

Lanka gearing for E Governance

By Subimal Bhattacharjee

The government has positioned an Information Communication Technology (ICT) roadmap called 'e-Sri Lanka'. This vision has a five-programme strategy in which e-governance is one of the significant areas of focus. To set the ball rolling, there is a high level forum to facilitate a national dialogue and work out the modalities for establishing an institutional authority to plan and implement those initiatives. Simultaneously with the government, industry would also participate in the building of the e-nation. There are concerns in many circles that Sri Lanka has missed the e-island bus to Mauritius but considering the emerging situation in the nation politically and economically, there is a lot the nation will have if ICT is blessed by the government as a major toll of development efforts.

Across the globe, in particular in many developing nations, electronic governance is a popular concept and the most visible area where technology directly reaches the common man. Electronic governance or more commonly referred to as e-governance generally refers to the use of web-based internet applications and other information technologies, combined with processes that implement these technologies, to enhance the access to and delivery of government information and services to the public and other agencies or to bring about improvements in government operations that includes effectiveness, efficiency, service quality and

transformation. The three major focus areas in e-governance are - Government to Citizens (G2C), Government to Business (G2B) and Government to Government/Employees (G2G). Thus e-governance goes far beyond the application of ICT in government functioning.

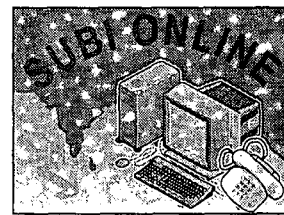
With e-governance bringing in many possibilities, it is imperative to explore the benefits that Sri Lanka can have by bringing in such practices. The flow of necessary government information will be streamlined in the region and people would be able to participate and not be left out. Tourism is another area that could be significantly boosted with the new applications. The ongoing peace efforts should result in more tourists once again back to the country and a modern ICT infrastructure would result in greater flow. Even in the conductance of elections, there could be major strides with e-connectivity for the far-flung areas. Thus, the nation could pioneer efforts towards e-democracy. With a clean election process and system organized in the country, this could be a feature that Sri Lanka could demonstrate to the whole world.

There are many factors that go into making the programme successful. One of the major focus areas should be the creation of the information infrastructure support base. This includes bandwidth connectivity, electricity availability, and delivery centres. Connectivity still being a major problem in the region needs to be addressed and the best way

would be to network the whole island with optical fibres. This network could support all forms of voice and data communications. Equally important would be the availability of low-cost computers. Simputer from India could be a good option here. The software support should also come up simultaneously and availability of localized information in local language should be done on a robust footing. This is an area where a lot of work needs to be done.

Another important factor is people participation. Government efforts should be there to orient the general population to participate in all e-initiatives. This does not include only motivation and publicity drives but lots of ground work in training citizens in the use of computers and offering them incentives in using online services. Community information centers should also be set up at the grassroot level. These have been successfully done on the far-flung North East India where all the 8 states have these centers right at the block level catering on an average to 70 villages. The role of the industry and voluntary organizations should be encouraged to participate in the whole process.

As envisioned in the e-Sri Lanka document, e-governance would involve rapid changes in many areas. One of the major focus areas in the G2C sector will be the creation of fundamental databases that will contain many citizen centric functions like birth, deaths, tax payments and law enforcement. There would also be a database



of citizen data that could be the base for issuing a smart-card based national identity card. A GIS covering the aspects of land registration, survey, census and other statistical data will also form a part of the initiatives. The establishment of multiple levels of G2C delivery points will be undertaken on a priority basis and these would include the community information centers as well as telecentres. There would be a 24-hour call centre where all citizen queries will be answered. On the G2B front the proposal is to establish an interface that will ensure regular co-ordinated interaction between the government and the private sector in the areas of procurement and various daily business and commercial transactions like customs and taxation.

But all this would require a lot of efforts on the part of the government and its officer pool need to work diligently to ensure this transformation. There is no need for reinventing the wheel here. Many nations have successfully implemented various e-governance schemes and some of these successful schemes can be easily replicated in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government should work out bilateral agreements with such nations for implementing those programmes. In the same efforts, the international bodies like UNDP

and The Commonwealth are laying maximum importance on e-governance and various projects could be easily funded from these agencies. Some of the major success stories of e-governance across the world today have started as small pilot projects with seed money from these agencies. India is one of the best destinations for such pursuits. Across the country there are projects to pick up. Thus the community information centre (CIC) project in the North East for basic internet connectivity in the most remote area, the 'E-seva' project in Andhra Pradesh which has made possible for the people of that state to pay all their taxes in one place and at convenient times, the 'BHOOMI' project in Karnataka which takes care of the computerizations of all land records in the state and 'FRIEND' in Kerala which has transformed the whole government machinery for ICT services delivery and 'Gyandoot' in Madhya Pradesh offering distance education via the online network unto the remotest corner needs to be mentioned here. All these projects cover many of the dimensions of the whole gamut of e-governance structure and show that it is possible to transform if the will and the right efforts are there. These projects should be studied in the Sri Lankan context and a need-based structure could be devised for implementation with the active support of the Indian government. The advantages of a Indo-Lankan partnership in this area is mutually beneficial and

these needs to be fomented soon. Already India has agreed to support the e-Sri Lanka project. Apart from India, there are a few other models from other countries that could be encompassed and the 'INFOCID' project in Portugal and the Ghana medical delivery system in rural areas needs to be mentioned here.

Electronic governance could be a boon for the country if it is taken in the right spirit and implemented fast. Today, the environment is conducive for rapid development and the role of ICT in general and e-governance in particular does not miss anybody's attention. The presence of a young, vibrant government is a great advantage, all the youthful ministers understand the value of technology and want dynamic changes in the country. The efforts definitely supplement peace initiatives. But there is also caution; e-governance should not become another election governance, where the leaders would go on lecturing their new-found IT-savviness. But then the people of the nation are active now to see change and they would rather understand that e-governance for them should be electronic governance and not election governance.

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