CWG-Internet: Online Open Consultation (October 2015- January 2016)

"Access to the Internet for Persons with Disabilities and specific needs"

Response by:

Mr. Zakir Syed

Email: zakirbinrehman@yahoo.com

Country: Pakistan

Answers:

1. **What are the different challenges facing persons with disabilities and specific needs (e.g. lack of ICT skill sets etc.) in accessing and using the Internet?**

There could be a number of challenges in terms of access to the internet for persons with disabilities and specific needs. This may include the lack of necessary tools and applications that will facilitate the use of Internet by persons with disabilities thereby creating a special kind of a digital divide. There can possibly be 3 different challenges i.e.

1. No Internet access at all for persons with disabilities and specific needs just like it is for all other people. E.g. no internet infrastructure, non-availability of Internet in a given area.
2. Internet access is available but the necessary tools and applications are not. E.g. screen/website/text readers for visually impaired person, and video captions for deaf, and accessibility features in smart phones, and computers for persons with disabilities.
3. Internet access and the tools/applications are available, but the knowledge and skill to use these tools/applications is not there.

**2. What possible approaches and examples of good practices are available to address these challenges?**

In the given scenario (Internet related public policy issues) technology vendors and software developers have been comping up with technology product that facilitates the access to Internet by persons with disabilities and specific needs. See for example:

- Accessibility features in iPhone/iPad
- Website/text readers for blind and visually impaired persons
- Voice driven commands for those who cannot type

Similarly, encouraging and supporting the development of tools and applications that will facilitate the use of Internet by persons with disabilities and specific needs can be another best practice to address these challenges. Alongside, special training sessions can be arranged to train them use these tools/applications to be able to effectively make use of the Internet.

3. What are the gaps in addressing these challenges and how can these gaps be filled?

As discussed above, the challenge can be of 3 different natures in the given situation i.e. access, tools, and knowledge.
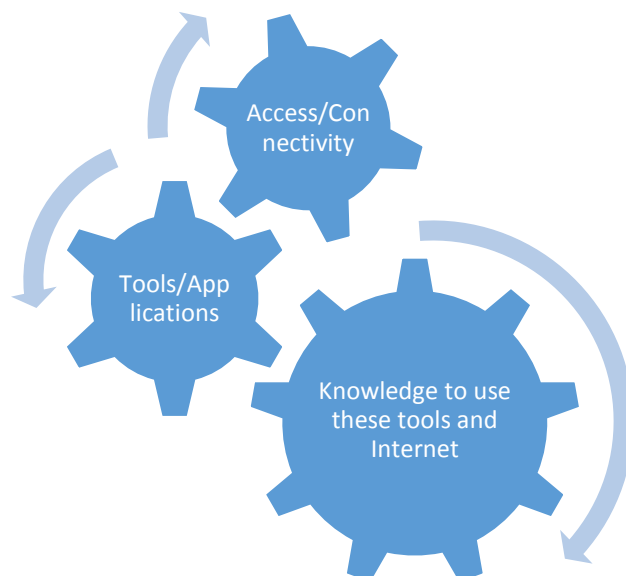
If any of the three fundamentals is missing, it will be challenging for persons with disability and specific needs to access and use Internet. These gaps can be filled by a coordinated effort among the industry stakeholders thereby covering there corresponding area. E.g.

- Telcos/ISPs could facilitate the Access part
- Technology vendors/Software developer could facilitate the development of tools and applications required
- Knowledge firms/ Trainings providers/associations etc could impart trainings

4. What is the role of governments in addressing these challenges and gaps?

Government role is always central when it comes to public policy and in the case of access to Internet by persons with disabilities and specific needs, it obviously is more decisive for the government to facilitate and encourage other stakeholders by providing an enabling environment. Government always has the upper hand and must corroborate industry players to come up with innovative approaches and tools in this regard. This can be done in the shape of subsidies, funding research & development in this area, reducing taxes and duties on tools/software etc that are meant for persons with disabilities and specific needs.

Another important role of the government is to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities and specific needs in the online world from abuse and exploitation.