



ASPEN INSTITUTE INDIA

Aide Memoire

The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program and Aspen Institute India jointly convened the **Aspen India/ C&S Fourth Annual Joint Roundtable on Communications Policy** on the topic of e-governance in Goa, India, February 13-15, 2009. The participants subsequently met with high level Indian government officials in New Delhi on February 16, 2009 to share their findings and recommendations.

The Government of India's National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) is visionary, ambitious, practical and detailed. It recognizes the importance of public and private agencies to come together to deliver the full potential of a participative democracy visualized in India's Constitution. Meaningful engagement between citizens and government will also require transparency and innovation at all levels.

The discussion and recommendations below are structured around four 'organizing principles', viz. *Partnerships, Infrastructure, Applications and Reform*.

Partnerships

The Roundtable especially explored the role of public private partnerships in fortifying governance through strategic use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). For long run sustainability, only 'win-win' arrangements, where both sides have incentives and mutually accountability, will suffice. Government agencies dealing with private companies should recognize the potential of "carrot and stick" approaches, not just for private players, but also for creating incentives and accountability within their own staffs as well. The Roundtable suggested that e-gov would expand best if the Government focused its PPP strategies on acceleration rather than for initial funding of e-gov infrastructure, if the Government adopted reforms in procurement policies (see below), and if contracts were consistently enforced for effectiveness and timeliness.

Infrastructure

Multiple Languages: There is a formidable challenge in delivering e-governance services to people in the scores of languages and dialects spoken throughout India. There should be a national level initiative to create a 'translation infrastructure' that can provide multiple language capability to applications and services, irrespective of the language interface used in their creation. Software alone cannot accomplish this, but by using India's strongest asset, its people, a "wiki" style solution is possible. By employing agreed standards which the NeGP already prioritizes, such a common shareable infrastructure and approach could save much time and money for developers of applications for the E-Gov system.

Energy: ICTs can potentially reduce energy costs and improve the quality of environment. By the use of new computer chips and other energy-efficient measures, now commercially available and built to international standards, equipment can be installed in the approximately 100,000 kiosks or Common Service Centres (CSCs) being set up under NeGP to make them more economical and

sustainable in rural areas where power supply is insufficient and unreliable. Additionally, by reducing energy needs, this equipment could make solar energy more viable.

Leveraging current networks: The existing national network of post offices and schools can be leveraged creatively to deliver diverse goods and services in the NeGP by modifying provisions that hinder or prevent public or private agencies from housing these networks.

Applications

The utility and credibility of the e-governance programme requires ready availability of government services in CSCs. Focused measures are necessary for faster development of applications of interest to rural populations - such as mobile finance, education, and entertainment - where demand and interest is high. A polling portal, which elicits responses from the public, could help to identify the nature and size of demand.

Reforming government policies and processes

The role of government extends beyond enabling its many processes for e-governance and using the latter's infrastructure to deliver public services. It should help to create an environment conducive for non-government stakeholders to provide and support the many services of interest to citizens. Government's procurement norms – targeted on securing the lowest price from suppliers - must be brought in line with world best practices to include quality of service. They should include safeguards against delays and breach of promise for private suppliers.

The government could appoint a Countrywide Information Technology Officer to streamline processes and norms within and across the Department of Administrative Reforms and the Ministries of Communications & IT (MOCIT), and Rural Development. The CITO could spur co-ordination and innovation across government and also monitor quality of service, deadlines, etc.

MOCIT should remove existing barriers and anomalies in policies that have hurt the growth of internet and broadband services that citizens will need to access most services.

- Internet Service Providers (ISP) face controls on services like internet telephony, and these services need to be fully deregulated.
- Similarly, ISPs find it difficult and expensive to access existing infrastructure created by BSNL using public funds. Unbundling of local loop is a critical first step.
- The unspent resources of the Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF) are currently available to telecommunications operators setting up rural infrastructure, but not to other players that are contributing to the same effort. USO benefits should be extended to all engaged in building rural infrastructure and bring it in line with CSC goals.

In sum, the Roundtable appreciates the aspirations and first steps that the Government of India and many of the States have already undertaken for e-governance. By pushing forward with modest reforms in communications policy, procurement and PPP policies, and by combining innovative ideas with the creativity

and industry of the Indian people, this laudable effort will be more likely to succeed in the long run.