National Information Policy - Differing approaches

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Introduction

In the new era of information society, it is information that is the most important factor of production and wealth creation. How well an individual, an organization, and an entire society can harness, access, share, and make use of available information will ultimately decide their ability to generate economic growth and to enhance the quality-of-life for all. Several Asian and Pacific countries like Korea, Australia, New Zealand, India and Thailand have already undertaken the transformation to develop a national information policy needed to take full advantage of the opportunities that are on offer.

Behind it all the information policy will depend on the ability to integrate and apply such technologies as computer, telephone, television, electronic mail, on-line retrieval, and other multimedia. They make up what is collectively called information technology or IT or information and communication technology ICT.

Why is a National Information Policy required?

There is a need for proper co-ordination of initiatives and the avoidance of duplication. Nowhere is this approach more likely to produce returns than with information policy, since it cuts across so many different departmental responsibilities. However, the job cannot be left to the market alone, because the market will be unable to guarantee that its investment in information for citizens will meet all of society's needs.

We are dealing with changes that pervade our entire economic, social, cultural and political systems. The inter-relationships between the different systems are such that there is much to be gained from co-ordinated development and much to be lost from fragmentation. Information policy, for example, has a bearing on:

- industrial and commercial competitiveness;
- employment and the creation of high value-added job opportunities;
- lifelong learning and the effectiveness of the education and training system;
- social inclusion and access to services and opportunities;
- healthy living and the effectiveness of the National Health Service;
- the efficiency and effectiveness of public services;
- participation in the democratic process;
- regional development;
- cultural identity and diversity;
- intellectual rights

None of countries mentioned before is covering all the issues above, however, the important question is for the countries in the region to possess visions about the information policy and to carry out whatever is most important for them to begin with.

To harness the full potential of ICT investment for a nation, ICT must be treated as an invaluable tool for government to use in support of various major national policies and development programs.

In sum, ICT can play a pivoted role in particular to support many of the government's policies for better distribution of wealth and opportunity to rural inhabitants; for equal opportunity to personal and corporate development, healthcare and other public services; for conservation of the nation's natural resources and environment; in addition to that of making the country a regional hub for finance, manufacturing and trade, transportation and tourism.

From visions to reality: The keys to success

As underscored, ICT empowers human ability to reason and gain wisdom, to bridge distances and to interact, communicate and work.

ICT not only make what we can do today much more easily, quickly, and efficiently. ICT can also make possible new ways of working, learning, communicating, and solving problems. Generally, ICT can improve the quality of life. In short, ICT empowers us to succeed as a part of the global community in the 21st century.

If the State is to succeed in implementing its major policies to create job opportunities and achieve a more equitable wealth distribution to all regions, or to provide equal opportunity to receiving education, healthcare, and other state services to all, or to conserve and protect the environment and whatever natural resources that remain, the government must act now to redress the grossly imbalance availability of basic telecommunications services.

It is true to say that it costs much more to invest in telephone service among the remote rural villages than in cities and towns, by several to tens of times more. It also yields much less return in direct revenues generated, as would be the case for cities or towns.

However, it is also true that the indirect economic return from rural telephone service (or more precisely, the saving from economic loss incurred by not having telephone services) is much more than the direct revenue generated by a city line. In addition, there are numerous other un-quantifiable but clearly identifiable social benefits derivable from it as well.

Areas of concern for a National Information Policy

Three main areas of concern can be identified for a National Information Policy: connectivity, content and competencies. Each needs to be dealt with in a context.

Connectivity incorporate ideally three areas which are information networks, access and interoperability

For creating the information networks a policy should set out a strategic approach to the development of the nation's information networks. It should provide a framework within which public and private investment can be planned. It should specify the preferred approach to regulation to ensure that the networks operate efficiently and for the public good.

The provision of universal access requires that networks are available as widely as possible in institutions and homes. The policy should specify a strategy to ensure access for key organisations and individuals such as schools, libraries, and those in isolated rural areas. Pricing strategies should not exclude people from network access.

To ensure interoperability one has to focus on the different devices making up the ICT. Given the rapidly changing technological environment, there will be a variety of technologies, networks and platforms that can be used to deliver information, including computers, telephones and digital

television. The policy should include provision to ensure that there are no barriers to the citizen from lack of inter-connectivity between the networks.

Content include the creation of core content, ensuring delivery of the same, protection of the citizen, and provision of free access to core information.

In creating core content for the public good a considerable amount of public information will be needed in an information society. Much of this will require to be provided by public sector institutions working, where necessary, in collaboration with the private sector. The policy should, therefore, set out a strategy that will ensure that public support is available for the development of needed information content.

To ensure effective delivery of content the creation of digital content alone will not be sufficient. Effective delivery over the networks requires the development of appropriate information retrieval aids and navigation tools. Government departments and agencies must look for innovative ways of presenting information to citizens, cutting across institutional boundaries. Training and awareness programmes will be required to ensure target markets are reached efficiently. The policy should indicate how these issues are to be addressed.

Ethical issues like protecting the citizen require regulatory mechanisms. The information policy should address a range of legal and regulatory issues including privacy and data protection, intellectual property rights, censorship or fraudulent use of the networks and legal deposit of intellectual property.

The rapid development of e-commerce will generate further requirements for regulation in the consumer interest. To ensure the rapid take-up that the Government seeks, the e-envoy will need to make issues of consumer confidence a priority.

To have free access to core information a policy will need to cover rights of access to information. Individuals already have rights in some countries to access personal information about themselves and there are some rights of access to local government information. However more work will be needed on securing and safeguarding access free at the point of use to citizenship information that is already in the public domain.

Competencies consist of the development of universal information literacy, the supply of information specialists, and the creation of information strategies for organizations.

To develop universal information literacy effort is required to develop a base level of information literacy for everyone. The policy should set out a strategy for the achievement of this. It should encompass a wide range of skills, including numeracy, literacy, computer and information retrieval skills. It must be delivered at a variety of levels throughout the formal and informal education processes, and it should take advantage of the full range of delivery methods now available, including digital networks.
The National Information Policy must address the need to ensur e that there is an adequate supply of appropriately skilled information specialists to maximise the value of information for individual users and organisations through processes of collection, organisation and dissemination.

Further the National Information Policy should establish a framework to promote information strategies for organizations. Government departments should developing a comprehensive set of information policies to maximize the impact that information can have on consumers and on service managers.

Similar approaches are needed by other publicly funded bodies. Information skills handling should be explicitly identified in any national initiatives designed to improve management and human resources skills.

Countries in Asia and Pacific having built a National Information Policy

It was mentioned earlier that some countries in Asia and the Pacific have experiences in developing a National Information Policy. However, as will be seen from the examples given below not all areas, which can be part of an information policy, have been affected by the countries.
In Australia it was decided to make government resource holdings more visible. A working group was appointed and the group concluded that the information needed to be described in a consistent manner at either a collection level or at a document or object level. The group found that the best metadata attribute set for standard description of government resource holdings is one based on the United States Government Information. The report from the working group recommends that the Australian Archives, in consultation with other agencies as necessary, review guidelines and promulgate procedures for a metadata attribute set based on the US metadata.

In addition Australia ventured into the communications and computer technologies making recommendations for the implications for Australia's future employment and skills. Other areas like technology and the enterprise, education and training provision, Commonwealth cultural policy etc. all became part of the information policy in the 1990ties. For Australia the role and responsibilities of the future lay in the National Information Policy.

In Japan government information administered by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications was first observed on the Internet in the 1990ties. Shortly after various Ministries administered their part of a National Information Policy on the Internet and many issues to be incorporated in a single policy or a set of information policies can be viewed today.

The general conclusion of the many reports on information policies in this region is that agencies can immediately enhance both visibility of and access to government information by making descriptions of resources and documents available on the Internet, directly as Web documents or as records in an agency. However, in order to provide effective, efficient and long term access to the whole of government information, hence further research should be carried out and the findings should then be presented to the Government for endorsement and promulgation.

Why is there a need for developing a National Information Policy?

The transition to information societies and knowledge-driven economies is a global phenomenon. Many of the western countries, USA and Asia & Pacific have created policies to speed the process of transition and some more countries in Asia are in the process of doing so. If other countries are to maintain their competitive position they must not lag further behind.

There are many reasons for thinking of this as a decisive moment in the development of the information society. Many of the Government's initiatives have a significant information element. Failure to get the information right will reduce the impact of individual initiatives. There is much to be gained from a co-ordinated approach to information across the board. A National Information Policy framework will contribute to:

- Modernising government: the agenda for a modern government requires that information flows are managed as effectively as possible within government and between government and citizens and businesses.

? Building a knowledge-driven economy: the planned transformation of industry and commerce will lace a premium on the effective use of information and knowledge.

? A better environment for e-commerce: better co-ordination is needed between Government and industry to gain maximum benefit from existing and proposed programmes. Ambitious targets for electronic transactions with Government will depend on co-ordination across Departments and Agencies.

? Improving educational effectiveness: curriculum developments such as teaching thinking skills will depend for their effectiveness on children and young people having access to the information they will need to support their learning; lifelong learners will need co-ordinated guidance on all the opportunities open to them.

? Avoiding social exclusion: many current information developments could exacerbate social exclusion, further isolating the information have-nots from the rest of society. We need policies to ensure that no one is excluded from the benefits of an inclusive information society.

? Strengthening our cultural identity: technological development offers opportunities to articulate and promote minority cultures. At the same time, the global nature of the cultural communication system puts national cultures under threat.

To follow up procedures on National Information Policy the subsequent series of actions can be formulated:

National Policy on Information
?
Design on a plan of action for the development and operation of information services and systems fully integrated in the country's national development plan
?
Launching of information programmes coordinated and integrated in the plan of action
?
Implementation of information projects at the most appropriate place and date
?
Optimum operation of information services and systems
?
A national policy on information, whether it is a single policy or a set of policies, usually covers the main issues shown above in the field of information.

Conclusion

The challenge to governments, therefore, is the re-thinking of their role, their laws, their rules, their regulations, and their national policies in the Cyberspace era, so that they maximize the driving forces propelling them to exploiting to the fullest potential the positive benefits of the Information Society, while at the same time minimizing the negative, constraining forces that are acting as barriers to frustrate this exploitation.

References

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