E-Development in Bangladesh

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INTRODUCTION

Numerous factors, like political stability, physical infrastructure, basic healthcare, and so forth influence the extent and speed of social and economic development. There is no suggestion that ICT can eliminate the need for these or offer a panacea for all development problems. But detail analyses of experience around the world reveal ample evidence that, if used in the right way and for the right purposes, ICT can have a dramatic impact on achieving specific socio-economic development goals, as well as, play a key role in broader national development strategies. The real benefits lie not in the provision of technology rather in its application to create powerful socio-economic networks by drastically improving communication and the exchange of information (Vulkan, 1999).

Recent developments in the fields of communications and information technology are indeed revolutionary in nature. Information and knowledge are expanding in quantity and accessibility. In many fields, future decision-makers will be presented with unprecedented new tools for development. In such fields as agriculture, health, education, human resources and environmental management, or transport and business development, the consequences could be really quite revolutionary. Communications and information technology have enormous potential, especially for developing countries, and in furthering sustainable development (Hamelink, 1997).

ICTs have therefore brought about a new hope for the developing world. Many of these countries continue to labor in the agricultural age and their economic development is thus restricted and unable to move on and catch up with the developed world. Most developing nations have also been unable to industrialize their economies leading to greater impoverishment and dependence. In this context, the very prospect of "leapfrogging" the traditional stages and cycles of progress, is seen as revolutionary. Telemedicine, distance education, wireless applications, the use of the Internet for a wide variety of critical information dissemination tasks—hold the promise of overcoming fundamental barriers of infrastructure which have plagued the developing world (Mody, 1999).

BACKGROUND

In examining the use of ICTs for development between 1995-1997 conducted by the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD), the Working Group on IT and Development noted that despite the positive impacts experienced in the industrialized countries and certain sectors of many developing countries, evidence showed that there were many people, especially in the least developed countries whose lives had been barely touched by ICTs.

In this context, Mansell and Wehn (1998, p. 6) raise some crucial questions, which should be urgently addressed by the political leaders and citizens of the developing world:

Are the benefits of the increasingly widespread, albeit uneven, diffusion and application of these technologies outweighing the risks for developing countries? Are the stakeholders in developing countries taking appropriate measures to minimize the risks of social and economic exclusion that could be associated with these revolutionary technologies?

ICT has changed the course of development in the Asia-Pacific region. It has, however, not progressed at the same pace of change and progress across all countries. Connectivity, infrastructure, human capacity and knowledge creation and exchange, underpinned by cohesive national e-strategies fed into national development plans remain a daunting challenge, with some countries seizing the opportunities for enhanced development provided by ICT, better than others. Efforts are needed to level playing fields and encourage strategic and effective use of ICT to further human development and help eradicate poverty.

VISION

Bangladesh seeks to build an ICT-driven nation comprised of a knowledge-based society by 2006. To meet this overall vision, the nation must develop a country-wide ICT infrastructure to give all Bangladeshis access to information. This will empower citizens, enhance demo-

cratic values and promote sustainable economic development. The infrastructure will be used for human resources development, governance, e-commerce, banking and public utilities, among other functions. A National ICT Task Force, headed by the Prime Minister, has been formed to help Bangladesh realize its established vision. (The World Bank & Centre for Advanced Studies, 1998).

NATIONAL POLICIES

The Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB) will shift from its role as a service provider to an infrastructure provider for telecommunication service providers and ISPs. The BTTB will work to make use of under-utilised resources of other public utility sectors (e.g., gas, railways). Such resources may include land, radio towers, power pylons, cable ducts, etc. Establishing the national Internet access platform must not affect the functioning of the present telephone network. Increased teledensity is essential, and advanced and new technologies must also be introduced in all areas. A national high-speed backbone and high-speed gateway facilities will be established to facilitate the installation of ISPs. Telecommunications facilities will be made available to all parts of society and at an affordable cost, and Internet-access will be provided to educational institutions and libraries. The country will promote the launch of cyber kiosks in all post offices and similar facilities.

To meet growing demands, infrastructure will be expanded immediately in the public and private sectors, and will reach out into rural and under-served areas. Liberalization of telecommunications and little or no customs duties will facilitate the construction of this infrastructure. As cellular mobile phones are increasingly used for functions such as emailing, customs duties on these items should also be lowered.

CURRENT STATUS OF THE ICT SECTOR IN BANGLADESH

Overview of the ICT Sector in Bangladesh

ICT infrastructure encompasses the transmission, storage, processing, and display of voice, data and images. This includes devices ranging from cameras and compact disks to mobile phones and computers. Depending on the requirements, a connected ICT infrastructure may be wired, wireless, automated, manual, or a combination of all. At present, connectivity requirements in Bangladesh are still relatively basic, with public access to telephones among the most inadequate in South Asia. The Public Switched Telecommunications Network (PSTN), the backbone of any ICT infrastructure, remains restricted to parts of Dhaka and major towns, with limited penetration in rural areas. The present state of ICT infrastructure does not include even the most basic services and information on an institutional level, and while poor legislation is the cause, the absence of public awareness to the benefits of such services and information has allowed this situation to prevail. The mobile sector is developing rapidly, primarily as a substitute for people who do not have a fixed line. The majority of these users are restricted to voice communication and some peripheral data services, and do not have universal access to the fixed line network (Kayani & Dymond, 1997).

Regulatory Framework

Although the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MOPT) officially assumed this role in 1995, Bangladesh did not have a regulated Telecom sector until the introduction of the TRC Act in July 2001. The National Telecommunications Policy was passed in 1998, before which The Telegraph Act (1885) and Wireless Act (1933) had been the only governing tools in the sector. However, the BTTB has effectively continued to perform the role of regulator, preventing any significant reforms from taking place in the sector and preventing the growth of the competitive private sector.

Universal Access

In 1999, Bangladesh numbered among the nations with the lowest teledensity ratings in the Asia Pacific region. At 0.5 %, Bangladesh fares poorly against an average of 8.5% teledensity in Asia Pacific, and 2.8% in South Asia. Although there are no actual measures of access to telephone (as opposed to teledensity) in Bangladesh, a vast majority has little access to affordable and reliable telephony services, and/or access is restricted to basic voice services.

Fixed Network Development

Within Bangladesh, there are currently only 600,000-fixed line connections, with waiting lists for new lines exceeding several years. As the only major provider of fixed network services at present, the BTTB lacks the necessary resources, incentives and framework for aggressive network expansion. This lack of connectivity has necessarily excluded Bangladesh from the global information revolution and its accompanying benefits.