Implementation of a Health Information Systems Programme

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E-GOVERNANCE AND ICT: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

In general, developed countries in the world is where Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is in an advanced state, governments in developing countries particularly in the Asia- Pacific region are only in the initial phases of adopting ICT. ICT has demonstrated benefits for governments in developing countries to improve management, information and reporting, streamline the delivery of government services, enhance communication with the citizenry, and serve as a catalyst for empowering citizens to interact with the government. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2001) considers that ICT is a useful tool for developing countries to progress and leapfrog to the applications applied in the developed world**.** The Indian draft report on ICT and Human Development records that in the 21st century there is large growth and diversification of the ICT sector in India particularly in areas of agriculture and in service sectors (UNDP, 2004). The United Nations even has an ICT advisory group with representatives from governments of developing countries and the industry (Singh, 2001).

The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the World Bank group are pursuing the objectives of improving economic conditions by application of information systems and framing policies to accelerate the process of integration of NII (National Information Infrastructure) with GII (Global information Infrastructure), further focusing on strategies to enhance human development. Consensus is almost emerging amongst the developing countries for preparing national strategies to participate effectively in the information society (Bajwa, 2001).

While there are a lot of potential benefits by e-government in terms of supporting public sector reform and poverty reduction, not many examples can be cited in the Asia-Pacific region where these benefits have materialized.

Analysts point out a number of potential benefits and pitfalls of adopting e-government. Heeks (2001), for example, gives many instances of managerial reforms supported by ICT, including improving effectiveness and efficiency of personnel management, parts procurement, accounting, health care, and claiming unemployment benefits. At the same time there are many authors like Salazar, Ranerup, Benjamin and West (2001) who point out that expected benefits are often blocked by managerial and technical difficulties, and insufficient attention to the information needs of communities.

Also in bureaucratic settings that exist in many developing countries with limited technical capacity, authoritarian decision making and strong patron - client relations may fail to produce the hoped for results (Berman and Tettey, 2001). Until there is a demonstrated example of e-government with tangible benefits, it will be difficult to progress (Dutton, 1996). Progress can only be made in delivering the ICT-enabled reforms that can yield many benefits, provided that government officers and people are willing to share information.

ICT IN INDIA

In India**,** the path towards technology-induced development, especially associated with ICT, was given a vent in 1984 under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi. He assumed power and adopted informatization of Indian society as an effective route to development, with a massive programme of computerization launched in the public sectors as well in the commercial undertakings and administrative departments. The computer policy of 1984 gave further thrust to software development by underlining the need for institutional and policy support on a number of fronts (Joseph, 2002). Again in 1986 an explicit policy was announced identifying software as one of the key sectors in India's agenda for export promotion and underlining the importance of an integrated development of software for the domestic and export markets. In the same year, the Department of Education (DoE) established ERNET (Education and Research Network), as one of the earliest Internet projects. These initiatives suggest that a significant beginning had been made in setting new ICT priorities and organizational development in different sectors.

Since the mid-1990's India has also embarked on ICT for development in a rather big way and sought to transform India into what has been termed as "Knowledge

Superpower" (another variant of the Knowledge Society). An IT Taskforce and an IT Action Plan from Planning Commission and MIT respectively are major policy initiatives towards this end. Even though India has been able to establish considerable ICT national capacity in the context of market-oriented globalization, the same cannot be said about India's ICT capacity for addressing pressing needs and demands of the underprivileged sections. It also emerges that the role of individual state leadership in proactively using ICT for development, also tends to strengthen a system of a market economy (Bajwa, 2001). By 1999, a separate Ministry of Information Technology was created and in May 2000 the Information Technology Bill was passed in Indian Parliament to foster widespread use of ICT in the day-to-day lives of the people.

In any major policy initiative that induces a dramatic social change, the state normally is expected to play the role of the initiator, mediator, facilitator and arbitrator. The Indian state has played a major role in the context of ICT for development from the early 1980's at various levels. Even in the networked age, national domestic policy still matters and the policies devised at the centre provided a favourable climate for the states within India to take a proactive role in the growth of ICT industry. Apart from encouraging investments and exports, these policies focus on the key issues of infrastructure, electronic governance, ICT education and providing a facilitating environment for increasing ICT proliferation in the respective states.

ICT INITIATIVES IN ANDHRA PRADESH

Andhra Pradesh (AP) is one such state in India where different ICT initiatives support the desired national policy. MPHS (Multi-Purpose Household Survey), CARD (Computerization of public administration functions), Video conferencing, TWINS (a single window service for integrated services to citizens under the title "e-seva") and APSWAN (A wide area network to connect the secretariat), CICs (Community Information Centres) were given support to progress faster than otherwise would have been the case. In a relatively short period the state had been in the news for its innovative approach to designing and implementing an ICT-enabled strategy for e-governance and as well for bringing about an ICT-enabled social transformation. These different ICT-enabled initiatives were mainly aimed toward poverty alleviation among the poorest areas and in the marginalised in the rural areas (where 80% of the AP population lives), providing them with ICT resources in an attempt to link them to the global information network. Also the State ICT policy emphasises

application and *use* of ICT. The aim is to enable that the common citizen starts using ICT applications in ways that benefit themselves. In short, the Andhra Pradesh government's aim was to enable localised technological learning by using ICT, which will in turn over a period of time provide the potential for ICT innovations and local entrepreneurships to develop.

It is within this broad framework and environment for change through e-governance policy and implementation, that this articles briefly describes an ongoing empirical project called the Health Information Systems Programme (HISP). It relates to the implementation of information systems for improved local control and use of information at district and sub-district levels in the health sector in Andhra Pradesh. This article later describes the challenges that the team faced in sustaining the implementation of HISP in AP.

Keeping the background briefly outlined above as a backdrop and taking in account the state government's priority for health and education in the existing sagging public health care network, the introduction of the HISP in AP was considered timely and appropriate.

CONTEXT FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF HEALTH INFORMATION SYSTEMS PROGRAMME (HISP)

Health Policy in Brief

The initial decades after independence in India saw the launching of many new ventures in the health sector. However, over a period there emerged a complaisance in the Health Department which led to the introduction of a new health policy in 1983. This had a view to promote Preventive, Promotive and Rehabilitative health care and also to shift the focus from medicare to health care and from urban to rural, as 70% of population in India lives in rural areas. Both the Government of India and State government made large investments in the development of Primary Health Centres (PHCs). But their operation and sustainability left much to be desired as staff largely worked in isolation in hierarchical ways with no feedback on information that was collected and collated in huge volumes.

HMIS in India and Andhra Pradesh in Particular

Ranganayakulu Bodavala (2001) in his report on Health Management Information Systems (Vital Statistics) and Geographical Information Systems (GIS)—Structure, Prac-

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