The Inter-American Digital Government Network: capacity building for digital transformation with equity
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Cover photo: Attendees at the 9th Annual Meeting of Red GEALC, Mexico City, 2015.

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Twenty years ago, a group of digital leaders working in the public administration in different countries of the region created a steady forum to collaborate, share, talk or, sometimes, just to vent frustrations with someone who experience the same challenges in their daily activities. They were all strongly convinced of the benefits of technology and that the challenge of broadening the use of information and communication technologies to all corners of Latin America and the Caribbean was more achievable if efforts were pooled.

Although its name included the expression “e-government” which sounds more robotic than human, from its very beginning, the GEALC Network (today the Inter-American Digital Government Network) was a people’s network for people. The GEALC Network initially operated like a club of members with common interests, but soon evolved more into a family spirit where those with a higher level of expertise help those who are just starting out, all shake hands to move forward together, and many remain connected, even if at some point they step away from public administration.

People have always been at the center of the agenda. The first excelGOV awards, back in 2007, had already recognized a category called “Citizen Participation”. Soon, the members of the Network realized that the key to their success was the professional experts they had at their service, so they started FOCOH, a cross-country expertise sharing program that connected dozens of specialists among the different members of the Network. Then followed more than 100 workshops in which hundreds of officials were trained on key topics for digital transformation, such as interoperability and digital records. In addition, a significant investment was made in training courses for members of the digital teams. The OAS soon made available to the countries an online training course in e-government through the Educational Portal of the Americas, which was a great success, and was followed by other courses offered by the OAS as well as by the IDB through AcademiaBID. The support of Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in building knowledge communities also played a key role at that time.

A review of the 9 excelGOV award catalogs clearly illustrates the importance given to people by the leaders of digital government in Latin America and the Caribbean. These catalogs show solutions that, supported by digital technologies, facilitate the process of registering children at birth, bring health services closer to citizens, make it easier for small entrepreneurs to start a business, speed up import and export procedures for large companies, or support the management of a public institution so that critical social assistance can reach the person who needs it promptly.
A few years after the creation of the GEALC Network, the IDB found in it the forum that the region needed to organize and expedite digital transformation efforts. Since its participation in the first ministerial meeting in 2009 in Uruguay, the Bank gradually increased its technical and financial support to the Network until transforming it into its Regional Policy Dialogue on Digital Government in 2019. Furthermore, the Network has the virtue of facilitating work at the regional, sub-regional or national level based on the nature of the topic, which proved especially valuable for the IDB’s Regional Public Goods initiative, that has been supporting the Network in its interoperability and cross-border digital signature activities for several years. This support has crowned with the creation of the list of trusted lists for the recognition of digital signatures across borders, an achievement that shows the Network’s potential to help the countries of the region move forward as a whole regarding their digital agendas.

In every survey or in every panel related to the digital agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean, an obstacle recurrently arises: the lack of financial resources to invest in ICT projects. The Bank has been making a growing effort to support the digital agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean through lending operations in its different modalities (political and performance-based investment), which to date account for 43% of the loan portfolio currently under execution, which amounts to approximately USD 50 billion. This support is enhanced by the online courses offered by AcademiaBID, the knowledge documents available on the Bank’s publications page, and non-reimbursable technical cooperation resources. This IDB support has benefited from the valuable technical and financial assistance of the Government of the Republic of Korea.

In keeping with the family spirit mentioned above, over the years the GEALC Network has opened its doors to the international organizations that have been supporting the region’s digital agenda. ECLAC, UNDESA, the OECD, ITU and the European Union itself have all been involved in many of the activities developed over the past 20 years, and the Network has been the digital government working group for the eLAC agenda led by ECLAC. In this section, the outstanding collaborative relationship that the OAS and the IDB have developed over the past 20 years to strengthen the capacity of the GEALC Network to play the leading role in regional digitization that it is playing today deserves a special chapter.

Twenty years ago, a group of committed digital leaders dared to dream of a better region that would leverage the opportunities that digital technologies were beginning to offer. After 20 years, not all dreams were fulfilled, but the region has electronic government agencies, interoperability platforms, cyber emergency centers, citizens with digital identities, countries where more than 50% of the procedures can be initiated online and... yes, many challenges and a long way to go.

However, the achievements of these years are a call to dream bigger about what we can do in the next 20 years. But this time with more political support, more human talent, more knowledge, more resources and... a mature GEALC NETWORK that has 9 working groups, that manages the list of trusted digital signature lists,
that in 2024 will hold its IX Ministerial Meeting and that is ready to achieve the digital dreams that its leaders dare to dream.

The IDB will continue to support this family of digital government so that all countries in the region reach a level of digital maturity so that all people in the region can enjoy the best living conditions.

Miguel A. Porrúa
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INTER-AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK
OAS Foreword

Since 2001, the Organization of American States (OAS) has been promoting the digital government agenda as an essential element for the modernization of the State and the provision of quality public services to citizens. Good government performance is key to improving public satisfaction regarding democracy.

Through digital government we contribute to the strengthening of public institutions to make them more transparent, effective and provide them with mechanisms for citizen participation. This is particularly important to increase citizen confidence in democratic governance.

One of the main features of the OAS is to provide opportunities for dialogue and exchange of experiences among all its Member States in a joint effort to find solutions to address common challenges. The OAS is the political integration body which works to facilitate the digital government agenda in the region. Initially, we worked on electronic government under an agenda fostered since 2001, which was later strengthened by the Member States in 2006 through the Declaration of Santo Domingo: Good Governance and Development in the Knowledge-based Society, with special emphasis on the modernization of the State through the design and implementation of e-government strategies to improve the provision of public services and information to the people.

At that time, the OAS/DEPM embarked on a journey to hold the first Inter-American exchanges on the subject, founding, in 2003, the Electronic Government Network of Latin America and the Caribbean (Red de Gobierno Electrónico de América Latina y el Caribe, RED GEALC), which was acknowledged, by resolution of the General Assembly, as the Inter-American Digital Government Network, and as a mechanism of the Inter-American system.

It is within the framework of this mechanism that we hold annual meetings with the highest national digital government authorities of the Member States and biennial meetings with the Ministers in charge of this portfolio. These meetings have a direct impact on the regional digital transformation agenda and are the coordination mechanism that technically supports the development and negotiation of the commitments undertaken at the Summits of the Americas and those adopted by the resolutions of the General Assemblies on these issues.
The most recent mandates to the OAS in terms of digital government are the commitments of the Eighth and Ninth Summits of the Americas, mainly those commitments that promote the open data agenda, the use of electronic systems for government procurement, the promotion of security in the use of the Internet, and the simplification of procedures and the modernization of public services. Similarly, the provisions of the resolutions on Strengthening Democracy of the OAS General Assemblies, which since 2018 point out the importance of the use of technologies for a more efficient, transparent, and participatory public administration.

The Ministerial declarations and regional digital government work plans, which are defined annually by the GEALC NETWORK, are the instruments that translate the mandates received into goals and actions to be implemented under the responsibility of the digital government authorities of each country, in each of the thematic work areas identified as a priority.

Other instruments, prepared within the framework of the OAS, are the Inter-American Open Data Program to Fight Corruption (PIDA) and its execution guidelines; the regional metadata profile; and the Diagnostic Analysis on the level of adoption of innovation and digital transformation in public procurement systems (among others).

The GEALC Network has also enabled the cooperation, coordination and exchange between the countries and multilateral organizations such as the IDB, OAS, CAF, ECLAC, the World Bank and the OECD.

On this 20th anniversary of working together with the IDB as the Technical Secretariat of the Gealc Network, we would like to thank the efforts of the Directors of Digital Government in the countries and the staff members of their institutions who promote the progress of the regional digital government agenda on a daily basis to make their governments more efficient, effective, transparent and provide them with mechanisms for citizen participation, thus contributing to strengthen democracy.

Maria Fernanda Trigo and Mike Mora
Director and Specialist
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20 Milestones in the Network’s History
That Monday, November 17, 2003, the sun had risen in Santiago de Chile at 6:30 on a cold morning with a temperature barely reaching 10 degrees Celsius. The wind would soon die down, bringing with it a cloudy day that would hit 15 degrees by midday. By the end of the afternoon the sky was clear and the weather was warm, with a temperature of 21 degrees. Visibility had improved significantly and now it was possible to see three times farther than at dawn.

Would that group of officials from several Latin American countries who were participating in the Electronic Government Capacity Building Seminar be able to see that far? The meeting, convened by the Organization of American States (OAS), through its Inter-American Agency for Cooperation and Development (IACD), and by the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA) of Canada, would extend until the next day. On behalf of the host country, the agencies that extended de invitation were the Agencia de Cooperación Internacional de Chile (AGCI, International Cooperation Agency of Chile) and the Ministerio Secretaría General de la Presidencia (MINSEGPRES, Ministry General Secretariat of the Presidency). Chile had been chosen as venue because, that year, it was one of the pioneering countries and promoters of digital government in the region. There were officials from Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.

Some of the topics discussed were: drivers for success (Pablo Valenti, Inter-American Development Bank, IDB), digital strategies (Martín Hilbert, Economic Commission for Latin America, ECLAC), the role of international organizations (Miguel Porrúa, OAS and Ben Petrazzini, ICA), interoperability, open source solutions, public-private collaboration, methodologies, and citizen involvement. Even though electronic government was in its early stages, it was already the subject of thorough debate (obstacles and myths was the topic of one of the presentations).

But the most important event took place on Tuesday the 18th at 3 PM. The title in the agenda was “Intra- and Inter-Country Collaboration to Improve the Effectiveness and Efficiency of Electronic Government in Latin America.” Instead of a speaker, it involved “group work”.

This is how the network was born. Still without a declared name, but with a group of officials with a clear objective: to share, collaborate and learn together about how to apply electronic government in their respective countries.
The benefits of exchanging experiences had been so evident that, less than six months later, the stakeholders agreed to meet again, but now in Lima, Peru. The title of the event, which took place on April 27 and 28, was “Capacity Building in Electronic Government.” It seems the same title, but it is not. It was no longer just a seminar; we understood that it was a process. And, most importantly, we already knew what it would take to move it forward. The countries defined it as such in the conclusions. The network, through exchanges on its would-be website, would be a space for:

- Finding already developed applications and relevant documentation.
- Organizing information by topic of interest: strategies, legal framework, GIS, security, procedures, payments, etc.
- Getting/asking for support and validate proposals in countries in the early stages of development towards possible e-gob strategies.
- Finding national case studies, best practice guidelines, and standards.
- Having access to existing national portals and new developments and legislation.

A few weeks later, between May 10 and 12, 2004, a new meeting was held in Brasilia where the above was reaffirmed and the host country shared several successful experiences.

After these two meetings, we were prepared to launch the founding declaration in November, and this time it had a proper name: Red de Líderes de Gobierno Electrónico de América Latina y el Caribe (Red GEALC, Network of Electronic Government Leaders of Latin America and the Caribbean). That lowercase “e”, which eventually would be capitalized as the other four letters that make up the acronym, has certain ancient roots.

The seminar in Chile is recognized as the starting point, and the importance of the activities in Lima and Brasilia is also acknowledged in the founding process. The founding declaration states that the network “seeks to promote the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) as support tools for enhancing the efficiency and transparency of the public sector, leveraging lessons learned, and adopting solutions that are already proven to work.” The initiative promotes the adoption of ICT in the public sector in order to “significantly improve the services offered by the State as well as it functions, in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean”. Services and Functions. Better State for better living conditions of the people who live in the region.
The world of technology kept making progress, new versions of Linux Ubuntu were launched, a prototype of what would later become Google Maps is born and in April a young man born in Bangladesh uploaded the first video to YouTube: “Me at the zoo.” Facebook had only been launched the previous year, and its global expansion was yet to happen.

In our GEALC Network, although the C in the acronym referred to the Caribbean, in reality the countries in that part of the continent had not yet been fully integrated. On July 26, 2005, however, the name finally reflected the real situation. The “Caribbean Workshop on Best Practices in Electronic Government” took place in Port-of-Spain, capital of Trinidad and Tobago.

It was organized by the OAS and the ICA, in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Administration and Information of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, the IDB, the Caribbean Center for Development Administration (CARICAD) and other international partners, at the local headquarters of ECLAC. The workshop stressed the importance of Electronic Government for the economic growth of a country, along with monetary, fiscal, labor and trade policies. At the same time, it showed how sharing experiences and knowledge can help developing countries, including the Caribbean, reduce costs and avoid unnecessary pitfalls. More importantly, it showed how the region can progress together.

In addition to this meeting, a delegation of Caribbean countries traveled to the other end of the map, from November 28 to 30, to learn from the Chilean experience in using technology for public management, including government procurement, the foreign-trade single window, civil identification, and customs.
While many of the founders of the GEALC Network still remembered the cold inaugural morning three years earlier in Santiago, Chile, it soon became an almost tropical anecdote when compared to the freezing temperatures in Ottawa at the end of the northern winter in 2006.

Considered the IV Annual Meeting of the GEALC Network, the event held in Canada, from March 6 to 8, had a special significance. It was the first time that top-level officials responsible for e-government, from both Latin America and the Caribbean, worked together.

The Canadian experience, as a country that has consistently been a global leader, was shared, and there was an overview of the region. The topics ranged from the legal framework to data centers, and did not leave out one of the focuses of the network’s permanent action in those years: a citizen-centered electronic government. Later on, it would no longer be electronic, but digital, it would no longer be citizen-centered but citizen-driven, but the starting point can be found in this initial work.

The weather improved greatly in the following months. In April, almost the entire region participated in a technical visit to Brasilia, sponsored by the OAS, to learn about Brazilian innovations in electronic government adopted to promote transparency and government democratization in the access to public services and information. That objective was, once again, one of the network’s main activities.

The year 2006 is also a milestone because the countries approved in the General Assembly of the OAS the Declaration of Santo Domingo: Governance and Development in the Knowledge Society approved earlier that year, it was the first major regional political agreement to promote information and communication technologies. It highlights the important role these technologies play as a transversal tool for achieving equitable and sustainable development, strengthening governance and promoting and protecting human rights.

That same year, in July, a working visit was made to Jamaica with the objective of sharing the host country’s experience in Customs management with other countries in the Caribbean region interested in replicating it. The result was one of the most successful examples of horizontal cooperation at that time. In this case Antigua and Barbuda, which received the assistance, was able to save a significant amount of resources. This was the foundation of a workshop on ICT for Customs conducted a month later in the Dominican Republic, open to governments in South America. With a similar rationale, and IDB support, the year ended with a workshop in Bogotá, Colombia, on interoperability. Not only were countries sharing information, at cruising speed at that point, but there were also discussions about cross-border interoperability, fifteen years before we had the foundation for its effective implementation, and when Twitter was just emerging.
The ExcelGOV Awards are Born

Fifteen years ago, there was little awareness of the significance of digital technologies in public policies, in contrast to the post-COVID-19 pandemic era. The directors of e-government were often solitary advocates of the digital cause, with few resources and limited attention from political decision-makers. It was necessary to recognize their work through an award that would give them the visibility that their work deserves. This simple idea was warmly embraced by the network’s members. To identify the best e-government solutions that are being implemented at the national government level and use them as a knowledge base. It wasn't just about rewarding them. The primary objective of the excelGOV e-government excellence awards was to make them known. Thus, fifty practices were gathered and a jury of experts - made up of the speakers at our annual meeting - recognized the most outstanding ones.

Two categories were created (Transparency in Public Management and Citizen Participation), two ways of granting the award (one for the most advanced countries and another for those countries in a less mature stage) and the nominees received a certificate.

The Transparency category was won by the Chile Compra e-procurement system (Best Solution) and the National Nosocomial Infection Surveillance Program of Argentina (VIHDA) was recognized. The other finalists were the Foreign-Trade Single Window (Colombia), the SAE Electronic Auction System (Mexico) and Panama’s Official Gazette.

In the Citizen Participation category, the best solution was the Web Platform for the Collective Construction of the National Education Plan PNDE 2006-2015 (Plataforma web para la construcción colectiva del plan nacional de educación, PNDE, Colombia), and the award for best effort was presented to the National Information System for Disaster Prevention and Management (Sistema Nacional de Información para la Prevención y Atención de Desastres, SINPAD (Peru)). The other finalists in this category were the SIU-Guarani University System (Sistema Universitario SIU-Guarani) (Argentina), Popular Participation of the Chamber of Deputies (Participación Popular de la Cámara de Diputados) (Brazil) and National Debate on education (Debate Nacional sobre la Educación) (Uruguay).

The activity did not stop at that, but revolved around the project “Improving Public Management Through the Best Practices of Electronic Government”, (Mejoramiento de la gerencia pública a través de las mejores prácticas de gobierno electrónico), funded by the IDB, which had one of its milestones in the Costa Rica interoperability workshop, where experiences from Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela were presented.
Horizontal Cooperation and Knowledge

One year had passed since the creation of the Horizontal Cooperation Fund (FOCOH). Using an online form, a country would describe an issue to be solved and, with the help of the GEALC Network, another country that could offer support to solve it was identified. The network was in charge of the mission’s airfare (with IDB funds), the country offering support would provide the expert, and the receiving country was responsible for the accommodation and food expenses of that expert for a three day stay. It was a simple format, but it worked.

This is how Brazil supported Uruguay with interoperability issues, Peru helped Nicaragua with their electronic government strategy, Chile helped Panama with standards definition, and Uruguay supported Peru with data openness and protection, among other bilateral exchanges.

In 2008, the format was not only consolidated, but it also saw one of its most successful cases: Jamaica helped Antigua and Barbuda adapt the Customs Automated Services system (CASE). To make it formal, an agreement was signed at the OAS headquarters between the Minister of Finance and Economy of Antigua and Barbuda, the Director General of the Jamaican Tax Administration Vinnette Keene, and the Secretary General of the OAS. In this way, the government of Antigua and Barbuda saved more than 2 million dollars in investments in research and development, and reduced implementation time to eight months.

Within the context of the Network, the knowledge generated by these exchanges and the authorities gave rise to the regional eGovernment Bulletin/Newsletter. It was published that year for the first time, with 100 issues so far, and features interviews with ministers and other authorities as well as best practices and emerging trends.
The annual meetings have acquired a new status: now are ministerial. The location chosen was Montevideo, Uruguay, in the Mercosur headquarters building, an old art deco hotel with a view of the Río de la Plata that serves as the national office of the OAS in this country. There were speakers from 29 countries, with notable appearances by José María Figueres, former president of Costa Rica, Zachary Tumin, from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and Joe Rospars, Director of digital media in the electoral campaign of then-US president, Barak Obama.

The Declaration of Santo Domingo, which was approved by the OAS General Assembly in June 2006, had served as the conceptual framework for the network’s development up until that point. However, starting with the 2009 Ministerial Meeting, the GEALC Network started to adopt its own declarations, even though they remained in line with the inter-American organization.

The Declaration of Montevideo stated, among other issues, that “electronic government constitutes a fundamental instrument for promoting efficiency, transparency and citizen participation in public activity and, therefore, for strengthening democratic governance and competitiveness”, without forgetting that “it must also be an instrument to promote greater social cohesion”.

Among the ministerial meeting documents, a catalog of that year’s excelGOV awards was prepared. It included a prologue by the President of the host country, Tabaré Vázquez, who expressed that Uruguay felt “honored to host this meeting of the GEALC Network” and encouraged participants to “continue taking advantage of the opportunities offered by information and communication technologies to improve people’s lives and society’s progress.”

This second edition of the awards adopted the format in which the jury members are the ministerial delegations themselves, with one vote per country; this makes the awards a true example of peer recognition.

The ExcelGOV Efficiency in Public Management Award went to Plan Ceibal (Uruguay), with Comprasnet (Brazil) and the Public Software Portal (Brazil) receiving special mentions.

In the m-government category, the award went to the Mobile Portal of the Government of Mexico and special mentions were awarded to the mCommunity Skills Bank (Trinidad and Tobago), and the Information System for Productive Agents of the Agricultural Market (Sistema de Información para agentes productivos del Mercado Agropecuario) (Chile).
Research Enters the Scene

This is the year the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa won the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Argentine player Lionel Messi his second Ballon d’Or, and Spain the Soccer World Cup in South Africa. Since October, special events as well as everyday moments could be shared through homemade photos with artistic aspirations on the Instagram network, which four years later would reach 300 million users.

Although the early days of the GEALC Network were focused on the exchange of experiences, in 2010 the emphasis shifted to outlining potential avenues for thinking about the way in which we do things, about the use of technologies for public management and exploring ways to extend that use.

Accordingly, we collaborated with OAS and OUI/COLAM (Inter-American University Organization / College of the Americas) as well as Canada’s IDRC (International Development Research Center) to design the project “The Citizen and Electronic Government in the Americas.”

The applied research focused on four studies: “Hacia la conformación de Agendas Digitales Integradas” (Towards the Creation of Integrated Digital Agendas) (Mexico), “Modelo de Madurez para diagnosticar el Gobierno Electrónico en las Instituciones Públicas “ (Maturity Model to Diagnose Electronic Government in Public Institutions) (Chile), “Ambiente colaborativo para el fortalecimiento de la democracia y monitoreo de informaciones estratégicas” (Collaborative Environment for Strengthening Democracy and Monitoring Strategic Information) (Brazil), and “Del Gobierno Electrónico a las prácticas de gobernanza mediadas por Internet: una mirada a la brecha de comunicación política” (From Electronic Government to Internet-Mediated Governance Practices: Analysis of the Political Communication Gap) (Colombia).

Consequently, four sets of knowledge—one for each project—were acquired. In one of them, Brazil pioneered the use of smartphones for electronic government, a concept that would later be referred to as mobile government, or m-government.

Five “liaison officers”, young researchers, were also selected to support five governments (Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Peru and the Dominican Republic) in the use of ICT for public management, through a Red GEALC pilot experience coordinated by the OAS and financed by the IDRC.
Training and Knowledge Communities

Public officials were trained in key aspects of electronic government from the very beginning of the network’s operation, but in 2011 there was a particular boost in this area. This was so due to the strengthened connection between digital government agencies and the OAS virtual campus. In that regard, the course ‘Introduction to the Formulation of Electronic Government Strategies’ reached its 49th edition in Spanish, its 42nd edition in English, and its 41st edition in Portuguese that year.

At the same time, new courses opened within the framework of the IDRC-funded project, such as “Interoperability and Interinstitutional Public Processes”, and “Government in the Era of Social Networks.”

Issues such as citizen services (horizontal cooperation between the Dominican Republic and Colombia) or cybersecurity (horizontal cooperation between Uruguay and El Salvador) were not neglected. However, the activity that year focused on the activity plan of “The Citizen and Electronic Government in the Americas.” It began with a workshop in Bogotá (in January) and concluded with another in Guadalajara (in December). Thus, knowledge communities were established, which would serve as the foundation for the workgroups that, through various stages of development, would become one of the network's distinguishing features in the following years.
Second Ministry Meeting

While that meeting in Montevideo in 2009 could have been seen as a single example of good synergy between political leaders and implementers of e-government, the second ministerial meeting held in San José, Costa Rica proved that the format was here to stay.

It was held on November 26th and 27th, 2012, and authorities from 29 countries in the region participated again (Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay and Venezuela.) In addition, technical and financial support from the government of the Republic of Korea began at this meeting. Support that would become essential to solidify the GEALC Network into the political and operational space related to the digital transformation that it has become today. The Korean delegation at this meeting was led by the President of NIA (National Information Society Agency), Mr. Seangtae Kim.

The delegations voted for the excelGOV awards for that year, choosing between 76 applicant solutions. In the category “E-government with the Citizen at the Center”, Mer-link, the public procurement platform of Costa Rica, was the winner. In the “M-government” category, tConnect Mobile, the mobile version of the information and services portal of Trinidad and Tobago, was chosen. The winners were awarded a technical visit to Canada.

The format of delivering special thematic mentions was started this year. Two of them were for Uruguay (Government Open Data Portal, and Personal Data Protection Website) and one for Brazil (Women’s Assistance Center Call 180).

In addition to pointing out that “e-Government initiatives must be designed with the citizen as the protagonist and that the benefits of e-Government must reach all citizens equally”, the final ministerial declaration emphasized “the need to share experiences, solutions and knowledge as a mechanism to accelerate the advances of electronic Government and the promotion of synergies for the implementation of initiatives leveraged during this collaboration”.

The latter was closely aligned with the spirit of the GEALC Network. That year, for example, horizontal cooperation missions had been carried out between Costa Rica and Honduras (electronic signature), Ecuador and Colombia (government intranet), Uruguay and Paraguay (georeferencing and cadastre), Argentina and Nicaragua (interoperability), Brazil and Colombia (open government), Uruguay and the Dominican Republic (legal and regulatory framework for e-government), among others.
GovCamps are born

They were intended as instances to reflect on strategic issues. The relaxed format sought to be a complement to both the training and experience exchange workshops and the decision-making meetings. The first one took place in Chile, in March 2013, in a rest house on the outskirts of Santiago. Representatives from Colombia, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Chile participated to think about ways to address together issues such as the implementation of Open Government, how to drive citizen participation, the advancement in the digitalization of procedures, the promotion of cloud policies and public software, among other issues.

Public software was consolidating itself as an important topic of the network at that time, becoming the focus of several of the bilateral instances of horizontal cooperation that took place that year and that would result in the materials to build a collective project: supported by the Regional Public Goods Initiative of the IDB, the "Regional Collaborative Mechanism for Public Software" would formally begin in July of the following year, in Mexico City, with the emergence of the regional knowledge community in public software.

But we are still in 2013. The good result obtained by the GovCamp in the combination of workshop-reflection-collaboration led to repeating it in the same year. Thus, GovCamp II took place three months later in a winery near Montevideo. That natural environment allowed us to gather around a wood stove to think about the bridges between open government and e-government, with input from the public sector, academia and civil society.

In addition to representatives of e-government agencies from Argentina, Chile, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela, the IDRC invited the organizers of the regional open data conference that held its inaugural meeting at that same time in that same city. It was the beginning of a bond that, since then, would closely link the Red GEALC Govcamps -led by the OAS- with the editions of the Abrelatam/Condatos regional open data conference.

At the same time, the open government paradigm, which invoked the digitalization of government and the opening of data for more efficient and transparent management for citizens, matured as a mechanism and thus the OAS, within the framework of the GEALC Network, with support from IDRC, launched the two pioneering open government publications from a multilateral perspective.
Institutionalization

The GEALC Network was always a light, agile, flexible mechanism, put entirely at the service of facilitating horizontal cooperation between countries and channeling the relationship between those countries and the regional initiatives of the driving international organizations. However, the growth of experience, the incorporation of a political level of decision-making with the ministerial meetings, the multiplication of activities and the commitment of the countries with their participation bodies, made it evident that a minimum formal framework was needed.

Thus, at the Ministerial Meeting held in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, the network statutes emerged, prepared and approved by all members, which formalized in terms of governance what was already a reality: the appropriation by the countries of this regional collaboration instance. That is why it had been born of the will of those who formed it as they were building it.

These statutes involved work plans, also approved collectively, and the election of authorities: an eight-member Executive Committee respecting regional balances and the rotation of countries, and the election of a presidential country with defined terms. This role went to the Executive Director of Agesic, José Clastornik, from Uruguay. For the Executive Committee, Belize (Michelle Longsworth) and the Dominican Republic (Armando García) were elected for the Caribbean Area, for the Andean Area, Chile (Jorge Alzamora) and Colombia (Johanna Pimiento), for Mercosur: Argentina (Gabriel Casal) and Uruguay (José Clastornik), and for Mesoamerica: Guatemala (Joel Peñate) and Mexico (Yolanda Martínez). With voice, but without vote, the Executive Committee is also made up of the OAS as a technical secretariat through the Department for Effective Public Management (Mike Mora), the IDB as the driving agency (Miguel Porrúa) and the Manager of the GEALC Network (Roberto López).

In that year, it was noted that the XXIV Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State and Government (Mexico) had reaffirmed the role of the GEALC Network as a space for Ibero-American collaboration, as recognized in the Panama City Declaration of the XV Meeting of the Ibero-American Network of Ministers of the Presidency and Equivalents, approved in April 2013, which enabled Andorra, Spain and Portugal to join the GEALC Network as observer countries.

As in all our ministerial meetings, the delegations present in Cartagena de Indias voted for the excelGOV awards, this time between 84 applications from 20 countries, with Colombia being the nation with most entries with 19 projects, followed by Costa Rica (9), Chile and Uruguay (8). In the Simplification of Public Services category, the award went to Urna de Cristal, from Colombia, and in the Social Innovation category, it went to Uruguay for the Consumer Price Information System. There were special mentions for Chile (public software), Nicaragua (gender approach) and Colombia (combat poverty).
It was the first meeting of GEALC Network where there was a speech specially prepared for the event by a president of the Republic, through a video by President Juan Manuel Santos. The Cartagena Declaration, at the end of the meeting, highlighted that, “given the rapid and constant technological advances of the last two decades, changes in citizen expectations demand acceleration of the innovative use of technologies for greater administrative efficiency and timely provision of public services”, which result in achieving fair, equitable and sustainable development objectives.”
Open Government and Public Software

If we only take into account the new developments, and ignore the continuation of bilateral exchanges of horizontal cooperation or training courses, for the GEALC Network 2015 was the year of the Regional Open Data Dialogues (promoted by the OAS, in Peru and El Salvador) and the Regional Collaborative Mechanism for Public Software (supported in technical and financial terms by the IDB).

The second public software workshop was held in Brasilia, in March, with the participation of experts from Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Spain, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela. The Regional Diagnosis of Public Software was presented, and a knowledge community was created for the adaptation of the Chilean software SIMPLE (System for the Implementation of Lightly Standardized Processes) to a SIMPLE-Lat format. After a virtual work process, the same actors met in November in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, where they worked on a regional collaborative model, including the regional platform for the exchange and co-creation of public software.

The Annual Meeting of all members was on October 26th and 27th at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mexico. 21 countries participated along with representatives of multilateral organizations, invited governments and local officials. Uruguay was re-elected as the presiding country and the Executive Committee for the coming year was made up of Haiti and the Dominican Republic (Caribbean Area), Chile and Colombia (Andean Area), Brazil and Uruguay (Mercosur), Guatemala and Mexico (Mesoamerica).

It was in this year that the Executive Committee of the Network became the consultation mechanism for the open data community of the region in the vote to select the regional open data conference Abrelatam/Condatos headquarters with candidates from governments and the civil society.
Fourth Ministerial Meeting

After a year of intense work in the development of public software knowledge communities, the network reached its fourth ministerial meeting, in Santiago, Chile. 22 countries from the region participated, including a large Korean delegation, as well as panelists from Spain, Estonia and the United Kingdom.

The novelty in the election of authorities was that the network had its first female president: Yolanda Martínez, head of digital government in the Ministry of Public Function, of Mexico. She was accompanied by an Executive Committee: from the Caribbean Area: Jamaica (Maurice Barnes) and the Dominican Republic (Armando García), from the Andean Area: Chile (Andrés Arellano) and Peru (Lieneke Schol), from Mercosur: Argentina (María Inés Baque) and Uruguay (José Clastornik), and for Mesoamerica, in addition to Mexico, Panama was chosen (Irvin Halman).

As usual in the GEALC Network ministerial meetings, the excelGOV awards were voted on, and this time, the award was a technical visit to South Korea. In the category of Improvement of Public Services, Trinidad & Tobago won with Electronic Single Window (TTBizLink) to facilitate business and commerce, and in the Public Software category, Chile won with Simple version 2016. There were special mentions: Economic Development (Unique Key, from Chile), Open Data (Gob.mx, from Mexico) and Gender Approach (also Gob.mx, from Mexico), and statuettes for horizontal cooperation were awarded to Brazil, Chile, Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay.

In the Declaration of Santiago de Chile, the delegations expressed their “firm determination to continue driving the development of public policies and digital government strategies at the highest political level in the countries of the region and to strengthen the GEALC Network as the platform for dialogue, coordination and regional integration, calling on regional and international organizations to consolidate their digital government initiatives and related topics, seeking to channel and optimize efforts in technical assistance, capacity building, knowledge transfer and exchange of good practices, among others.”
LAT Public Software

It was the year of the development of regional public software, generated with the support of IDB and the work of the GEALC Network knowledge community. Throughout several face-to-face workshops (Lima, Buenos Aires, Panama City, Caracas and the Dominican Republic) and virtual exchanges, the LAT versions that were evolutions of the SIMPLE tools (procedure generator, originated in Chile with improvements from Uruguay, Mexico and Paraguay), Tenoli (interoperability, Salvadoran adaptation of the Estonian X-Road), SINMA (natural disaster management, originated in Panama), Muruchi (digital signature, originated in Venezuela). These knowledge communities would be the foundations of the future working groups of GEALC Network.

During the XI Annual Meeting of the GEALC Network (Santo Domingo, November 30th, 2017), Panama was elected as the presiding country, a position to be exercised by the National Authority for Government Innovation through its General Administrator, Irvin Halman. The Executive Committee was made up by: Bahamas (Carol Roach) and Guyana (Floyd Levi) from the Caribbean Area, from the Andean Area: Ecuador (Javier Jara) and Peru (Marushka Chocobar), from Mercosur: Argentina (Daniel Abadie) and Paraguay (Javier Quiñónez), and from Mesoamerica, El Salvador (Eric Ramirez), in addition to Panama.

The GEALC Network was awarded the WSIS Champion 2017 Awards, in the International and Regional Cooperation category. It was given within the framework of the Information Society World Summit (CSMI) 2017 organized by the United Nations, which took place in Geneva, Switzerland.
The Cross-Border Path

In many ways it was a pivotal year. The experience of co-creation of public software and knowledge communities gave rise to cross-border digital services and working groups, which will involve in the GEALC Network not only the directors of digital government of the countries of the region, but also dozens of experts in different topics from the teams of those same national agencies.

The showcase for this progress is the Ministerial Meeting in Panama City. The country is experiencing the happiness of having qualified for a soccer World Cup for the first time (Russia 2018). They can replay goals and plays on a new short video app, Tik-Tok, which had emerged a year and a half earlier. With an organizational enhancement that set the bar very high for the following events and that had, for the first time, a President of the Republic (Juan Carlos Varela) opening a ministerial meeting of the GEALC NETWORK in person. Studies carried out by the GEALC Network itself were presented, such as the success story book The Value of Digital Government (led by Panama and IDB specialists) and the First Regional Report on Emerging Technologies (led by Mexico).

Once again, with the support of the IDB’s Regional Public Goods Initiative, the “Program to Strengthen Cross-Border Electronic Transactions in Latin America and the Caribbean” is presented at the Ministerial Meeting in Panama, before delegations from across the region. Work begins on digital signature, cross-border interoperability and its link with emerging technologies. It is a leap in quality that is accompanied by the creation or consolidation of working groups in Open Data, Innovation, Measurement, Public Software, Emerging Technologies, and Cross-Border Services.

That year, the excelGOV Award in the Emerging Technologies category was given to Document Integrity with Blockchain, from Colombia. The award in the Value of Digital Government category was given to Digital Citizenship Platform, from Brazil. Special mentions were awarded to Open Contracts, from Mexico (for Open Data), to Change of Affiliation for Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy, from Uruguay (in Gender Focus), and to the National Smart Interoperable Monitoring and Alert Management System (SINMA), from Panama (in Public Software).

The country elected to preside over the GEALC Network was the Dominican Republic (headed by Armando García, General Director of the Presidential Office of Information and Communication Technologies, OPTIC), and the other seven countries chosen to be members of the Executive Committee were the Bahamas, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Paraguay and Uruguay, which joined the IDB, the OAS and the Network Manager.
The Panama Declaration highlighted “the need to raise the public value of digital government to strengthen democratic governance with greater transparency and openness, competitiveness in our countries and wellbeing for our people, using data and innovation in strategic ways, to bring the State closer to citizens, to improve governments’ response capacity and make access to quality services more democratic, promoting citizens as engines driving public policies, in pursuit of an inclusive and sustainable future for all”.

For the first time in the history of the Network, the host country of the ministerial meeting, as well as its presiding country, presented a comprehensive report of the Network at the OAS headquarters in Washington DC before the Permanent Council of this organization.

That same year, the Presidents of the region had approved, at the VIII Summit of the Americas, the Lima Commitment: Democratic Governance in the Face of Corruption, which constitutes the first moment when the heads of government and State of the hemisphere made a commitment to drive the use of new technologies that facilitate digital government in order to promote transparency, interaction with citizens, and accountability; and also to drive the establishment of an inter-American open data program to prevent and fight corruption.
The 49th OAS General Assembly held in Medellin in June endorsed the Inter-American Open Data Program to Prevent and Fight Corruption (Programa Interamericano de Datos Abiertos para Prevenir y Combatir la Corrupción, PIDA). It also acknowledged the GEALC Network as an Inter-American network that is open to the participation of all OAS Member States, a willingness that had been already stated by the countries of the network at the previous year’s Ministerial Meeting in Panama. This paved the way for the effective participation of the United States and Canada in our annual meeting in Buenos Aires and it became part of a process of analysis that was developed throughout that year to broaden the membership. It was agreed that the acronym should be kept, as it was an acknowledged trademark of the digital government continental community, but progress was made towards the amendment of the bylaws, which would take place the following year, thereby establishing its scope of action for the Americas as a whole.

In June, a workshop was held in Santiago de Chile to launch the cross-border project, and in September the GEALC Network working group on digital signature held a key meeting in Brasilia, with support of the IDB. At that meeting, the technical bases for the mutual recognition of digital signatures among Mercosur countries was agreed upon, and this was later ratified at the highest level, on December 5, in Bento Gonçalvez (Brazil), by the Presidents of the four countries: Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

At the Annual Meeting in Buenos Aires, Costa Rica was elected as the new President Country of the network, and the new Executive Committee was also composed of Argentina, Belize, Chile, Colombia, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay.

The regular actions remained within the scope of the cross-border project and working groups, or the extension of the GovCamps (that year in Ecuador), but also provided opportunities to act in the event of emergencies. For example, when Hurricane Dorian hit the Bahamas, the Government Innovation Authority of Panama supported the Government of the Bahamas in the deployment and use of the natural disaster management software, SINMA-LAT, within the framework of the horizontal cooperation mechanisms of the GEALC Network. This ability to react quickly to unforeseen events would be key in the following year.
In the first half of March, the countries of the region issued health-care emergency decrees in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation put the GEALC Network’s horizontal cooperation mechanisms to the test.

The network proved its capacity to provide immediate response through knowledge exchange webinars to share ideas, proposals and developing practices among the continent’s digital government teams. The digital government agencies had the huge challenge and responsibility to offer immediate attention through digital public services to citizens, and at the same time, coordinate a public administration under a new remote work modality. On March 17, a webinar was arranged to closely follow the efforts being made by Brazil to develop its app; 72 hours later, 14 countries in the region learned about the Korean apps to start working on their possible customization; on March 20, the technical and financial support line of the IDB’s Data and Digital Government Cluster was launched through our communication channels; and on March 23, a dedicated line of action had already been systematized in the GEALC Network on coronavirus with a resource guide and a working group. The first task of this group was to organize, every Friday, a webinar on digital government to share best practices and concerns about digital government in the face of the crisis caused by the pandemic.

In April, work began on how emerging technologies were being used in this field, a specific webinar was held for countries in the network on the digital responses of the United Kingdom, another on Spain, and the teleworking experience driven by Chile was also presented. On April 3, Bahamas, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela learned first-hand how Uruguay was developing its app. The challenge was not only to build the tools but also to keep societies, and specifically governments, up and running.

Our international partner organizations joined their efforts in line with the GEALC Network, and so the challenges raised by COVID in terms of governance were discussed with the OAS and how to manage data and privacy during the emergency with the IDB. In addition, specific cooperation also took place, as Peru customized the Korean app through the GEALC Network with IDB funds, and Panama shared its knowledge with Suriname. Crossing fields, with a dedicated working subgroup on data and COVID, or analyzing how interoperability contributes, together with the digital signature, to a regional vaccine certificate. National progress, such as those of Panama and Uruguay that managed to interoperate their certificates with the European Union, were seen as achievements of the region, since they were promptly shared with other countries and enabled others, such as Brazil, to reach the goal, saving precious time.
All this without forgetting the actions committed to cross-border digital services, which would be useful to support the solutions being deployed in response to the pandemic. In this regard, the countries received support to implement the public software tools donated by Spain: @firma and TLmanager.

In 2020, not only the individual countries were put to the test, but also the way in which the Network was conducting its own meetings. That year, the Ministerial Meeting was held entirely on a remote setting, with a broadcasting station in Buenos Aires and a virtual venue in Costa Rica. The meeting was so successful that it was attended by the President of Costa Rica, the Secretary General of the OAS and the President of the IDB, which was the first time that these three high-level authorities had participated in our meetings. A new feature was the creation of parallel thematic tracks that allowed the participation of the working teams and not only the directors. As in every meeting, the authorities were elected, and the Executive Committee was composed of Colombia (president country), Argentina, Belize, Ecuador, El Salvador, Panama, Paraguay, and Trinidad and Tobago. The excelGOV awards were also voted from among 53 nominees. The winner in the Digital Transformation category was Brazil’s Digitalization of Procedures, and in the category Digital Government against COVID-19, the award went to Plan Panama Solidario (Solidarity Plan). Special mentions were given to the App 144 Against Gender Violence, from Argentina (Gender Approach); the Unique Work Certificate for the Youth - CERTIJOVEN, from Peru (Open Data); and a shared mention in Emerging Technologies between Blockchain for Land Adjudication, and Artificial Intelligence for Sustainable Development Goals, both from Colombia.

The 2020 Ministerial Meeting had a session in which the new status of the GEALC Network as the IDB’s Digital Policy Dialogue was addressed. In addition, during the meeting, the Document for the Promotion of Cross-Border Digital Signature was approved, in which “the willingness to advance in the features of digital government which shall serve, in the future, as bases for mutual recognition of digital signature between countries whose legislatures resolve to do so by means of the relevant mechanisms” was stated, underscoring “the non-binding consensus reached by the GEALC Network Working Group on technical matters of cross-border digital signature, and presented in a summary paper prepared with the support of the IDB’s Regional Public Goods Initiative”.

Needless to say, the 2020 Ministerial Declaration echoed the moment. It noted that “the huge challenge raised by the COVID-19 pandemic required the region’s digital government agencies to make an extraordinary effort to innovate in the creation of digital government tools to respond to the health and social crisis caused by the coronavirus, while supporting the continuity of government operations in the different forms of social distancing established by each country”. Based on that, it stated, as one of the items, that “digital transformation is critical for an inclusive economic and social reactivation in the region in the face of COVID-19, a reactivation which together with the strengthening of digital government, should promote equal opportunities with citizen-centered public policies”.
Gradually, the situation was returning to normal, although the use of platforms for thematic meetings was here to stay. Therefore, 2021 was marked, from the perspective of the GEALC Network, by the strengthening of the working groups, which held 68 meetings and 8 workshops or webinars. These groups were formed by 216 members from 19 countries (two thirds of the Network’s member countries). It should be noted that 5 countries participated in all working groups (Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Uruguay) and 8 countries in more than half of the groups. The working group on Cybersecurity, which was formed upon Costa Rica’s request, began to work.

In knowledge generation, the Study on security policies and technical requirements, gap analysis and recommendations for cross-border interoperability was validated. A Digital Government Indicators Dashboard was created, led by Colombia with the contribution of the thematic working group and the IDB, and the Regional Emerging Technologies Study on was updated.

The 2021 Annual Meeting was not yet fully attended in person, but it had a hybrid setting, with the Executive Committee countries attending in person and the other members of the Network attending virtually. In terms of cross-border digital services, it was resolved to “move forward with the definition of the GEALC Network as the governance mechanism for the regional trusted list of digital signature, which should always have the agreement of the country involved, which is sovereign with respect to its national list of trust”.

The authorities of the Network were also elected and Ecuador was appointed as the new President, together with Bolivia, Brazil, Dominica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Paraguay, Trinidad and Tobago on the Executive Committee.

The countries that were present (Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Dominican Republic and Panama), signed an agreement to enhance the potential for technical implementation of the recognition of COVID-19 digital vaccination certificates. All the delegations, both those that participated in person and those that participated virtually, approved the final document “Digital transformation beyond Borders”. The document acknowledged that: “in the face of the significant global changes experienced in the last two years, that digital transformation for inclusive economic and social recovery has as a key cross-border component, which not only complements the digital transformation within countries, but also enhances it.”
Regional Agreement of the Americas

Our 7th Ministerial Meeting, held in November, took place at a time when the hemisphere was consolidating its joint will to advance towards the highest level of digital transformation for equity and social and productive reactivation. For example, during the 9th Summit of the Americas, held within the framework of the OAS in Los Angeles (USA) in June, the heads of states and governments approved, for the first time in the continent’s history, a Regional Program for Digital Transformation by which they pledged to further innovative digital ecosystems, open digital government, cybersecurity, and to promote an “inclusive, resilient, efficient and equitable economic and social recovery, making use of digital technologies”. This process fed into later events, the OAS General Assembly as well as this Ministerial Meeting of the GEALC Network, both held in Lima (Peru).

Similarly, during the 2022 Meeting of the Board of Governors of the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), IDB reasserted in March its commitment to digital transformation.

The agenda of our 2022 Ministerial Meeting had a focus on cross-border digital services, consolidating progress in the Americas on digital signature and interoperability as enablers of regional commitments. Within this framework, the ministers of the delegations attending the Ministerial Meeting of the GEALC Network approved the Regional Agreement of the Americas on Cross-Border Digital Signatures, in which they established a Regional List of Digital Signature Trusted Lists “as the technical basis for regional cross-border digital signature agreements” and entrusted the GEALC Network with the governance of said list. In addition to presenting the aforementioned list of lists in the plenary session, the Uruguayan signatory took the opportunity, as president pro tempore, to declare the Mercosur list of lists established, a key technical component for the validation of signatures among the countries of the group.

The ministerial event was attended not only by the President of the Republic of the host country at the opening ceremony, but also by several ministers, including the premier and the foreign minister. During the event, the authorities of the GEALC Network were elected, and the Executive Committee was also composed of Peru (president country), Bolivia, Brazil, Dominica, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Suriname, and Uruguay. As for the excelGOV awards, there were 61 nominations from 17 countries and the delegations recognized “firma.gub.uy”, from Uruguay, as the winner in the Cross-Border Digital Services category, and “Mi Argentina” as the best solution in Digital Transformation. Special mentions were given on Gender Approach to “Programa Niñas Digitales Perú” (Digital Girls Program of Peru); in Open Data to the also Peruvian “Programa Territorios Digitales Confiables”.

Official photo of the 2022 Ministerial Meeting, held in Lima, Peru.
Planning for the future

Far from taking two decades of existence as an exercise in nostalgia, the year began with a material result: a cross-border authentication pilot, between Argentina and Uruguay, for the River Plate Digital Citizen, and a workshop on emerging technologies for cross-border digital signatures and interoperability with Caribbean countries. This was the platform for reinforcing the work accomplished through the project "Deepening the Program for Strengthening Cross-Border Electronic Transactions in Latin America and the Caribbean". This is a three-year work plan within the framework of the Regional Public Goods Initiative supported by the IDB. With this new 2024-2026 project, more countries in the region will be able to join the list of trusted digital signature lists, advance in the technical preparation for a Mercosur Digital Citizen (scalable to other countries) and explore the benefits of pilot services adopted as a basis for cross-border interoperability.

This program will focus on the expansion of key actors in this process, raising awareness of the axes of digital transformation and supporting workshops for foreign ministry staff (who negotiate agreements between countries based on the technical preparation provided by the GEALC Network) and members of the legislative branch (who approve these international agreements in the parliaments).

Also, there was a celebration marking a decade of the Abrelatam/Condatos regional conferences, returning to the host country where these conferences were first held in 2013, Uruguay, with the support of AGESIC and a dynamic community and a work agenda that has evolved and matured from open data to data governance and artificial intelligence with the support of the GEALC Network and a new working group formed with the support of IDRC to develop the Inter-American guidelines on the subject matter.

Digital technologies continue to encourage the public sector to innovate and re-invent itself. Artificial Intelligence is advancing with the promise of accelerating governments' efforts to meet the needs of their citizens in a customized and universal way. Proactive government is becoming increasingly feasible. The justice system is already reducing the time required for judicial processes by taking advantage of digitalization; disease diagnoses are beginning to be faster and more accurate thanks to new technologies; and business procedures are beginning to cease to be a burden on a country's competitiveness. From the electronic government of 2003 to the digital government of 2023, the agenda for digital transformation in Latin America and the Caribbean has matured significantly, and the region has its best years ahead to consolidate progress. There is still a long way to go, but the GEALC NETWORK has been preparing for the last 20 years to ensure that it supports the countries of the region in their efforts to ensure that all their people benefit from digital technologies to improve their lives.
Almost a thousand public officials have been part of the Gealc Network in these 20 years, holding positions of responsibility that range from governing bodies to working groups. The first 19 names represent them, starting with the former presidents, continuing with some examples of those who worked from the countries, and finally with three of the promoters who laid the bricks from the ground up. The 20th “name” is the team.
José Clastornik. Systems Engineer and Founding Director of Uruguay’s digital government agency, Agesic. He could have been a concert pianist given his unusual musical skills, but chose the digital world. He and his team led his country to become one of the members of the Digital Nations at a global level and the number one in Latin America and the Caribbean. He was the first president of Gealc Network, elected by his peers in Cartagena de Indias in 2014. Although he started out in the private sector, he has a great calling as a public servant and a collaborative spirit, always willing to share his experience with other countries, many of his colleagues consider him the “Yoda Master” of digital transformation in the region.

Yolanda Martínez. As Head of the Digital Government Unit of the Mexican Ministry of Public Administration, she was the second president of Gealc Network, in 2017. Even in that “far away” time, she boosted the work of the Network in emerging technologies. During her mandate, the Gealc Network was awarded the WSIS Prizes Champion 2017 recognition in the framework of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Known for the intensity with which she takes on her professional challenges, she was the Representative from IDB in Chile and today she is the Leader of the Govstack Program of the International Telecommunication Union of the United Nations. Strong advocate for the role of women in the technology universe.

Irvin Halman. As General Administrator of the National Authority for Government Innovation (Autoridad Nacional para la Innovación Gubernamental, AIG), of Panama, he was the third president of the Gealc Network during 2018. That year he hosted one of the most memorable ministerial meetings, which featured, for the first time, a Head of Government at the opening ceremony. Current Leader of the National Competitiveness Center of his country, he knew how to combine in a great way the positive connection between the private and public sectors. He is a committed environmentalist and advocate of an efficient, transparent and participatory institutional framework, and he plays chess both as a sport and as a metaphor. Thanks to his encouragement, the advisory board of former presidents of the Gealc Network was created to keep the link between the road traveled and the future to be undertaken.

Armando García. As Director General of the Presidential Office of Information and Communication Technologies (Oficina Presidencial de Tecnologías de la Información y Comunicación, OPTIC) of the Dominican Republic, he was the fourth President of the Gealc Network in 2019. As such, he emphasized coordination with the Inter-American framework, paving the way for membership to reach the Americas as a whole. He participated in the organization of the 49th General Assembly of the OAS and led the countries of the Network in advising their Foreign Ministries on the Digital, Open and Transparent Government Resolution, and in promoting the Inter-American Open Data Program (Programa Interamericano de Datos Abiertos, PIDA). He is a Systems Engineer and also has a Master’s Degree in Economics from his home country, and postgraduate studies in Canada.
Luis Adrián Salazar. He attended the founding meeting of the Gealc Network in Santiago, Chile. Then, throughout these 20 years, he participated in several occasions representing Costa Rica, based on his increasing responsibilities: Director of Digital Government, Deputy Minister and Minister of Science, Technology, Telecommunications and Information Society. He was also President of the Gealc Network in the first semester of 2020. Also a consultant and university professor, his most recent work is the book *Inteligencia artificial en Latinoamérica* (Artificial Intelligence in Latin America), published by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Enthusiastic about challenges, he considers technological innovation as “a transversal axis in human development since the beginning of our times”.

Paola Vega Castillo. First Costa Rican woman to obtain a Doctorate in Electronics, a degree she completed in Hamburg, Germany. She was Founder and Coordinator of the Master’s Program in Electronic Engineering and the Nanotechnology Research Program at the Technological Institute of Costa Rica. Both as Deputy Chancellor of that institution, and later as a public official, she fostered the scholarship system and the international networking of her country's scientific community. While Minister of Science, Technology and Telecommunications (Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación, Tecnología y Telecomunicaciones, Micitt), she was President of the Gealc Network in the second semester of 2020. She took on the challenge of hosting our Ministerial Meeting that year, which was a virtual one due to the pandemic.

**From the countries**

Ciro Avelino Pintangueira. The Baiano describes himself as an organizational rebel by conviction. This has led him to be co-founder of movements such as GovHackers or IGOVNights. He brought this spirit to the Gealc Network as a Brazilian Representative at different times, always encouraging regional cooperation and ready to act as a liaison between the working groups and the decision-making levels regarding public policies. With a degree in Design, then specialized in Strategic Management of Information Systems, from the Getulio Vargas Foundation, he has been able to blend both worlds for his actions in entities such as Caixa Economica Federal or the Secretariat of Digital Government, where he is a Digital Transformation Consultant. His slogan: “It’s always the people”.

Monique Bakker. A signatory in 2009 of the Declaration of Montevideo, our first ministerial declaration, along with representatives of 29 countries, she was at that time Advisor on electronic government public policies to the Ministry of the Interior of Suriname. Both before and after, she collaborated to make horizontal cooperation between Caribbean and Latin American countries a reality, especially in the first decade of the network. She graduated from Anton de Kom University and coordinated the Public Sector Management Strengthening Program.
Marushka Chocobar. From the Secretariat of Government and Digital Transformation of Peru, she was able to weave the tapestry of one of the most successful ministerial meetings of the Network. With a record attendance of national authorities, including the President of the Republic, the mayors of hundreds of municipalities, the country’s Premier and a dozen ministers, in addition to about twenty foreign delegations, the 2022 Ministerial Meeting witnessed the establishment of the foundations for cross-border digital services. A year later, a new protocol was established for the transfer of the presidency of the Gealc Network, in a historic ceremony in which Ecuador passed the baton to the President of the Republic of Peru, indicating the commitment at the highest level of the State.

Enrique Cossich Mérida. As one of the pioneers of electronic government in Central America, he was part of the first generation of directors that promoted the Gealc Network since its founding meeting in 2003. Over time he continued to participate in the network, as for example in the Lima 2022 Ministerial Meeting, when he was Coordinator and Executive Director of the Presidential Commission for Open and Electronic Government of Guatemala, or in open data initiatives aligned with the OAS. Professor at the Francisco Marroquín University for 12 years, expert in civil registry and modernization of the State, he has a degree in Systems Engineering and Business Administration.

Patricio Gutiérrez González. He hosted the 2003 meeting that gave birth to us, as Electronic Government Coordinator of the then Ministry of Secretariat and Finance of the Presidency of Chile. By then, the “Trámite fácil” portal web was already highlighted as one of the five best e-government products in the world according to the World Summit Award. Industrial Civil Engineer, with a Master’s Degree in Management and Public Policy, Pato Gutiérrez was involved in the promotion of this and other of the most successful Chilean projects on this topic. He served for six years as Electronic Government Coordinator in his country and also as Executive Secretary of Digital Strategy. In these positions, he played a key role in the consolidation of the first decade of the Gealc Network.

Adam Montserin. Representative of Trinidad and Tobago during the first steps of the integration of Caribbean countries into the Gealc Network, he hosted the meeting that brought it to fruition in Port-of-Spain in 2005. Later, as Executive Director of E-Government with the Ministry of Public Administration and Information, he continued to build bridges between Spanish-speaking and English-speaking countries. His ties to the Network were maintained even after he assumed responsibilities outside the government, as he participated in our first Ministerial Meeting (Montevideo, 2009) in his capacity as CARICAD’s E-Government Manager. Lately, he has focused on academic research, analyzing the use of ICT as an element of resilience in the pandemic.
Wahkeen Murray. Our network requires sharing technical expertise and political support. Murray, a graduate of the University of the West Indies, attuned both aspects from her various positions in Jamaica. As Technical Director or Permanent Secretary, she has articulated her country's work in our ministerial bodies and collaborated to build knowledge on the National Data Protection Act, on cybersecurity endeavors or, more recently, on the discussions on Artificial Intelligence. It is impossible to forget her efforts for the inclusion of girls and young women in technology, or her involvement in one of the most striking horizontal cooperation experiences, when Jamaica shared its computerized customs system with Antigua and Barbuda.

Marcos Ozorio de Almeida. From the Secretariat of Logistics and Information Technologies of Brazil, when our network was born, he hosted the 2004 meeting in Brasilia, during which the name Gealc Network was chosen. From 2007 to 2013, he worked at Serpro, in project management and strategic design, and also in that role he hosted other countries in the region so that they could learn about Brazilian experiences. Born in Maputo, Mozambique, he was a technology liaison between his country and governments in Lusophone Africa and was a consultant in Angola, Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau. In 2001, when electronic government used to be the responsibility of small units within state reform units, he provided assistance to the Uruguayan Government.

Diana Parra Silva. Whether as a member of Colombia's online government team or, later on, as part of Uruguay's digital government agency, Agesic, she was always one of the leading actors in regional cooperation. For more than a decade, she worked tirelessly to build the network from within the governments that make up the network. In this regard, her contribution was key in the 2014 Ministerial Meeting in Cartagena de Indias, where the bylaws that she helped to draft were approved. She also had a major role on the “human face” of the Gealc Network. After a period at the National Tax and Customs Directorate (Dirección de Impuestos y Aduanas Nacionales, DIAN) in her native Colombia, she is now a Senior Sector Specialist at the World Bank.

Carol Roach. A cornerstone of the digitalization of the Bahamas for more than 30 years, she has put her knowledge and her ability to inspire and work in teams at the service of the region. A member of the Gealc Network Executive Committee in 2018 and 2019, she boosted the participation of Caribbean countries in that entity and in all the Network’s activities. She brought to her region one of the workshops of the public software project and engaged her country in the replication of good practices. Although she has learned a lot from her colleagues, this passionate swimmer has found a great source of inspiration in her family, especially in her mother, from whom she learned the joy of music and reading, and in her sister, one of her models in public service.
Promoters

Mike Mora. He is one of the visible faces of the GEALC Network, but also one of the invisible hands behind a great deal of what is done, and one of the brains that collaborate in what is planned. An OAS Specialist in the Department for Effective Public Management of the Secretariat for Hemispheric Affairs since 2007, he represents the Technical Secretariat of the GEALC Network from that institutional framework. His career portfolio includes Digital Government, Open Government, Data, Artificial Intelligence and Cadastral Registry. He has a degree in International Relations obtained in Colombia and a Master’s Degree in Conflict Resolution and International Peace from the American University in Washington DC. When he takes off his business suit, he goes back and forth between playing soccer and baseball.

Ben Petrazzini. His approach was key to providing resources to the Network when there was not even a sketch of what it would later become. His perseverance to support the first activities, to incorporate the research component, and his “people skills” did the rest. He is now retired, and during his time with the GEALC Network he was Director of the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (Instituto de Conectividad en las Américas, ICA) and Senior Specialist at the IDRC. Previously, he had been Policy Advisor to the General Secretariat of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in Geneva. He holds a Doctorate in Communications from the University of California, San Diego. He was Professor at the University of Science and Technology in Hong Kong and at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Miguel Porrúa. With a great talent for combining efficiency with human charm, he has always been the driving force behind the construction of the Network. Now at the IDB, where he coordinates the Digital Cluster, and before that at the OAS, he was the one who devised the first meeting that gave rise to the GEALC Network. Asturian by birth and Latin American by heart, he has over 25 years of professional experience in both the public and private sectors. Prior to his time at the OAS, he had worked for the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo, AECID) and for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In 2019, Apolitical listed him among the world’s 100 most influential people on digital government.
The team

Led by **Roberto López**, a Specialist in Public Policy and Communication who has been its Manager since 2005, a great team of people made possible the construction and operation of the GEALC Network during these 20 years. Sometimes the support came from the Technical Secretariat, managed by the OAS, which appointed specific members of its staff, such as Ricardo Lesperance, Helena Fonseca, Daniela Paoli or Lina Marmolejo. Other times the same happened with the IDB as the driving force, which contributed with the work of Darío Kagelmacher, Florencia Cabral or Florencia Baudino, not to mention the many IDB specialists who provided support in their fields of expertise. Occasionally there were also interns such as Macarena Zunini or liaison officers such as Kateila Gómez, Yudy Méndez, Christian Mesa, Iris Palma or Luis Santiago. In short, starting with Eduardo Pino, who coordinated the first months of activities, we could include dozens of consultants, interpreters, designers, and technical and logistical service providers, but the list would be endless.
In addition to the members of the GEALC Network, there have always been friends from other entities, or from the sponsoring entities themselves, who have always been on hand to add value throughout these two decades. Many of them carry the particle “ex” before their position title, since they served during the consolidation of the Network. As the years are 20, we mention 20 names, but the list could take several pages. From the dozens of speakers at our events, from countries on several continents, to the dozens of people who joined us from the Republic of Korea for our meetings or the technical visits of excelGOB award winners.
• **Mike Bracken**, first Government Chief Data Officer of the United Kingdom.
• **Elisa Calza**, Innovation Expert, ECLAC.
• **Kevin Casas**, ex Secretary of Political Affairs, OAS.
• **Antoine Chevrier**, ex Chief Innovations and Partnerships for Development, SEDI.
• **Christine Desloges**, ex Chief Strategist Transformation, Treasury Board, Canada.
• **Sheyla Donovan**, Program Leader, Inter-American Agency for Cooperation and Development, OAS.
• **Elsa Estévez**, Program Officer, United Nations.
• **Luciana García**, Integration and Trade Lead Specialist, IDB.
• **Martin Hilbert**, ex Economic Affairs Officer, United Nations.
• **Orlando Masón**, ex Senior Specialist, Trade Unit, OAS.
• **Fernando Perini**, Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada.
• **Alfonso Quiñónez**, ex Executive Secretary for Integral Development (SEDI).
• **Jonas Rabinovich**, Senior E-Government Advisor, Undesa.
• **Ana María Rodríguez**, ex Manager of Institutions for Development.
• **Fabrizio Scrollini**, ex Coordinator, ILDA.
• **Siim Sikkut**, ex CIO of the Estonian Government.
• **José Luis Tesoro**, ex Academic Coordinator RIF-GE/COLAM, Argentina.
• **María Fernanda Trigo**, Director of the Department for Effective Public Management, OAS.
• **Bárbara Ubaldi**, Open and Innovative Government Division Lead, OECD.
• **Pablo Valentí** (QEPD), eGov Management Lead Specialist, IDB.