

D.Net supported by CIDA/WBI and ANSA organized a roundtable discussion on “**Use of ICT to Enhance Information, Transparency and Accountability for the Poor: Prospects & Challenges**” on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011 at Meeting Room, BRAC Centre Inn.

Dr Gopakumar K Thampi, Chief Operating Officer, ANSA-South Asia & Global delivered welcome speech and introduced agendas to all. He said, “The aim and challenge of this workshop is to blend social realities with technological possibilities in the context of Bangladesh.”

Dr Ananya Raihan, Executive Director, D.Net discussed on “Setting agenda of ICT and RTI, transparency, accountability in Bangladesh”. In the broad context he said that, the RTI ordinance was converted into an act by parliament approval in 2009. The Information Commission was subsequently established with representatives from the bureaucracy and civil society. From the supply side, the Commission has till date organized several awareness raising events on the RTI law. The Public Administration Training Centre (PATC) has also undertaken RTI trainings for government officials. From the demand side, CSO’s in Bangladesh have taken the initiative to establish the ‘RTI forum’ to monitor progress on the implementation of the law as well as encourage the public to file RTI applications.

The definition of “information” in the RTI law in Bangladesh is very progressive. It includes the use of electronic platforms to store, extract and disseminate information. Relevant government authorities are also obliged to publish their email addresses in websites. In the presentation Dr Ananya focused on the benefits of ICT application, challenges and limitations, demand side, supply side, application of ICTs, entry point for NGOs, role of government and technology providers.



### **Benefits of ICT application**

There are several benefits that can be drawn out of ICT application in public service delivery. These are:

- Improving efficiency of institutions who are bound to provide information
- Better service delivery
- Better mobilization of voices – especially from the margins.
- Better education about rights and governance
- Better accountability and transparency – better opportunity for completing the service delivery and accountability loop

### **Challenges and Limitations**

- Technology is not value neutral and can lead to dangers and misuse. For example, a centralized population register may be used for repression by the government.
- The provisions of the law state that individuals should seek information, not communities or organizations. However the question is does an individual have the courage to seek information on his/her own? CSOs may have to play a role in facilitation but the law doesn’t allow it. This is a current debate.

## **Demand side**

- Illiterate population
- Population don't know how to use ICT with the exception of mobile telecom
- Information illiteracy – people in urban areas don't know how to search for information

## **Supply side**

- Attitude of finding problem to use particular problem, rather finding a technology solution to an existing problem
- Dominance of thinking solutions in a 'computer box' – sometimes community radio can be more useful – have to be open in designing solutions
- Sidelining major systemic issues in governance
- Pilot syndrome – no scaling up so that all citizens are benefited
- Solutions should be cross cutting and feasible to be used in all platforms

He used an example of sugar mills for giving a sense of utility of digitalization.

## **Application of Information Communication Technologies ICTs**

Level 1 – information

Level 2 – interaction

Level 3 – transaction

These levels can be used in the design of ICT in RTI.



### ***Entry point for NGOs***

1. Bringing order at home – NGOs themselves should ask questions – eg. Why wasn't I promoted? They should take necessary steps for promotion.
2. Proactive information disclosure – law requires but also it raises credibility of the department doing it!
3. Facilitating government to deliver services/information
4. Public-private partnership – costs can be covered on behalf of government and plan can be implemented by private organization.

### ***Role of government***

1. Political willingness
2. Identify key institutions for making them compliant with the law
3. Engage governance experts rather than technocrats – technocrats charge for higher costs because they have donors fund.

### ***Technology providers***

1. Priority to ultimate users rather proposing any technology first
2. Priority to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Mr Naimur Rahman, Director, OneWorld South Asia discussed on Innovative Information Infrastructure for Governance & Development (I<sup>3</sup>GD).

He emphasized on

- Capacity constraints of ICT users
- Information illiteracy

These two issues are very pertinent as highlighted by Dr Ananya Raihan.

One thing that OneWorld has been stressing is the importance of Information infrastructure (moving away from the overused and misleading terminology of ICT4D)– can be as simple as painting a wall with statistics – deploy the way that is most appropriate in the context.

### ***How can technology play a role in access to public information?***

Important for citizen to participate equitably in public processes, make informed decisions, challenge the public policies that affect them and hold decision makers and public administrators accountable.

He described a project of One World for understanding to Information Infrastructure Innovation

"People, processes, procedures, tools, facilities, and technology which supports the creation, transport, storage, diffusion and use of information." So in that sense, it can be as simple as painting a wall with statistics – but information and communication technologies do play an important role creating a robust information infrastructure for development and public accountability.

In OneWorld anchored innovations, ICT has been leveraged innovatively to enable non-intermediated access of public information, directly by the poor and disadvantaged men and women to obtain information on

- (i) rights and entitlements enshrined under statute and legal provisions; and
- (ii) ways and means of exercising these rights by citizen, especially the poor and the marginalised.

Innovative integration of touch-screen computers with internet, graphics based user-interface for easy navigation on the screen, real-time information acquisition and transaction over web-services, text-to-voice transformation capabilities, and field extension of the service through mobility based hand-held devices - allows anyone to use the facility – even by people who cannot read or navigate a typical computer. Enmeshing this innovation with existing administrative process has created an environment for the poor to demand equitable and accountable response from the government system.

That means ICT can and do play an important role in innovating the information infrastructure for public accountability, governance and development.

Mr Venkatesh Nayak, Programme Coordinator, Access to Information Programme, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (*CHRI*) discussed about “Opportunities and limitations of using ICT for accountability of Public Authorities”.

Mr Nayak offered a visual representation of how information was communicated in pre-Ashokan and Ashokan period i.e. around 250 BCE. The new born empire used the latest means of communication available namely, carving the royal edicts on rocky surfaces on hills in rural areas and on pillars in urban centres. The edicts were drafted in the local language and script to make them more accessible to the local populace. However as most of society was unlettered royal officials had a duty to read out aloud the contents of the edicts. These edicts often disclosed state policy, contained lectures on ethics, and preached religious tolerance. The earliest edict on the subcontinent is found in Mahasthan at Bogra in Bangladesh. The edict which is pre-Ashokan identified royal officials who are responsible for carrying out famine relief work. This is one of the earliest recorded instances of proactive disclosure of royal policy. However these edicts fell into disuse because of two reasons- a) the later regimes ignored them and shifted policy and b) people forgot how to read the script and the language. Their decipherment had to wait until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when James Prinsep was able to break the code. This is a real danger that all attempts to use the state of the art ICT must address- obsolescence of technology over time.

## Public Accountability Information Systems (PAIS)

Mr. Nayak offered a glimpse of the portal set up in order to monitor the performance of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act/Scheme implemented in India. This Portal has been set up as part of a public accountability information system established to enable citizen monitoring of performance. Data can be accessed by three categories of users: a) a beneficiary of the scheme; b) a planner cum administrator of the scheme and c) any person who intends to research the efficacy of the implementation of the scheme also known as social audit. This portal also allows for the filing of complaints and grievances about poor or non-performance of the scheme.



### Challenges of this:

- The PAIS will work only if skilled humanpower is available to accurately key in the data from hard copy records;
- A supervisor is required to ensure that the data is accurately entered;
- However the PAIS does not capture expenditure details of fund spent on materials use din the rural development works. According to the law funds spent on materials must not be more than 40% of the total expenditure. In fact most of the corruption

occurs in the spending on materials acquired for the development works;

- Access to the PAIS for ordinary villagers is extremely difficult. All villages do not have Internet access facilities;
- There are very real barriers inhibiting peoples' easy access to the portal such as intermittent power supply, disabilities on account of caste, gender, religion, language, class, political affiliations and educational qualifications.
- The bureaucratic mindset of secrecy is reluctant to throw open the books and records under this scheme.

Dr Gopakumar K Thampi facilitated the “Open discussion and sharing of relevant experiences by participants” session. The Questions and Comments of the session are as below:

*How can information be accessible to disabled groups through initiatives like Jaankari? Also how can women in brothels and their children access this information?*

- DAISY – digital accessible information system is introduced by the Daily Prothom alo but there is an international audio standard. It is not enough to simply translate text to audio. Also Braille technology.
- RTI law in Bangladesh is still not disability friendly

*Are we reinventing the wheel? Why not use existing technologies which are already quite progressive, rather than inventing new ones? For example voice SMS, mail*

- Innovation is necessary
- HSTP – hyper speech transfer protocol, rather than HTTP – recreating the entire protocol. These are applicable for millions of illiterate and disabled people in the country.

*In Bangladesh, the business sector is exempted from the RTI law, NGOs are not.*

- In India this is also the case. But if one takes the number of PPPs taking place, this is a real problem. These agreements enter into billions of rupees and are not in the public domain. Business sector has been successfully arguing so far that there are issues of business confidentiality and therefore should not be in the public domain.
- In Bangladesh if any private sector provides any service on behalf of the government, the law states that these should also be accountable.

- BGMEA in Bangladesh is extremely powerful
- Two methods are used to get information from private sector – one in Africa. If you can prove that the information obtained will affect a right that is entitled of law, you can get it. The second model is in India, where any information about a private body can be obtained via another public authority (?)
- Provision in Bangladesh law: ‘any statutory institution established by and under’ – quite flexible

*Discussion needs to also recognize the business model and how to make it sustainable. Business model means that service is provided for some cost. But these models in the development sector bring in the question of financial sustainability. Examples are there of people giving voluntary contributions, also of people giving money because the opportunity cost is higher! PPPs address this to some extent. LifeLine for example charges a small fee from the farmer. Farmers say they are ready to pay for information. The question here is whether the service provided has an economic return or is it a public service and therefore should be free of cost?*

*Unique identification number – What is the chance that countries other than India will pick it up?*

- Information about individual and privacy issues – how to ensure that its not being used for repression, discriminatory immigration policies, theft, racial profiling?
- UID defines biometrics through 3 categories – face, eyes, fingerprints. Problem lies with eyes because its very costly – Rs. 4.14 for iris registration which means 5 billion rupees for a country like India. The other problem is that IRIS is also completely patented technology and there must be costs involved.
- UID will become compulsory depending on the kinds of services. These UID details will override the RTI law. These initiatives are attuned towards big businesses.

*Are we bridging the divide or digitizing the divide? For example there is a case in India where land records were digitized and sold to real estate developers. The latter used these to hunt down the poor widows who owned large tracts of land and used coercion to dislocate them! Most of CSO engagement in ICT has been partnering with the government but not so much in critiquing, monitoring and inspecting!*

Dr Gopa K Thampi also facilitated the “Discussions and brainstorm on concrete possibilities of collaborations, model adoption, engagement of donor community and next steps” session

### **Key Challenges in terms of Access/Inclusion re. ICTs in RTI**

- RTI depends on information management/records management. This is a challenge for Bangladesh because we do not have a ‘Public Records Act’. RTI serves no purpose if the department says that it doesn’t have the information in the first place!
- Most of the populace are rural based, marginalized and do not have access to technology.
- Mindset of the bureaucracy
- RTI law inaccessible for special needs people - disabled people, autistic, indigenous masses, local dialects, blind & deaf.
  - Solutions – e-text, digital talking books, digital talking drama (dowry law has been translated into several formats using a software),braille, community radio, Braille printing is very costly – some initiatives in South Asia are making it very cost effective
- Non-availability of digital content – content is highly dynamic. As a result it has to remain dynamic. This requires huge investment.
  - Solution - Two kinds of content need to be developed – one is static and the other is dynamic
- Most businesses are competitive who are not interested in sharing or up-scaling an innovative initiative with other businesses. As a result, large scale implementation is not possible
- Designing proactive disclosure has to be made at different levels of government



