Role of ICT in Establishing E-Government System for Disadvantaged Communities

Hakikur Rahman
Sustainable Development Networking Programme, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) are playing an increasingly vital role in the daily lives of all communities by revolutionizing their working procedures and rules of governance. ICTs offer a unique opportunity for governing elite to overcome the crisis of representative democracy, as ICT and the Internet empower civil society to play its role more effectively and facilitate the performance of governments' main function-serving the people who elect them (Misnikov, 2003). In the realm of government, ICT applications are promising to enhance the delivery of public goods and services to common people not only by improving the process and management of government, but also by redefining the age-old traditional concepts.

Community networking groups and local government authorities are well placed to campaign for greater inclusion for all members of the community in the information society. Possible areas to target include the provision of technology at low or no cost to groups through community technology centres or out of hours school access. There are many possibilities and local government must take a significant role in these activities (Young, 2000).

Information society is based on the effective use and easy access of information and knowledge, while ICT for development (or ICTD) is not restricted to technology itself but focusing on manifold development and diverse manifestations for the people to improve their well-being. ICTD has deep roots in governance, is part of governance and has effects on governance patters and practices at both central and local level.

By recognizing these facts, UNDP focuses on technologies to end poverty at WSIS Cyber Summit 2003, and emphasizes on ways that new technologies can help lift more than one billion people out of extreme poverty (UNDP, 2003). Apart from the four Asian IT giants (Korea, Rep., Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, China, and Japan), most of the Asian countries have fallen under the "low access" category of the Digital Access Index. This has also been referred in the WSIS Cyber Summit 2003, until now, limited infrastructure has often been regarded as the main barrier to bridging the digital divide (ITU, 2003). Among the countries with ICT spending as share of their GDP, Sweden, UK, The Netherlands, Denmark, and France (8.63, 7.97, 7.39, 7.19, and 6.57% respectively during 1992-2001) remain at the top (Daveri, 2002, p. 9), while countries like Bangladesh, Greece, Mexico, Niger, and many more remain at the bottom (EC, 2001; ITU, 2003b; Miller, 2001; Piatkowski, 2002). In a similar research it has been found that in terms of average share of ICT spending GDP, New Zealand, Sweden, Australia, USA, and UK (9.3, 8.4, 8.1, 8.1, and 7.8% respectively during 1992-1999) were among the highest (Pohjola, 2002, p. 7), though most of the countries in the Asian and African regions remain below the average of 5%. The disadvantaged communities in the countries staying below average in ICT spending seem to be lagging in forming appropriate information-based economy and eventually fall behind in achieving proper e-government system.

The e-government system in those countries need to enhance access to and delivery of government services to benefit people, help strengthen government's drive toward effective governance and increased transparency, and better management of the country's social and economic resources for development. The key to e-government is the establishment of a long-term dynamic strategy to fulfill the citizen needs by transforming internal operations. E-government should result in the efficiency and swift delivery and services to citizens, business, government employees and agencies. For citizens and businesses, e-government seems the simplification of procedures and streamlining of different approval processes, while for government employees and agencies, it means the facilitation of cross-agency coordination and collaboration to ensure appropriate and timely decision-making.

Thus, e-government demands transformation of government procedures and redefining the process of working with people and activities relating to people. The outcome would be a societal, organizational, and technological change for the government and to its people, with IT as an enabling factor. E-government should concentrate on more efficient delivery of public services, better management of financial, human and public resources and goods at all levels of government, in particular at local level, under conditions of sustainability, participation, interoperability, increased effectiveness and transparency (EU, 2002).

ICT brings pertinent sides more closely by prioritizing partnerships between the state, business and civil society. A few East European countries have became economically liberal with the high level of foreign direct investment per capita and at the same time became ICT-advanced regional leaders in terms of economic reform. These countries also present the region's most vivid examples of partnerships and collaboration. They have clearly manifested the importance of the public-private partnerships, transparent bottom-up strategies, involvement of all stakeholders, total governmental support, capturing economic opportunities, and enabling electronic mediated businesses, responding to the challenges of globalization.

BACKGROUND

Electronic government refers to public sector use of the Internet and other digital devices to deliver services and information. As the e-government industry expands worldwide, the complexity and specificity of online services continues to develop. Many nations have sites devoted specifically to e-government, on which they present new initiatives as well as offer listings of services available online. For example, Taiwan, Singapore, and the United States have highly developed portals, which serve as gateways to a plethora to a plethora of government services as well as directories to other specific government sites (West, 2004).

Definitions of e-government range from "the use of IT to free movement of information to overcome the physical bounds of traditional and physical-based systems" to "use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees." The common theme behind these definitions is that e-government involves the automation or computerization of existing paper-based procedures that will prompt new styles of leadership, new ways of debating and deciding strategies, new ways of transacting business, new ways of listening to citizens and communities, and new ways of organizing and delivering information (Pascual, 2003). E-government is a sub-set of the broader phenomenon of e-governance, and can be understand as the application of information technology's tools and techniques to the workings of government for the workings of government for the benefit of its "customers"—citizens and businesses—as well as for itself (Scacco, 2003).

With the proliferation of easy-to-use Internet and Web technology, many federal, state and local governments now provide the necessary instructions and forms for specific services. This facilitates citizens with direct interaction with the desired government service. However, this first phase of digital government efforts has resulted in a fragmented conglomeration of services and information sources (Chun, Atluri, & Adam 2002).

In ways, governance systems are not always neutral to ICTs; they may sometime support or sometime obstruct the application of ICTs for development. The era of the global information society, as brought about by the technological advancement and globalization in trade and economy may create challenges to the society, restrict the development of grass-roots communities; contests the business accomplishment and create barrier to the professional development if congenial policies have not been adopted by the government.

Governance, participation, and inclusion stand to benefit from the networking opportunities and access to relevant knowledge across distances. ICT can finally bridge local, regional and central governments, although it is difficult to separate the work of central government from overall governance practices. If a common platform of e-governance may be initiated, it does not matter much whether the central government provides nation-wide services or a grass-roots telecenter in a remote area services local villagers.

However, the central government need to review regularly its citizen services, retaining only those that are a clear public good, while outsourcing (whether fully or partially) to the civil society and private sector those that are too expensive or difficult for the government to administer or that would simply be better and faster delivered by non-governmental organizations.

Aims of E-Government

The aim of the e-government policy is to set the enabling framework for the government administration to effectively and efficiently utilize ICT opportunities and to guide the forward move in the right ICT direction along an accelerated path in contributing towards the economic and social upliftment of the nation. It will enable the citizen to be a beneficiary in the global information economy and would create the framework for an e-society to support their economic, learning, and personal needs (e-Sri Lanka, 2003).

E-government may be set to accomplish the following goals that move beyond mere efficiency of government processes to that of overall reform and development:

- Better business environment
    - Technology is a proven catalyst in increasing productivity and economic growth, especially in rural and underserved communities (Konrad, 2002) (remote and disadvantaged). The use of