COMNET-IT: Networking for economic and social development

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Developments in information and communications technologies (ICTs) are spearheading fundamental economic, social and cultural transformation. Most observers agree that the global economy is undergoing far-reaching transformation, moving from an industrial to a knowledge-based society. In a knowledge-based economy, economic and social well-being will be determined more by the innovative application of information, knowledge, and intelligence than by the production of physical goods. The creation, distribution, and exploitation of information, knowledge and intelligence will constitute primary economic activities.

The move to a knowledge-based economy is filled with uncertainties for even the most developed economies. Governments and organizations in developing countries face even more daunting challenges. Most of these countries lack the fundamental capacity to understand and articulate the economic, social and cultural consequences of the move to a world economy where information and knowledge are the key factors in economic productivity and wealth creation. Developing countries face a critical information and knowledge gap that must be bridged if they are to participate fully in creating the new information society.

A number of international initiatives have been launched to ensure that developing countries fully participate in the global information society. Efforts by the Group of Seven (G-7), the World Bank, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Commonwealth Secretariat, among others, have been instrumental in encouraging the participation of developing countries in international forums focused on information society issues.

Since the late 1980s, the Commonwealth Secretariat in London, UK has been concerned about the impact of information and communications technologies on economic and social development. This has led it to spearhead the creation of The Commonwealth Network of Information Technology for Development (COMNET-IT). COMNET-IT is an international foundation hosted by the Government of Malta and supported by the Commonwealth Secretariat. It works primarily, although not exclusively, within Commonwealth member countries to support activities related to the development of capabilities in designing, deploying, managing and using new information and communication technologies to support economic and social development.

COMNET-IT is a network organization whose mission is to foster the building and enhancing of institutional and human networks through the effective deployment and use of information and communication technologies. Its primary aim is to promote dialogue and interaction between people in a variety of institutions to encourage and empower them to become active and informed participants in efforts to enhance social and economic development. COMNET-IT is particularly concerned about the application of information and communication technologies in fostering economic and social change. As a consequence, it promotes and engages in activities that facilitate the sharing of information and experiences about the effective deployment, management and use of these technologies. It is also involved in brokering and funding of international IT projects and develops Internet-based services for development-oriented international organizations. COMNET-IT uses a variety of means, including face-to-face interactions and various forms of human-computer communications, assisted by computer-based communication networks, to enhance linkages between sources and consumers of information and knowledge.

Brief History

A working group report of the Commonwealth Secretariat (the Menon Report, published in 1985) entitled “Technological change: enhancing the benefits,” which was endorsed by the Commonwealth heads of government, recommended that the Commonwealth Secretariat disseminate information about the economic and social impact of new technologies. It also gave a mandate to the Secretariat to organize training or exchange programs for key human resources in Commonwealth countries to improve awareness of new technologies and their applications. Noting this recommendation, the Management and Training Services Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat initiated and undertook a set of interrelated projects focused on the effective harnessing of information and communication technologies to support national development. Several case studies were commissioned and a number of regional and pan-Commonwealth workshops and seminars were organized to bring experts together to deliberate on ideas and exchange their experiences. COMNET-IT was formally established in 1992 as a result of the recommendation of a pan-Commonwealth Workshop on Information Technology Policy held in London, UK in November 1990.

From 1992 to 1995, COMNET-IT operated as a Commonwealth organization under supervision of the Management and Training Services Division of the Commonwealth