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Afghanistan

Afghanistan in the past four years has been trying to recover from the trauma of war and instability. A successful presidential election followed by successful parliamentary elections has put the country on the road towards democracy and prosperity. The ICT sector has improved, teledensity grew from 0.08 per cent to 8 per cent and access to information has become easier.

Technology infrastructure

Both the government and the private sector have put together the telecom infrastructure, which has made it possible to achieve a reliable infrastructure in three years based on international best practices. By the end of 2006, 31 out of 34 provincial capitals, 160 major cities, 10 highways and 180 districts had voice and data connectivity contributed by three GSM operators, 14 ISPs and one CDMA operator with roaming service in 124 countries.

As of today, all of the international communications use a satellite connection. However, in 2006, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) contracted the installation of 3,600 km of fibre through ZTE Corporation China. The fibre connection will form a ring connecting most of the major cities of the country. The aim is to be able to connect the country's major cities with TAE (Trans/Asia Europe) and SeMeWe (South East Asia Middle East, Western Europe). This will enable the country to enjoy good quality communication at reasonable cost.

Internet penetration has increased from 0.08 per cent to 1 per cent. It is hoped that this will increase with the completion of the District Communications Network (DCN) project and the fibre optic connection.

The Afghanistan National Data Centre (ANDC) will be operational by the end of 2007. It will provide a central location for hosting the government electronic data and will provide collocation space for the private sector. The Centre will also host the e-Afghanistan project of the MCIT.

Key institutions dealing with ICTs

The MCIT is the government entity working for the promotion of telecoms and IT in Afghanistan, in partnership with various international and local organizations. The private sector is importing a lot of ICTs into the country.

Indeed, ICT use in Afghan society is growing. Unfortunately, the government has not yet adopted ICT as a tool for national reconstruction and economic development. This may change with the new mandate of the MCIT. Also, the National ICT Council of Afghanistan (NICTCA) established in 2006 will be fully operational in 2007. This will boost coordination of ICT efforts by the government and the private sector.

In order to contribute to the development of national ICT policies, standards and procedures, the private sector, IT professionals and IT departments in academe are establishing the National ICT Association of Afghanistan (NICTAA). This entity, which will be fully operational in 2007, will have permanent seats in the NICTCA.

The telecom sector is regulated by the Afghanistan Telecom Regulatory Authority (ATRA), an independent regulator established in 2006 as the successor to the Telecom Regulator Board (TRB), which also covers spectrum monitoring in the country.

Legal and regulatory environment for ICT

On 18 December 2005, the new Telecom Law of Afghanistan was put in place. This law governs only telecom services. However, the MCIT has drafted an ICT Law that will address issues such as IP, digital signatures, e-commerce, e-government, IPR and cyber security.

ATRA has started working on different regulations to encourage the sector's competition, growth and new telecom services (for example, WiMAX, VOIP).

Digital content initiatives

There are a number of initiatives underway for developing a platform to meet local computing needs. The MCIT in collaboration with the Afghan Computer Science Association (ACSA) has developed a Pashto language version of MS Office 2003 and MS Windows XP, to be launched by Microsoft in mid-2007. There are plans to localize MS Office 2007 and MS Windows Vista in 2007. This will enable the 64 per cent of the population who are Pashto literate to make use of computers in their daily life. ACSA, in collaboration with the PAN Localization Project, finalized the character set, keyboard layout and collation sequence in 2006. The project will continue with font development, lexicon, spell-check and machine translation in 2007.

All of the newly customized software applications developed for the government is in the official languages of the country, Dari and Pashto.

ACSA is working to put in place a task force for the introduction of open source in Afghanistan.

Online services

Online services are not yet popular in Afghanistan due to the lack of electricity and the lack of local content. But there are a number of websites that provide information about policies, regulations and development projects to the public and to the international community. Some good examples are the website of the Office of the President (www.president.gov.af), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (www.mfa.gov.af), Afghanistan Reconstruction and Development Services (www.ards.gov.af), Afghanistan National Assembly (www.nationalassembly.af) and Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (www.mcit.gov.af).

The government has put together a unified development strategy called the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) (www.ands.gov.af). It covers security, governance, rule of law, human rights, and economic and social development. The MCIT has developed a concept called e-Afghanistan, which focuses on the utilization of ICT to achieve the goals set in the ANDS. e-Afghanistan covers the development of e-government, national portals, e-commerce and ICT governance.

ICT and ICT-related industries

The ICT industry is growing very slowly due to the lack of physical security in the country and the lack of electric power. In spite of this, the telecom industry attracted over USD 700 million in the last three years. Some statistics shows that in 2005, the government spent more than USD 70 million on procuring ICT equipment. This shows the potential of the market for investors. Also, the number of SMEs in the country is growing.

The government has established a separate entity called the Afghanistan Investment Support Agency (AISA) to attract foreign direct investment. In addition, the MCIT has plans to set up an ICT Park. This facility will improve the state of the ICT industry in the country.

Education and capacity building

Capacity building has been the primary focus of the government from the day it came into being after the Taliban regime was deposed. There are a number of national projects addressing the issue. The Civil Service Commission (CSC), an independent body, is tasked with implementing programmes such as training civil servants and re-engineering the business process of the government administration.

There are a number of projects focusing on ICT-based training, such as the Cisco academies and the ICT training centres established by the MCIT.

The new educational policy of the government is to open the field to private sector investment, which has increased the number of institutions contributing to human resource development in the country.

Challenges

The country is on the road to recovery and is making great progress in different areas. The government and the international community have identified three main challenges to development activities in Afghanistan—terrorism, narcotics and corruption. The MCIT believes that adoption of ICT and the e-Afghanistan project will help reduce corruption and bring in administrative reforms and transparency.

Other challenges confronting the ICT sector are the lack of trained human resources, lack of awareness and acceptance of ICT, lack of electricity and political instability. Despite these challenges, different sectors are committed to the development of Afghanistan. The penetration of telecom services in Afghan society is remarkable, compared to its neighbouring countries. However, the penetration of the concept of ICT4D will take some time because of the lack of local content.

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the international community are determined to strengthen their partnership to improve the lives of the Afghan people and to contribute to national, regional and global peace and security. Thus, they affirm their shared commitment to continue, in the spirit of the Bonn, Tokyo, Berlin and London conferences, to work towards a stable and prosperous Afghanistan, with good governance and human rights protection for all under the rule of law.

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