

## Brief Note for Media Round Table 27-29 June Stockholm

### ICT IN BANGLADESH : CAN IT DRIVE PHONEY DEMOCRACY OUT ?

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The implications of the ICT revolution for democracy can be tremendous in knowledge-based, forward-looking, societies, but what can it mean for us in Bangladesh, a least developing country where radio and television is still under state control and not many have access to a computer, and fewer to the peripherals essential for optimum use of ICT ? It depends on how the new media are used by the government and public institutions to institute transparency and accountability. No sign of that happening yet at the government level. But the private sector has been quite energized by the potential of ICT to create jobs and increase incomes. The young and enterprising are joining the computer world in droves. Some efforts are already on to win foreign contracts to do tedious documentation and data entry jobs via the Internet. High ideals of democracy don't feature here. It is simply an economic window where distance and geography don't matter.

When I called the Information Ministry recently and wanted to know how many of our ministries use ICT, the person who answered the telephone could not, or would not give me the information. Claiming to be the PA (Personal Assistant) of the Minister or the Secretary, he seemed to imply that I had asked for classified information! Such a response from this quarter is not unusual. I mention this simply to illustrate the 'closed' mindset of our government functionaries despite the ICT revolution all around them. My information is that computers have been installed in most of the ministries though very few of them are actually being used, and then also, only for basic word processing and accounting. Work practices have not changed for the better.

The government had declared ICT a 'thrust sector' in 1997 and promised to invest enough in it to produce at least ten thousand computer programmers a year. Since then Taka 15 crore per year have been sanctioned for ICT education in the five public universities. But four years on, not much has moved in that direction although government declarations have grown louder. Specialized and private universities and institutes however do produce a modest crop of computer science graduates, about 1200 per year. But among them are quite a number of world-class candidates, most of whom unfortunately end up serving abroad in the 'brain drain' scheme of things.

Computer shops and firms are coming up virtually in every nook and corner in Bangladesh's cities but how far they can equip clients with the skills necessary to make the best of the ICT (Information and Communication Technology) revolution and to contribute to democracy needs to be assessed. There are currently over a 1000 computer training institutes (home grown and foreign franchise) that are literally minting money. But barring a few the majority are reportedly not up to standard, and are even faulted with taking trainees for a ride and confusing them in the bargain. In some cases neither the trainees nor the instructors seem to know what they really want to achieve. However, it is often the poor educational background of some of the trainees that is at fault, because they approach ICT in much the same way as they do English language courses ---- as if it is a quick-fix formula to qualify for jobs.

Not that they are without any usefulness. Most of the training centres and institutes offer simple computer literacy, enabling trainees to use it for word processing, maintaining accounts, database and the like. This does not necessarily mean they are digitally knowledgeable enough to make the digital leap, although basic computer skills give them a competitive edge in job-searching over those who are still using pen and paper. These skills certainly open up job opportunities for those who are smart enough to enter the 'telework' sector at competitive wages. Already there are many companies taking advantage of teleworking. Though most of these opportunities are relatively low-paid, low-value work, such as data-entry and back office services, they are more than welcome in Bangladesh's high-unemployment environment.

The more globalized and educated breed of ICT whizzkids --- and Bangladesh produces a modest number of them --- can surely rise to great heights. Although slow, some of the ICT savvy Bangladeshis are taking a cue from their counterparts in India and spreading out their wings to reach the global market in software production. If bureaucratic red tapism and corruption were weeded out Bangladesh could really make the most of the ICT revolution. As Grameen's Dr Yunus says, it is possible to double the per capita income and transform the lives of Bangladesh's millions within this decade if only we would wake up to the digital opportunities in today's world. If we could get even a tiny part of the global software market it would mean 1000s of crores of taka per year, which could help us bring the number of stark poor people down by at least 50 per cent.

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