

Low Cost Sustainability Access

Among many of the workshops that took place at 2008 Internet Governance Forum, Hyderabad, the workshop on "Low Cost Sustainability Access", was organised by Digital Empowerment Foundation and the Internet and Mobile Association of India, on December 5, 2008. The principal objective of the workshop was to provide a focused platform for a multi-stakeholder interactive meet on key areas of accessibility and involve participants from different sectors to discuss and put on table the recommendations. The workshop underlined the need for "low cost and sustainable access" to the rural poor, focusing on "connectivity", "devices", "content", "services", "commerce" and "business", and "policy" and "regulatory" matters

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Participants

The workshop, which was attended by more than 60 key participants, was presided by Mr. R. Chandrasekhar, Special Secretary, Dept of Information Technology (Ministry of Communications & Information Technology, Government of India and

moderated by Mr. Osama Manzar, Founder & Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation, New Delhi, India. The participants came from different backgrounds, representing civil society, corporate entities, international institutions, NGOs and government, were asked to join



one of the four thematic sessions to brainstorm their experiences and ideas.

'Low Cost Sustainability Access is paramount'

"There has been an explosive growth of the Internet. It shows that Internet has a meaning in India. Low Cost Sustainability Access is paramount if we want to talk about reaching the last billion," commented Mr. Chandrasekhar, Special Secretary, Dept of IT, Government of India, who presided the session on Low Cost Sustainability Access. During his speech, he made a picture of connectivity in underdeveloped countries,

giving concrete examples about India and raised interesting questions for the panelists of each group.

Lack of adequate infrastructure

Talking about India, he said that the "Picture in rural areas is bleak", and highlighted the problems that developing countries are facing concerning a lack of adequate infrastructure, a lack of awareness on the benefits of internet, an uncertainty of technology adoption by rural users and power shortages. He said that the advent of low power devices (like low-consuming chips) and the emergence of solar power and other alternative source of energy and power are essential to bridge the digital divide in developing countries.

Focusing on the economic viability of connectivity

In order to make the infrastructure sustainable, the number of users has to be maximised, aggregating the demand and lowering the costs. He said that shared access points, as Internet kiosks, make economic sense

Mr. Chandrasekhar raised the questions of availability of content in local languages and literacy - in languages and in computers - problems in developing countries and asked for short-term solutions to be addressed





Each group composed of 10-15 experts and other attendants were asked to brainstorm recommendations under the framework of "Low Cost Sustainable Access"

to entrepreneurs and to the final users and are thus one of the most viable ways to bring connectivity to the rural areas. "We are looking for a solution at the Base of the Pyramid where the market opportunity is amazingly vast. But at the same time the challenge and supporting infrastructure is pretty bare

bone. The users at this segment are clearly a VFM (Value for Money) market", he declared. Projects based on donor efforts have made a lot for connectivity in the rural areas but are unfortunately not scalable, and economic viability is essential for scalability. He also highlighted that the growing penetration of mobile telephony is another way to reach the masses and bringing them Internet and said that individual connectivity through the mobile is emerging as the preferred manner to provide connectivity to the population at large.

Importance of content
Mr. Chandrasekhar also

noticed that access is not just a question of equipment and there are many other barriers to connectivity. He raised the questions of availability of content in local languages and literacy - in languages and in computers - problems in developing countries and asked for short-term solutions to be addressed. Focusing on the meaning and utility of content for the final users he advocated the creation of services and said that adding value to those services is critical in order to spread Internet, making its access sustainable and beneficial the users.

Finding the right policies to foster Internet usage and connectivity

Finally, Mr. Chandrasekhar focused on regulatory side and said that even if Internet is bringing a lot of opportunities, for education, for example, there is a lack of mechanisms for the providers to give these services, giving the example of the IPR regulations. Regulations must be adapted to take all the benefits of Internet concerning financial inclusion and micro-credit.

II. Content & Services:

The role of content and services in Internet Governance is still an emerging as well as simmering challenge. This group session had to delve on the content and services framework in its technology, device, access, affordability focus.

Recommendations

- >> Standardize the means and medium to meet regional languages like standardisation of keyboards of all vendors;
- >> All citizen services have to be made also available in the mobile platform;
- >> Suggestion to insist on uniformity in formats across different states in the same areas;
- >> Translated content to be made available in regional languages;
- >> Prioritise and support use of open source software;
- >> Services and content has to be made available and accessible to physically challenged (disabled) people.

I. ACCESS, CONNECTIVITY & DEVICES:

The focus of this breakaway session was on areas of accessibility, governance around access, issues in network and connectivity and role of technology devices, gadgets and how all three aspects are critical in "Low Cost Sustainable Access".

Recommendations:

- >> Focus toward providing low cost devices to rural poor with cheaper access cost. These devices have to be multi-functional in order to take the most benefit out of them and have to be low-energy consuming;
- >> Increase the investment

- capacity of end users (micro-credit for example) and promote shared access to lower the costs;
- >> Increase human resource capability in using the devices and connectivity. Rural Empowerment on using of these devices and internet need to be focused;

- >> Focus on open source application and free software in order to lower the software and its upgrade cost;
- >> Awareness on visible improvement in livelihood of end users, to foster the usage of the devices and lower the individual-user cost.

III. Commerce & Business:

Commerce, trade and economic exchange is a critical component in Internet Governance framework. This breakaway session had to focus on why and how economics and trade is vital in governance driven by World Wide Web (WWW) including policy framework, inno-

vation, inclusion, transparency and efficiency drive.

Recommendations

- >> Need for a uniform policy for e-Commerce transactions and sites, including taxes;
- >> Uniform security standards for sites that adopt e-commerce transactions. This has to be

- made in order to improve user confidence and to engage more people to sell their products online;
- >> Low cost / Incentivised access to e-commerce sites and governmental promotion of e-commerce, especially in rural areas;
- >> Creation of Synchronous

e-Commerce models that facilitate following market interactions: Rural >>Rural; Urban >> Rural; Rural >> Urban; and Urban >> Urban transaction models.

IV. Policy & Regulatory Focus:

Policy areas constitute the most significant driving point in Internet Governance system that a country adopts and drives. This session had to delve on the types, pros and cons of having a regulatory friendly governance framework that can facilitate governance in social and

commercial contexts.

Recommendations

- >> Create a corpus fund like USOF (Universal Services Obligation Fund); in which each operator gives a part of its revenue to incentivise the connectivity in underserved areas;
- >> Ability to share and dis-

- tribute unutilised capacities and share infrastructure (for example: in wireless services, tower costs are very high) ;
- >> Right of Way policy;
- >> Demand side policy facilitating long term sustainability;
- >> Integrated or unified license for services for multiple services;

- >> Spectrum regulation should reflect utility or public good.

Thematic Sessions & Recommendations

The thematic sessions were divided into four groups (1. Access, Connectivity & Devices; 2. Content and Services, 3. Commerce and

Business and (4) Policy and Regulatory Focus). Each group composed of 10-15 experts and other attendants were asked to brainstorm recommendations under the framework of "Low Cost

Sustainable Access", and focusing on their sub theme. The sessions were organized in a participatory mode, in order to bring more elements into the debate and enable all the participants to take active part of it.

the decision making process even if some of them require more work to be actionable and to be translated into specific steps, and that home work could be taken by Digital Empowerment Foundation, being the principal organiser.

Conclusions

Post Session presentations, Mr. Chandrasekhar delivered his concluding remarks encapsulating the recommendations in one. He said that despite the small span of time, the recommendations were "extremely useful and insightful". He said that many of these recommendations would be plugged into

"This workshop has been a good initiative where the vital issues of internet access, affordability of internet for the common man, especially rural lessons of India, were discussed". - Jatinder Kumar, NIXI (National Internet Exchange of India)

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