Chapter XIII

Potential Challenges of ICT Implementations in Sri Lanka

Kennedy D. Gunawardana, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

Abstract

This chapter offers a state-of-the-art review of the implementation of ICTs strategies in a developing country with special reference to Sri Lanka as a case study. This chapter is based on primary and secondary sources (books, articles, Web sites, white papers, and grey literature). It also brings in a small number of empirical studies that serve to illustrate the practical use of the ICT to support arguments. Traditionally, access to ICTs and information has not been viewed as basic a need. However, if needs are interpreted as being dynamic and changing over time and culture (Max-Neef, 1986), access to information and knowledge could be treated as a basic need. Information and knowledge have become increasingly important in the contemporary globalized economy, as advancement in ICTs has enabled larger amounts of information to circulate at a much higher speed and at lower cost. This is partly due to the balance between knowledge and natural resources, but with regard to being the most important factor in determining the standard of living in a country, it is said to have shifted in favor of knowledge. This has led many authors to claim that the people are now living in an information society or a knowledge-based economy (Drucker, 1993). Nowadays, it is a country’s ability to assimilate, use, and diffuse knowledge that will essentially determine its chances of uplift in the new economy.

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Emerging ICT Issues in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka’s ICT industry is thriving but faces significant problems, such as lack of transparency in government acquisitions (the largest prospective client); lack of moderately priced international bandwidth; lack of trained ICT professionals and classes knowledgeable about ICT; and a tax structure that does not reward local sales. In recent years, USAID has funded a number of projects aimed at increasing the competitiveness of various industries in Sri Lanka, and ICT is one of their prime foci. Their ICT sector studies have been well-performed, and their recommendations, if followed, will help guide the industry. However, there is some danger that they may widen their scope to include the application of ICT in peripheral areas and, as a result, dilute their resources to no longer focus on their original crucial targets.

In general, the use of ICT in the commercial sector is irregular. Often, computers only seem to be found in managers’ offices; they are rarely integrated throughout all levels of an organization. Some financial institutions have invested heavily in ICT, and as a result they are country leaders in the use of technology. Other sectors are far behind and their use of ICT is not visible. Even those companies that have invested in ICT often do so in restricted ways that are poorly integrated into their businesses. The same is true in case of the use of the Internet. In part, this is a small percentage (less than 10% of their total revenue) of Sri Lankan’s access to the Internet, but the prime reason is, no doubt, the low level of managerial knowledge about the ICT capabilities in their business area.

At all levels of aggregation, statistics about any aspect of ICT in Sri Lanka are highly misleading and can be deceptive when used for policy purposes. Virtually all ICT activity is centered in Colombo, with small pockets in the Galle and Kandy areas (100 kilometers away from Colombo city). There is clearly a desire to spread ICT development over a wider geographic area than just in Colombo, but it appears that it is not going to be an easy task.

The regions outside the urban areas are particularly poorly served with respect to electricity and telecommunications. Total consumption of the western province is 3,699 Gwh in 2003, compared to the rural sector’s consumption with an average of 340 gwh. Moreover, the rural areas do not provide the level of comforts and conveniences often expected by people with the high-end technical and managerial skills needed to drive this sector. Lastly, the supply of lower level technical skills is substantially lower in these regions.

The telecenter movement is in its infancy in Sri Lanka. In many countries, telecenters have become the focal point for introducing technology into rural areas, and in fact to disadvantaged groups in urban settings. The concept shows up in many reports and plans, but despite this, there are a very few active telecenters. Of more concern is that the groups that are developing telecentre plans are doing this in isolation from each other, and from the worldwide community that has a rich knowledge on what works and what does not.

Underlying most issues in Sri Lanka is the 19-year civil unrest and conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has controlled territories in the northern and eastern parts of the island and been the source of disruptions in the south. There are 362,000 (both Tamils and non-Tamils displaced due to Tamil conflict) who have been killed by the war.
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