledge-based society" (The Newsday. December 17, 2003).

The Governments of Barbados, Jamaica and St. Vincent have also embarked on fairly comprehensive programs to train young people to understand and work with information technology in their daily lives. (See http://www.unittaskforce.org).

These are all encouraging signs and they are likely to intensify in the coming years. This paper is therefore intended, firstly, to acknowledge these initiatives, and secondly, to persuade us to "fast forward", if you will, to the not-too-distant future when the impact of all these initiatives will become evident in the way we do business in the Caribbean. It is in anticipation of this outcome that I am suggesting that we give specific consideration to the electronic dimension of the CSME, even as we analyze its legal, political, economic, and social dimensions.

Towards an Electronic CSME

The cornerstone of the CSME is the commitment by member states to the free movement of persons, labour, goods and capital throughout the CARICOM region. With this commitment, skilled technicians, artistes, professionals and entrepreneurs (among others) in the region, will move and work freely - and legally - in any member state, without the need to apply for work permits and other approvals. In addition, the CSME will place a market of about 14 million people (if Haiti joins the CSME) at the disposal of CARICOM businesses and workers (http://www.caricom.org).

The big news is, however, that the majority of persons identified above - graduates, professionals, entrepreneurs, technicians and artistes, have already gone digital. They are already major users of technology. Many of them are already conducting multiple commercial transactions online. The electronic way has already become for them, a way of life, and they all appreciate the tremendous implications that ICT has for their success and development.

In fact, the average person, even if he does not own a computer in his/her home, knows someone who does or where to go to obtain information that is online. They know about sending emails or surfing the net for information, and of course, the smallest child is aware that the entertainment gadget he sees advertised on American television can be obtained "somehow", by doing "something" with the computer and Daddy's credit card. With the various ICT initiatives being taken by regional governments, soon most of our people will have no patience with conducting business or personal affairs in any other way, but the "e-way". And we all know that, once a person has sampled or partaken of an empowering experience, he or she can never really go back to life as it was before.

In the digital environment that is evolving in the Caribbean, therefore, the need of our people will be - not only to obtain accurate information, quickly and easily - but more so, to be able to act on, or respond seamlessly to this information, in a secure and confidential setting.
To take advantage of the CSME, our web-savvy CARICOM nationals (and remember they live all over the world), will want to access a plethora of information in a matter of minutes on a series of matters. They will need to know, for instance, what vacancies exist in St. Lucia, Antigua or Barbados or elsewhere that match their skills. Will their qualifications be recognized? How can these qualifications be evaluated for acceptability, as provided under the CSME? By what means can they apply for jobs and get their qualifications evaluated?

They may also want to obtain copies of their certificates of birth with the minimum of hassles. Can they bring their vehicle from where they live in Holland to their new job in Grenada? What exemptions from import duty are they eligible for? How can they apply for those exemptions? By what means can the wife, who works in the Jamaican civil service, transfer her benefits to the Grenadian civil service, as is envisaged under the CSME? Can they go online and get the answers to these questions, and more important, can they make all these various applications electronically?

If they have children or pets, then a different set of questions arise, relating to schools, uniforms, books, libraries, immunizations, and quarantine. If they are thinking of building a home or purchasing land, then that is yet another dimension.

In the world that we now live, the most viable way to get quick, reliable and ready information on these matters is to go online. The CSME must aspire to meet, not only this standard, but also to provide interactive systems by which persons can consummate their transactions electronically. Any other way will be like traveling by boat to England or using a coal pot iron to iron our clothes.

The same is true for CARICOM companies and businesses. They will have the need for certain key services, as they seek to exploit the removal of barriers to trade. Being able to tender for the supply of goods and services to any CARICOM government, they will need ready access to all tender notices and requests for proposals of all the governments. They would also want the facility of submitting their bids as quickly and securely as possible. Their customs declarations must be dealt with as expeditiously. They may also want to enter into joint ventures with other CARICOM companies, and certainly, they will be hiring staff who are nationals of other CARICOM countries. To do all this, these companies will require a host of information that lies in the domain of other member states.

For instance, an Antiguan company, wanting to construct office buildings in Barbados would need prompt and accurate information on the ownership of the land, whether taxes are paid up, or whether it is encumbered in any way. Is it zoned for commercial construction, and how should an application for a building permit be submitted?

An attorney in Jamaica would wish to ascertain in reasonably quick time whether his client’s proposed joint venture partner in Grenada is a duly registered entity in the Companies Registry of Grenada. Does it file annual returns? Who are on its board of directors? Are there any judgments or liens against it that a potential joint venture partner should know about?

If the Jamaican company wants to hire a Vincentian citizen, now living in Dominica, who worked for years in Trinidad, it would need to determine in the quickest possible time whether his/her credentials are authentic, or if he/she has a dishonest past. Can a background check or
certificate of good character be obtained from St. Vincent, Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago, in a few days?

Governments, too, will need information on job applicants or the companies to which they will award procurement contracts. Is the company a bona fide CARICOM entity, and thus eligible for CSME benefits, or is the locus of its control outside of CARICOM? Where was it incorporated, has it complied with all regulatory requirements of the country of incorporation? Has it filed its annual returns? Who makes up its management team, and what are their credentials?

All of this information is relevant and essential for CARICOM citizens and businesses, if they are to realize the gains accruing under the CSME. It is also worth noting that in other parts of the world, all of this data and services are being routinely provided by electronic means to citizens and companies. The irony is that, if anyone so desires, he or she can stay right here in the Caribbean, and access any of these services in other countries, as they are all online.

Douglas Holmes in his book, *EGov - Ebusiness Strategies for Government* (2001) has collated a wide range of public services that are being conducted electronically in various countries, on a daily basis. These include: the filing of income/corporate tax returns; the payment of income taxes, property taxes, VAT, water rates and social security contributions; the registration of motor vehicles and renewal of driver licenses; provision of traffic information; the filing of immigration and passport applications; the submission of customs declaration and payment of customs duties; tendering for government, state or county contracts; the accessing of personal health records; the connecting of all schools to libraries; transmission of finger prints and criminal records; accessing all the laws of the country, plus decisions of the courts; accessing public records pertaining to deeds, companies, birth, death and married certificates; company incorporation, applications for patents and trademarks; all types of training programs; and accessing hundreds of government forms and applications for a wide range of other services.

We are indeed evolving into a “paperless” world, and soon we will all be conducting only “paperless” transactions. A pen would be a thing of the past.

Now I am not advocating that we, in CARICOM, should aspire to providing every one of the services described above, and certainly not all at once. We are well aware that, given our peculiar circumstances and culture in the Caribbean, it is not appropriate, practical or even advisable to provide certain types of public services online. Suffice it to say that our decision makers will have to collaborate in deciding the services that will bring the greatest benefit to our peoples, while at the same time, advancing the CSME, and CARICOM generally. Our ICT experts in the region are extremely capable and can advise us in this regard.

**CARICOM E-Governments**

You will note that all of the services I have been discussing so far are public or government services - the request for tenders, the customs application, the building and zoning information, the certificate of good character, certificate of birth, motor vehicle registration, company registration and filing of corporate returns, land records are all public administration functions. It is therefore obvious that “electronic government” is a vital prerequisite to a dynamic and efficient CSME.
According to Fay Durant (2002), most of the governments in the region already have official websites, and so do some of their line Ministries and key agencies. That is a good start. Of course, all these diverse systems are unconnected and operate in their own little world. Durant’s analysis shows that none of the websites, (except the Jamaica customs) allows online payment for services, and only a small percentage carry interactive online capabilities. The Jamaica Registrar General Department’s website, commendably, allows citizens to download applications for certificates of birth, death and marriage. Jamaica has also quite recently instituted “e-manifest, and e-payment of customs duties.” (Ministry of Finance and Planning Newsletter, January 30, 2003).

At this stage, we have an ideal opportunity to deepen the integration and collaboration process in the region. My suggestion is that the diverse websites and information systems that provide government services in CARICOM should be integrated and linked up. This would enable users to access all the services of all the CARICOM governments through a single portal—a “one stop shop”, if you will. We would not have to click into the website of one government, then go to another website to access another government’s information, then another, nor would we have to re-enter the same information on several different occasions. This concept of “interoperability” (the linking up of all the information systems of member states) is critical as we consider the electronic dimension of the CSME.

The CSME is a perfect justification for implementing CARICOM interoperability; as the very essence of the CSME is reciprocity and closer inter-island relations. It makes no sense for one CSME state to pursue an aggressive digital agenda leaving its prospective trading partners to lag hopelessly behind. The goal should be to bring all member states to the same state of e-readiness, as far as practicable, so that the goals of the CSME, and CARICOM generally, can be advanced.

The European Union

The European Union is instructive in its approach to ICT. In an effort to ensure that information is easily accessed across the various member states, the Interchange of Data between Administration (IDA) was established. Its purpose is to use “advances in ICT to support the rapid electronic exchange of information between member states.” (http://www.europa.eu.int/ISPO/ida).


We ought not to be daunted by our small size and our economic disadvantage in comparison to the EU. Holmes (2001: 247), argues that “the lack of basic infrastructure and existing technology need not be an impediment for developing nations because they can ‘leapfrog’ the more industrialized nations which are bogged down with outdated systems.”

Tracing the experience of the Baltic country, Estonia, which on its independence in 1991 “had virtually no modern technology”, Holmes states, “Today, Estonia is one of the most wired nations in the world, with 30 percent of the population
having internet access. Its per capita income jumped from $600.00 in 1991 to $5000 in the year 2000.” The secret of its success he attributes to “a concerted effort based on a belief that improved connectivity could contribute to the survival of a small newly independent country and help it find its way in the world” (ibid.: 247).

Pitfalls, Prospects and the Path Forward

Finally, a word of warning. The idea of an electronic CSME is exciting and full of glorious prospects, but it can carry numerous pitfalls. Prime among them are breaches of security and privacy, not only by cyber criminals, but also by “Big Brother” governments. (See Holmes, 2001: 28-33 and 143-169). This can be very frustrating, if not disastrous. Consumer trust and confidence is a key factor if digital services are to command the support of citizens. At this stage, our governments should be working closely with their technical advisers to flesh out a plan for government e-services that caters to security concerns in the citizenry. That is the first place to start.

Secondly, the implementation of the plan must be underpinned by strict laws that will protect users, and governments from criminal and fraudulent activities. These laws must impose heavy punishment for “cyber crime.” A few CARICOM countries have already drafted cyber laws but none has actually enacted such laws, as far as I am aware. The training of government officials, administrators, cyber cops and counter hackers is another priority area that we should be considering right now. Laws recognizing digital signatures are also critical in the process.

The foregoing are matters which should be placed on the agenda of the decision makers of the region. A “nuts and bolts” CARICOM plan with inputs from our people and our ICT technicians, together with the enacting of laws to promote privacy, security and commerce, seems like the best way forward, if we agree that emphasis should be placed on the electronic dimension of the CSME.
References


