Civil Society Organizations in Knowledge Society: A Roadmap for ICT Support in Pakistani NGOs

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ABSTRACT

The notion of a knowledge society demands equal access of knowledge for every stakeholder in the society. Modern information and communication technologies play a significant role in accessing and storing knowledge, which is a vital enabler for fostering knowledge society paradigm. Voluntary organizations represent an important part of society which differs from traditional business and governmental organizations in terms of structure, working methodologies, and decision making. In this paper the authors investigate the Pakistani civil society sector to analyze the involvement of technology in their work settings. The findings suggest that lack of technological and financial resources hinder voluntary organizations in this region to adopt innovative technological solutions, so there is need for supporting the appropriation of technology in this sector. On the basis of the authors’ findings they propose a research plan to follow for the uplift of Pakistani NGOs and their use of ICTs. This research framework can be extended to NGO sectors of other parts of the world in an effort to generalize the findings worldwide to better support the technology needs of this community.

Keywords: Community Computing, Human Centred Computing, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Support, Information Systems Development, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Organizational Practices, System Design, Technology Appropriation, Voluntary Organizations

1. INTRODUCTION

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play an important role in every society, working mainly on the grass root level; CSOs became influential to governments in agenda setting and policy making. It is widely accepted that CSOs play a significant role in a nation’s development by complimenting activities of governmental organizations (Paul, 1999). Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are the most widely known fraction of CSOs. The term, “nongovernmental organization” or NGO, came into use in 1945 because of UN’s need to differentiate (in its charter) between participation
rights for intergovernmental specialized agencies and international private organizations. United Nations considers all private bodies to be an NGO which are independent from governmental control and do not seek to challenge government as a political party. Activities of NGOs include contributing vital information and ideas, advocating on behalf of ethnical minorities or resource deprived parts of the society, helping in case of natural disasters, or supporting development processes (Mostashari, 2005). Increasingly, NGOs become aware that problems such as AIDS, global warming, human rights, sustainable development, and disaster management cannot be dealt with locally but require cooperation beyond the borders of national states. This resulted in enhanced collaboration among north and south, and NGOs gained more recognition and they became transnational, requiring extensive communication. Meanwhile donor agencies also started funding cross-cultural networks of NGOs, as it become evident that local organizations know local issues more closely. As a result northern NGOs modified their mode of working from direct involvement in the south to financial and technical supporter (Mawdsley et al., 2005).

As knowledge has become the prime resource for organizations in the modern world, management of knowledge has gained central importance (Joia, 2007; Brauch & Tzokas, 2008). The accessibility and use of modern knowledge resources is widely mediated by information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Williams et al., 2004). This phenomenon has enhanced the need for employing modern information and communication technologies and resulted in a rapid ICT adoption by most sectors of the society to optimize their knowledge management strategies. On the other hand CSOs were not as quick to employ these technologies in their organizational settings, despite their advantages. Civil society organizations differ from business and government organizations on their objectives, organizational structure and decision making, which hampers technology sustainability in these organizations. Moreover, lack of funding and permanent employees adds further complexity in establishing ICT infrastructures (cf. Saeed et al., 2008a). The concept of knowledge society (cf. Lytras & Sicilia, 2005; Stehr, 2007; Castillo-Merino & Planer-Erta, 2010; Sharma et al., 2010) advocates for effective knowledge management strategies by all groups of society, but this lack of technological infrastructures keeps CSOs handicapped. There have been research efforts to understand the ICT requirements of the voluntary sector by analyzing ICT use in CSOs’ work practices in different geographical regions. O’Donnell (2001) has analyzed the role of alternative media by evaluating a mailing list that connected women organizations in Northern Ireland. Pini et al. (2004) have investigated that how a discussion forum is being used by an Australian farm women group (AWiA), as a communication platform. Cogburn (2004) empirically evaluated computer mediated communication among civil society representatives at United Nations World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) and its preparation phase meetings and found email as the most used communication media. Kavada (2005) has investigated usage of internet by three nongovernmental organizations in UK. Furthermore she has analyzed the role of email lists in the organizing process of the European Social forum, a gathering of social activists from all over the Europe (Kavada, 2007). Goatman and Lewis (2007) surveyed 1,000 UK charities and nonprofit institutions to find out their perceptions about their websites and its usage. Most of the above mentioned research efforts were carried out in the context of voluntary organizations based in developed countries. But in developing countries where digital divide is visible, availability of infrastructure and technological needs are quite different. Thus, there is need for studies in those regions to analyze the impact of ICTs in the organizational practices of CSOs. On basis of comprehensive requirement analysis or needs assessments, appropriate technological systems should be designed. Given the assumption that most CSOs in the south are weakly equipped with ICT infrastructures (such as technical equipment, network access, know-how, or qualified staff),
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