DEVELOPMENT ASPECT OF ICT AND INTERNET IN BANGLADESH AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF DOT FORCE REPORT ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

In the developing countries information has not been considered as a basic need during last few decades. Now, initiatives are being taken by the government, NGO’s, donor agencies and even private agents. The DOT Force (The Digital Opportunity Task Force) report - Digital Opportunities for All: Meeting the Challenge suggests that when ICT is wisely applied, it offers enormous opportunities to narrow social and economic inequalities and support sustainable local wealth creation, and thus help to achieve the broader development goals that the international community has set. The ICT can play a vital role in developing countries like Bangladesh for development in the priority sectors like agriculture, education, health and infrastructure. The efforts are being hindered due to lack of strong and genuine political commitment at the national level to share the expertise and knowledge in a more human way and not the corporate way. Rather keeping all the backwardness, ICT is spreading in Bangladesh and a very good number of initiatives that aimed to bridge digital divide gap and share the resources & knowledge through regional cooperation have been advanced. ICTDP'B (Information Communication & Technology Development Program, Bangladesh) established with the vision to build Digital Network through Rural based Telecenters for Education & Information service based on internet on Agriculture, Health, Social, Education. The two main programs of the project are BDHealthInfo for Health sector and womenBD.com for the women community of the society. Building a virtual approach through regional co-operation is the main force of the initiatives.

ICT IS SPREADING IN BANGLADESH

The Information Communication Technology (ICT) is spreading rapidly in Bangladesh as it is in the rest of the world. While the beneficiary groups in Bangladesh are, almost entirely, restricted to metropolitan areas and particularly in Dhaka, the capital city of the country, it is more than likely that demand for the ICT with other services like Internet will eventually arise throughout the entire country. Considering this aspect there are many apprehensions from the development partners, policy makers & others that if the ability to access and the quality of capacity building is increased, ICT can play an important role for the social and economic development in Bangladesh.

ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES

The ability to access the Internet is one of the most important factors in the operation of ICT today. The poor Tele-density (Only 5 Telephone for 1000 people) creates the main hinders of the Internet connectivity in Bangladesh. The higher Govt. fees & bureaucratic long procedure and bribe (Illegal fees / Charge) keep people away from getting telephone connections. Thus
telephone has become a luxury item not an "essential item". Moreover, the Tele-density at the rural areas is extremely worst. Simultaneously, the charge of ISP is also too high for the general users. The social demand of Internet connectivity is mainly obstructed by the poor telecommunication infrastructure.

RELEVANT & LOCAL CONTENT

Like many other developing countries, Bangladesh is facing acute shortage of relevant & local content for the users. In India, a good number of ICT based projects are running successfully in the rural areas with local contents and information. Users in general perceive the Internet as a source of information and entertainment. We need to strengthen the local content, adaptation (capacity building) & dissemination process in Bangladesh and technical support to access and application of ICT.

EDUCATION AND THE ICT

To bridge the "digital divide gap", more specifically the "ICT Gap", Bangladesh needs to improve the capacity of their workforces. This includes improving Internet access and educational offerings in schools and colleges, creating digital libraries for universities, and promoting professional training institutes.

Education is probably the most important issue that effects the ability to benefit from technology. In Bangladesh, the technical education sector, while experiencing some growth between 1980 – 2000, nevertheless failed to provide the numbers and kinds of personnel required for economic development. Most academic training also failed to equip its recipients with marketable professional skills. The faculty members, particularly in the government colleges and universities were usually well qualified, but research facilities were limited. Specially, ICT is being ignored to combine and adopt with the existing curriculum.

VICIOUS CIRCLE OF BARRIERS & LACKING

The Digital Divide gap is narrowing in developed countries but in developing countries like Bangladesh, the gap is widening. A wide community of people has a very limited access to the Internet and reasons behind the scene may be identified as Access to the Technology, Economic Barriers, Literacy Barrier, Language Barrier, Lack of Local & Social Issues in the Net, Social & Cultural Environment, Lack of Education, Fear of Technology use, Economic Condition, Working Environment and Professional Need Assessment.

This Vicious Circle of different barriers and lacking can be eliminated and Internet can be actively promoted to bring in larger and more diverse sections of community to discuss issues of common interest, especially with regard to creatively tackling the critical digital divide issue of the country. Bangladesh need to close the "ICT gap" by effectively building a domestic Internet economy and promoting online transferable capabilities for the professional groups, academician, student, consumer, business ( automation, e-commerce ), NGO's and government sectors ( e-governance ).

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT & ICT AND DOT FORCE REPORT

According to The DOT Force ( The Digital Opportunity Task Force ) report - Digital Opportunities for All: Meeting the Challenge, when ICT is wisely applied, it offers enormous opportunities to narrow social and economic inequalities and support sustainable local wealth creation, and thus help to achieve the broader development goals that the international community has set. ICT cannot of course
act as a panacea for all development problems, but can dramatically improve communication and exchange of information, and create powerful social and economic networks, which in turn provide the basis for major advances in development.

By enabling these new networks to collect and share local knowledge and information, ICT can provide new and more efficient methods of production, bring previously unattainable markets within the reach of local producers, improve the delivery of government services, and increase access to basic social goods and services.

ICT can also help to ignite a virtuous circle of sustainable development. But misapplied, they can result in marginalisation of the poor and the unconnected. All stakeholders—governments and their citizens, business, international organizations, civil society groups and individuals need to work together towards achieving real change.

Ensuring the participation of local communities is essential if ICT development is to flourish on a global scale and the fruits of the networked economy and society are to be reaped by rich and poor alike. The establishment of administrative and economic systems based on predictable and transparent rules, most especially good governance, which promote free development of ICT, is the key to success. The DOT Force also recognizes that a rapid response to the so-called "digital divide" in accordance with the rapid pace of ICT innovation is essential, and reaffirms the need for a multi-faceted and multi-layered effort by all stakeholders.

**THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES**

The international community has identified seven "International Development Goals" (IDGs) that are at the heart of the fight against poverty and the struggle to create opportunity, prosperity, health, safety and empowerment for all the world's people, especially the poorest and traditionally marginalized groups. The IDGs are:

- Reduce the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by half between 1990 and 2015.
- Enroll all children in primary school by 2015
- Make progress toward gender equality and empowering women by eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005
- Reduce infant and child mortality rates by two-thirds between 1990 and 2015
- Reduce maternal mortality ratios by three-quarters between 1990 and 2015
- Provide access for all who need reproductive health services by 2015
- Implement national strategies for sustainable development by 2005 so as to reverse the loss of environmental resources by 2015

**ICT, SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT & DOT FORCE ANALYSIS**

Harnessing the power of information and communication technologies (ICT) can contribute substantially to realizing every one of these goals; either directly (e.g. through greater availability of health and
reproductive information, training of medical personnel and teachers, giving opportunity and voice to women, expanding access to education and training) Creating digital opportunities is not something that happens after addressing the "core" development challenges; it is a key component of addressing those challenges in the 21st century.

**SHARING DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES OF ICT**

The developing countries as well as the international development community remain skeptical or unaware of ICT’s role in promoting development. The experiences of successful countries and initiatives need to be shared and adapted to local needs. In many areas, properly designed, adapted and implemented ICT solutions have significantly enhanced local efforts to improve the delivery of public and private goods and services through the automation, streamlining, rationalization and monitoring of repetitive tasks and improve tracking and monitoring in delivery. Corruption has been reduced and development stakeholders' actions have been made more transparent reducing leakage and cutting costs. ICT have also brought forward clear "development opportunities" through its direct use in addressing specific development goals such as health, education and the environment.

Cost-effective, country-differentiated and empowerment-oriented solutions are now available to combine the pursuit of a more equal access to information and knowledge with acceleration in the fight against poverty on a global scale. Wherever and whenever such solutions have successfully been implemented, the international community should be encouraged to consider whether such success is (1) replicable (in the same country or region), (2) transportable (to other geographical, social and economic environments), and (3) scalable (within a country, a region or globally). In this respect, the dissemination and exchange of best practices is particularly important. However, local and international efforts should be stimulated and supported to identify, improve and disseminate new cost-effective & filed tested ways of accessing & exchanging information & Knowledge.

**STRATEGIC VISION FOR BANGLADESH**

Bangladesh needs clear strategies to manage the complexity of the challenge of creating digital opportunities for its people. The most important, and in many cases most difficult, decisions and actions will have to be taken by govt. and communities themselves, to create the environment, mobilize the consensus, and set the priorities that will shape Bangladesh's path to digital opportunity. At the same time, the international community (governments, private sector, non-profit sector, international organizations) can and must play a critical role, mobilizing resources, building partnerships, increasing coordination, extending markets sharing innovations.

**DOT FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Digital Opportunity Task Force, structured in a way that affirms the importance of these multidimensional partnerships, calls for an enhanced and coordinated global effort to build digital opportunity for all, to extend the power and promise of the digital revolution to all parts of the globe and all segments of society, to help the poorest help themselves to create richer and fuller lives that express and affirm their own distinctiveness in an increasingly interconnected global village.

In the light of the considerations presented by DOT Force some priority actions have already identified.

2. Improve Connectivity, Increase Access and Lower Costs

3. Enhance Human Capacity Development, Knowledge Creation and Sharing

4. Foster Enterprise and Entrepreneurship for Sustainable Economic Development

5. Establish and Support Universal Participation in Addressing New International Policy and Technical Issues raised by the Internet and ICT.

6. Establish and support Dedicated Initiatives for the ICT Inclusion of the Least Developed Countries.

7. Promote ICT for Health Care and in Support against HIV/AIDS and Other Infectious and Communicable Diseases.

8. National and International Effort to Support Local Content and Applications Creation

9. Prioritize ICT in G8 and Other Development Assistance Policies and Programs and Enhance Coordination of Multilateral Initiatives

INTERNET & BRIDGING ICT GAP

Interest can play a key role in bridging ICT gap in Bangladesh in respect of sustainable development and promotion of digital opportunities. If the development partners (Local, International and Multi-national) take necessary steps to work for ICT based health, education & social development programs with emphasis of the use of interest, a good number of barriers might be eliminated which are hindering the development of ICT in Bangladesh, like in many other developing countries.

To achieve these goals, some have asked for sufficient support from the G8 countries. Special focus should also be given on the 9 point recommendations of the DOT Force report.

BDHEALTHINFO – A LOCAL ENDEAVOR FOR HEALTH WORKERS

BDHealthInfo is a Bangladesh initiative working as a cooperative network for organizations & individuals working in health sector with the vision to Bridge the Digital Divide Gap in Bangladesh. The project is a joint endeavor of ICTDP’B & EngenderHealth, Bangladesh. It aims to improve access to reliable and relevant information for health service professionals. It will also create opportunity to bring changes in the professional life.

BDHealthInfo will establish a Digital Platform Network and ICT system for local health workers to make them aware of the Internet resources available in the web and ensure accessibility in the net. Support service for sharing ICT based services and knowledge will also be facilitated.

BDHealthInfo is being set in collaboration with local and international partners for successful implementation and sharing knowledge & expertise. It will bridge the gap between the sources of information and beneficiary group at the remote areas of the country.

The BDHealthInfo network will also integrate other Internet based social services for the rural & sub-urban community as Community Technology Center.

Since promoting the initiative, BDHealthInfo is still struggling for finance and technological support from the local and international development partners.
TURN THE VICIOUS CYCLE INTO VIRTUOUS CYCLE OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

We should address the priority sectors like Education, Agriculture and Health for promoting ICT in Bangladesh. Avoiding further delay we can share xperience of other developing countries that have addressed some successful models like nLogue of India, Tele Centers of Brazil or SAHealthInfo of South Africa and etc.

Only inspiring the need based and replicable model programs will open new opportunities & give the scope to the entrepreneurs to change the direction and turn the existing vicious cycle to virtuous cycle.

BANGLADESH IS IN MOTION

Notwithstanding the disappointments of our ICT success history, some initiatives have already been taken by Learn Foundation in Sylhet, BDHealthInfo, ICTDP'B, womenBD.com, and Unisys, which aimed to bridge the ICT gap and promote ICT based development program. But more programs and projects are expected from the government, development partners and private sectors for introducing the computer education at secondary school level.

We wish Bangladesh have the opportunity and scope to change its image and turn to a ICT based new booming country.

Bio data

Md Shahid Uddin Akbar, from ICTDP'B, (a not-for-profit Initiative of Bangladesh) is working to promote Bridging Digital Divide Gap in Bangladesh. He does charity work & pioneer in campaigning Bridging Digital Divide in Bangladesh. He joined in various voluntary services as a social worker for the last three years. He graduated in 1990 and did his Masters in Finance & Banking at University of Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1991. He worked at different levels of a commercial bank as Credit Analyst and currently manages the overall ICTDP’B activities.

The focus area covers ICT based Multipurpose Learning Center for Sustainable Development, Education / Knowledge & Information Sharing, Continuing Professional Development for Health sector and Women community of the society.

ICTDP’B( Information Communication & Technology Development Program, Bangladesh ), a Bangladeshi initiative working to set up an Digital Platform Network for the ICT deprived rural communities, women empowerment through ICT and Health Service Workers.

Its mission is to promote ICT with massive awareness & support service programs in sharing knowledge, education and health sector and Bridging Digital Divide gap exists in the society. It will be an Internet based Information Service Provider and a Digital Platform / Forum will work for ensuring access in the web.

At present ICTDP’B has three projects:

- ICTDP’B building digital platform network as technology access center to Bridge the digital divide gap exists in the society
- BDHealthInfo for CME / Distance Learning for health workers and Education Program for ICT deprived community ( partner - EngenderHealth, USA ) and
- womenBD.com for women empowerment through using ICT.

Mr. Akbar is now working closely with the government policy makers and planners.

REFERENCES

DOT Force Report