

PARTICIPATORY ICT POLICYMAKING FOR POVERTY REDUCTION

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The ICT policymaking exercise in Nepal was one of the six projects in Asia selected for review recently by the Canadian International Development Research Centre's Pan Asia Networking Programme. The Nepal case was especially recognized "for adopting a participatory approach for formulating the country's IT policy and mobilizing people towards its implementation." I had chaired the National IT Strategy Formulation Steering Committee for the preparation of the IT Policy and Strategy Papers. Please permit me to share with you the gist of the participatory policymaking process we adopted in Nepal

In Nepal, to ensure smooth implementation of IT policy, we adopted a participatory process in which the government, private sector and civil society shared a common discussion forum during policy design. In the course of our informal preliminary discussions with the stakeholders—leading IT personalities from the private sector, leaders in the fields of education and telecommunications, and leaders from civil society—we felt that prior to formulating an IT policy, we needed to document the vision and strategies that these leaders in IT and the related fields have in mind.

Furthermore, with the increasing potential of ICT for poverty reduction, which is the principal goal of the national development strategy in Nepal, we felt that time has come to synchronize efforts in the ICT area with the national development strategy by developing the IT strategy papers.

Thanks to the recent innovations in the field of computing and telecommunications, we may finally be able to do away with ignorance and isolation that keep the poor locked away in poverty. However, IT may not be able to play such a role in poverty reduction by mere expenditures in creating the ICT infrastructure. For IT to play its role in the development process, we felt that it would be necessary to move simultaneously in three fronts: (1) to provide universal access to ICT infrastructure at least at the community level, (2) to develop human resources through IT-related education and training opportunities, and (3) to promote IT applications for conducting economic activities, providing social services and delivering government services.

For the preparation of strategy papers covering these three areas of critical importance, we formed six consultative groups on (1) universal access to information, (2) information and communication technology infrastructure development, (3) human resources development, (4) software development and IT-enabled services, (5) electronic commerce, and (6) electronic governance. These six consultative groups consisting of five members each had representation from the private sector, civil society and the government. A leader in the relevant field chaired each consultative group and each group chose its own paper writer. The IT Strategy Formulation Committee under my chairmanship provided overall coordination and guidance to the consultative groups.

Experts of international repute in their fields reviewed the strategy papers after they were completed. The review was aimed primarily at confirming the technical accuracy of the papers. This step was quickly completed after the reviewers found the papers to be sound. All the papers were then published on an Internet website for public review and comment.

After the six strategy papers were completed, these papers were carefully studied to see how the government could help to make these strategies a success. This review exercise produced the first draft of the IT policy. The strategy papers and the draft IT policy were then discussed at a National Stakeholders Workshop. 143 people representing a diversity of groups concerned with ICTs attended the meeting. They ranged from gender specialists and development workers Internet service providers and journalists. The participants broke into six smaller working groups after the opening session; each group focused their discussion on the theme of a strategy paper. The gist of the discussions and recommendations were then reported to all the participants when they met in plenary during the second half of the workshop. The participants were invited at this time to discuss all the six themes.

The workshop, together with the collection of comments received via e-mails responding to the six strategy papers published on the Internet, generated valuable input into finalizing the IT policy. After incorporating their comments, the final draft of the IT policy was then presented to the National IT Task Force, and upon its recommendation, it was submitted to the concerned agency, the Ministry of Science and Technology. Subsequently, the Nepal government approved the IT Policy 2000.

For the implementation phase, the government has formed the National IT Development Council and the National IT Co-ordination Committee with representation from the government, civil society, academia and the private sector. We believe such a process based on the consensus of IT stakeholders would lead to a “goal congruence” among them and thus facilitate the successful development of the IT sector.

To sum up, the process of designing and implementing IT policy and strategy should adopt a participatory approach encompassing the academia, the private sector, civil society and the government. During the formulation of the IT policy and strategy related to the areas of critical importance, the government should follow a participatory process involving the private sector and civil society as well. It is necessary to develop a common perception of the government, the private sector and civil society regarding the vision and the plan of action for the IT sector. Such a process would help towards creating a “goal congruence” among the stakeholders and thus create a “self-coordinating” environment even if the government, the private sector and civil society develop and carry on their IT-related programs independently. Ultimately, such a participatory process would lead to a successful development of the IT sector at a rapid pace.