

Peace Worldwide

WORLD SUMMIT OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Any country's economic success depends largely on the reliability of available information and proper utilization of that information. While developed countries have lead the way in sharing information relating to every sphere of mankind's existence they have also simultaneously imposed restrictions on the quality of available information.

Every type of information is readily available on the Internet. Most people excess such information to improve their socioeconomic standard while there are a few who access information to cause utter destruction. Regulating the flow of information is a cumbersome process while denying access to information belies the providers' ulterior motives.

PAKISTAN – The Information Society (Pros & Cons)

- Pakistan in the last five years has made immense progress in Information technology with the government encouraging its citizens to become more computer literate by reducing the costs in providing Internet access to common users. Internet clubs cropped up all over Pakistan including far flung rural areas, hourly rates were reduced by more than 70% and 24 hours accessibility allowed.
- Dissemination of the available information depends on the social and political climate prevailing in each country. While conservative governments scrutinize the information before allowing their citizens' access, over protectiveness often leads to diminished scope for progress. Citizens of such countries find alternative methods of gathering information.
- The computer culture has been around for over 20 years but until now very few Government departments both at federal and provincial levels have switched over to this technology. Maintaining manually prepared

records is still the norm causing severe hardships to people wanting immediate solutions to their respective problems. We must also analyze as to why the government is reluctant to computerize their operations?

- It is no secret that the bureaucracy is irreversibly corrupt. Irregularities in the preparation and disappearance of recorded documents are a fact. Gross injustices occur without impunity largely because of missing documentary proof causing all sorts of socioeconomic hardships for those affected. High ranking decision makers are reluctant to computerize their operations for fear that accountability would be maintained, hence the culture of bribe giving and taking would cease to exist. The manual method of recording information by the law enforcement agencies is abused with most police officers maintaining dual registers and files, thereby influencing the outcome in favor of those that grease their palms. The judiciary too rarely uses computer technology to conduct its affairs with major court decisions going in favor of the criminals instead of the victims of crimes. The revenue collecting arm of the government too prefer to manually record all documents - the main reason why the government is inefficient in collecting fees, levies, fines and other revenue the public is liable to pay.
- No proper information gathering and distribution regime exists in the Health and Education Ministry, denying students and patients access to proper facilities and services. The standard of education has over successive decades deteriorated primarily due to denial of access to latest methodology of education. The syllabus too has remained either static or altered to accommodate religion. While latest technology saves many lives in developed countries, lack of such information coupled with shortage of efficient staff causes unnecessary deaths for even minor ailments.
- Even NADRA (National Database and Registration Authority), which incidentally is computerized, never releases accurate figures preferring to hoodwink the public. The federal government for decades has reserved 4 seats in the National Assembly for minority representatives, till this day only 4 seats exist even though the population explosion in Pakistan warrant that the number of minority seats should more than double according to the census. Denial of access to such information is against the law, which explicitly entitles all citizens the right to access of information, but the bureaucracy connives to conceal facts.
- The election process too is manually conducted with intending voters' registration checked manually and in some constituencies people submit multiple votes. Since no proper computerized system is in place, checks and balances are near impossible providing questionable candidates an opportunity to win and to govern.

- The banking and finance sector has computerized most of their operations but till this day most rural branches still rely on paperwork manually recorded. This slow switchover has left open the door for abuses by senior management who fraudulently alter documents.
- Most small and medium size businesses rarely computerize their operations, primarily to avoid government taxation and levies. In the process these same businesses deprive the government of much needed revenue. Moreover it is near impossible to accurately gauge the import - export volume and revenue causing hindrances for the government in effectively managing the economy.
- The all-important Transport Ministry too relies on manually recorded documents. Vehicle registration papers and ownership documents are manually recorded leaving open the option for abuse. Stolen vehicles are dismantled, re-assembled and registered with the government without trace of its origin. Since no computerized records exist it is impossible to track the origin of the vehicle and the stolen vehicle is re-registered to the new owner. The government is acutely aware of this criminal activity but prefers to look the other way, as bureaucrats and the elite purchase these stolen vehicles for a fraction of the market value.
- Pakistan's land, sea and air points of entry and exit are ill equipped to handle the massive inflow / outflow of goods and services primarily due to the antiquated system of manually prepared records. Large scale misappropriation, theft of insured cargo, inadequate stock record of bonded and regulated products, negligence in handling cargo causing damage and other irregularities are daily events. Paperwork routinely disappears causing financial losses for importers and exporters alike.
- Every possible effort is made to conceal as much information from the public. Access to information is a rare privilege exercised by those that are either prepared to pay for such information or use influential sources to retrieve such information.
- Computerization has its benefits and disadvantages. While this technology is a time and energy saver extensive applications still remain a pipe dream for the average Pakistani. **The Information Society can best be effective in an environment where the government and the people work hand in hand to achieve socioeconomic progress without compromising integrity. Pakistan has countless infrastructure problems brought on by successive inapt governments. The people of this country are reluctant to embrace changes that affect the present status quo and stubbornly cling on to irrelevant / medieval ideologies. The globalization concept has been difficult for Pakistanis to grasp leaving the door open for continued**

confrontation with rest of the civilized world. Pakistani citizens are far worse off than foreigners in Pakistan in every aspect. Foreigners have better access to goods and services in Pakistan than do locals. Our government has always been indifferent to the needs of the masses including denying us access to information that would enhance our quality of life. World-renowned NGOs and other social welfare groups including international human rights watchdogs level criticism at the government's inaction but most criticism falls on deaf ears.

- Developed nations are equally to blame for the disparity in the distribution of vital resources. Their insatiable appetite to devour all vital resources in vast quantities leaves little or nothing left over for developing nations. Ever new innovation is costly and out of reach of people from developing countries. By the time developing nations are able to afford such technology it become obsolete. The information society concept though well thought and beneficial to mankind is difficult to implement here in Pakistan due to differences in culture and religion.
- Let's also highlight the misuse of Information that has enormously benefited developed nations. Criminals and looters from developing countries have siphoned large sums of money and deposited them in developed countries. Existing secrecy laws in these countries make it next to impossible for developing nations to pursue these looters as they have also been provided safe haven in these developed nations. Developed nations are well aware of the source of this illicit incomes but prefer to stay quiet least confidence in their banking system may erode and investors flee in droves. **How then can the developed world lecture the developing world on the virtues of effective communication when they themselves do not conform to this principle?**
- Communication is a two Way Street; any alterations to this thinking will only work in favor of the oppressor not the oppressed. Constructive criticism is the paramount right of every citizen – **here in Pakistan the government is not prepared to listen to the masses, merely dictating their terms at will. In such an environment how can the Information Society nurture and mature? Information of any kind should be based on facts; here in Pakistan it is difficult to gather accurate information on almost any subject. Even government employees lie to the public, misinformation is a way of life here with Federal Minister's regularly lying to the masses. How then can anyone expect accurate information?**
- The developed world has every conceivable information readily available at their fingertips, why then is it difficult for representatives of various NGOs from developing nations to get visa and other travel clearance from

Host countries that arrange important Conferences, Seminars and Workshops. The participation of representatives from developing countries is just as important as those from developed countries. In some cases visa clearance may take months while the scheduled event has concluded. How best can we avoid this unnecessary delay when technology to check individual/s is available?

The first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society touched on all issues that affect us. Now as we embark on the conclusive phase of this Summit we must not forget the difficulties involved in implementation. **How best can we convince developing nations to embrace a concept without first fixing their infrastructure problems? Are politicians in developing countries prepared to adopt and implement Information Society without contradicting earlier held religious and cultural beliefs? Are citizens of these developing countries guaranteed that the information provided is useful and not misleading? How best do we control the terrorist menace, as they too rely on readily available information?**