

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2007

Focus on Participation



Global Information Society Watch

2007



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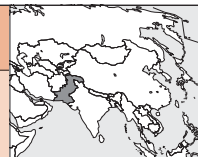
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PAKISTAN

Bytesforall.org¹

Shahzad Ahmad, Adnan Rehmat, Mukhtar Ahmad Ali and Fouad Riaz Bajwa



Introduction

Bytesforall.org (B4A) is a South Asian-wide network of information and communications technology (ICT) professionals and practitioners and a member of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). Under the auspices of APC's Communications and Information Policy Programme (CIPP), B4A Pakistan is managing the Pakistan ICT Policy Monitor Network and maintaining the Pakistan ICT policy portal.

A small team within the Pakistan ICT Policy Monitor Network brainstormed and agreed on the process for compiling this report and on the key focus areas. Efforts were then made to involve different experts and key organisations with expertise in those areas. For example, the section on community radio was written by Internews Pakistan, the section on free and open source software (FOSS) by the Free and Open Source Software Foundation of Pakistan (FOSSFP),² and the section on access to information by the Centre for Peace and Development Initiative, Pakistan. This arrangement helped to gather the best possible information on the topics addressed.

Country situation

Pakistan is a developing country with a population of approximately 160 million. It ranked 134th out of 177 countries on the 2006 Human Development Index (UNDP, 2006). The country faces many development challenges, including extreme poverty, a low literacy rate, poor health facilities, and a fragile socio-political situation, characterised by corruption and a lack of informed decision-making.

The ICT4D (ICT for development) sector in Pakistan is still at a nascent stage, particularly from a civil society perspective. Over the last seven years, however, ICTs have been one of the major focus areas of development for the government. There is a growing realisation among policy-makers that ICTs hold great socioeconomic potential, to the extent that the government is encouraging the use of ICTs at all levels, with planned investment in both infrastructure and technological application. This has resulted in Pakistan having the most extensive internet penetration among the countries of South Asia, with probably the cheapest internet rates. Similar progress has been seen in the development of telecommunications infrastructure, particularly regarding mobile telephony.

A comprehensive IT Policy was formulated in 2000, followed by an ambitious IT Action Plan. But for reasons such as a lack of capacity, corrupt governance structures, and an inability to comprehend the rapid developments in the field, there are not many success stories.

In terms of grassroots ICT4D projects, Pakistan has yet to present a strikingly good example that could be replicated on a larger scale in the country and elsewhere in the developing world. While it may come as a surprise, Pakistan lags behind even Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, not to mention India or Nepal, which can boast of dozens of such initiatives.³

Table 1: Statistics

Population (estimated January 2007)	159,278,000 *
GDP (2005)	USD 110.7 billion+
GDP growth rate (2005-2006)	6.6% +
Adult literacy rate (age 15 or above)	53% +
Adult literacy rate – male	60% +
Adult literacy rate – female	40% +
MDGs 2015 target for literacy	80% +
Human Development Index (HDI) rank	134th ^
Human Development Index (HDI) value	0.539 ^
Telecom sector share in GDP (2005-2006)	2.0% **
Foreign direct investment in telecom sector	USD 146.9 million **
Total telephone subscribers (fixed) as of Dec. 2006	5,184,132 **
Total telephone subscribers (mobile) as of Dec. 2006	48,289,136 **
Teledensity (total)	10.37% **
Total internet service providers	131 **
Total internet users on dial-up	2.4 million **
Total DSL subscribers	26,611 **
Length of fibre optic link	5,227 km **
Total FM radio licences issued	86 #
FM radios (on-air)	51 #
Total campus FM radios	3 #
Female only campus FM radios	2 #
Total household TV sets	24 million #
Satellite private television licences issued	16 #
Satellite private televisions (on-air)	12 #
Satellite television viewership (urban)	11 million
Satellite television viewership (rural)	3 million #
Cable TV licensees	1,301 #

Sources:

* Federal Bureau of Statistics (FBS) (<www.statpak.gov.pk>).
+ Government of Pakistan (<www.finance.gov.pk>).

^ Human Development Report-UNDP (<hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/statistics>).

** Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) (<www.pta.gov.pk>).

Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) (<www.pemra.gov.pk>).

1 <pakistanictpolicy.bytesforall.net>.

2 <www.fossp.org>.

3 "ICTs for Development: Moving out of the Pakistani Paradox", Hasan Rizvi, Sustainable Development Networking Programme, Pakistan.

The following sections highlight three key areas of policy concern: access to information, community radio and free and open source software (FOSS).

Access to information: policy and political constraints

The poor state of governance and weak protection of rights in Pakistan can largely be attributed to a lack of access to information on public affairs, which restricts the ability of citizens, civil society groups and public representatives to effectively monitor the performance of public institutions. Access to information is the first step towards promoting and institutionalising public accountability at various levels. Its absence often results in arbitrary and non-participatory decision-making,⁴ weak monitoring, inefficient project execution, human rights violations and rampant financial corruption in public bodies.⁵ Lack of access to information also contributes towards sustaining excessive bureaucratic controls and the weakening of democratic institutions.

Almost all government activity in Pakistan currently takes place in a pervasive culture of official secrecy, which is manifested in both official attitudes and various pieces of legislation (e.g. the Official Secrets Act 1923).⁶ Any disclosure or sharing of information, if and when it takes place, is on a "need to know" basis, as determined by official authorities, and not in recognition of a "right to know" as one of the fundamental human rights.⁷ Citizens have hardly any say or control over public information, even though the information and records held by various government departments may have direct implications for their environment, health, safety and well-being, as well as their ability to make political or economic choices. This particularly affects the weaker sections of the population, as powerful people find it easier to access the required information by using their contacts and influence.

The culture of secrecy is so predominant that it has seriously undermined almost all mechanisms created for providing access to government information. Official statements and media releases often provide one-sided information and lack credibility. Annual reports are either not published or lack details and appropriate analyses which could help in determining the credibility of data presented and assessing the performance of departments. Parliamentary questions lead to the disclosure of some information, but delayed or misleading replies, and the summary dismissal of many questions, especially ones relating to any aspect of the security establishment, are common.

Court proceedings take place in the open and, therefore, can result in the disclosure of useful official information, especially when the case involves government departments. However, the amount of information disclosed is often very little and may not automatically become available to a large number of people unless a particular case attracts substantial media attention. Information could also be made accessible through websites, but most government websites offer little useful content. Similarly, the archives are not properly maintained and updated and it is difficult to access old records. All of this is, partly or wholly, because of the absence of a comprehensive policy that recognises the right to information as a fundamental human right and provides an efficient legislative and institutional framework for its implementation.

The Constitution of Pakistan does not explicitly talk of a right to information (Constituent Assembly, 1947). However, the Supreme Court of Pakistan has interpreted Article 19 of the Constitution, which is about freedom of speech and expression, as including the right to information.⁸ Despite this, the government of Pakistan preferred not to refer to it as a constitutional right in the Freedom of Information Ordinance (FOIO) 2002.

The FOIO 2002 is currently in force. The Freedom of Information (FOI) Rules have been developed for its implementation. While about 40 ministries have designated officers who are responsible for dealing with information requests, the FOIO 2002 is extremely flawed, and offers little help in changing the culture of secrecy in government (Government of Pakistan, 2002).

The government needs to take urgent steps to provide a comprehensive legislative and institutional framework for access to information. This must conform to international best practices, including maximum disclosure, obligation to publish, promotion of open government, limited scope of exceptions, minimum costs, processes that facilitate access, open meetings, precedence of disclosure, and protection of whistle-blowers.

The FOIO 2002 does not conform to any of these best practices. It is applicable only to the federal departments and leaves out the provincial and local departments, as well as private organisations (including the ones funded by the government). It does not provide a comprehensive definition of information or records; nor does it provide an efficient mechanism for its implementation and handling complaints. It puts very limited demands on the government departments to proactively disclose information through publications, notice boards and websites. Most importantly, it includes too many exceptions and restrictions, which leave only a few records accessible. The FOI Rules 2004 have imposed further restrictions on public access to information by prescribing strict information request formats and asking high fees and photocopying charges.

A comprehensive policy on the right to access to information is a prerequisite for transparent and accountable governance. But this will only be possible when the government is willing and able to make a critical shift from a culture of secrecy to proactive information disclosure as a matter of fundamental human right.

Empowering grassroots Pakistan through community radio

Until April 2002, Pakistan's electronic media was monopolised by the government, with just the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation and Pakistan Television ruling the radio and TV airwaves. Heavily propagandist, these channels still give out highly censored news and information. With national newspaper circulation hovering around three million, and no private radio or TV, the majority of the population had no access to reliable, independent and relevant sources of information.

Then the government decided to open the airwaves to private ownership, creating the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) to issue licences for private radio and television. By November 2006, licences for over 100 commercial FM radio stations, two dozen satellite TV channels, an IPTV⁹ and two DTH¹⁰ channels had been issued, transforming the country's media scene dramatically.

4 This point was illustrated in 1999 by UN Special Rapporteur Abid Hussain, who said: "Implicit in freedom of expression is the public's right to open access to information and to know what governments are doing on their behalf, without which truth would languish and people's participation in government would remain fragmented." (Article 19, 2001).

5 Pakistan ranked 146th on the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) of Transparency International in 2006 (TI, 2006).

6 Available from: <www.ijnet.org/Director.aspx?P=MediaLaws&ID=101585&LID=1>.

7 "Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and is the touchstone for all freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated." (UN, 1946).

8 Supreme Court, Pakistan Legal Decision, PLD 1993 SC 473 and 746.

9 Internet protocol television.

10 "Direct-to-home" satellite TV.

A low literacy rate means that print media circulation figures are also low. Most Pakistanis rely on the electronic media to get their information. Even though private television in Pakistan has begun to reflect the country's diverse society and offer independent sources of news, radio has proved the most effective mass medium. By the end of October 2006, more than 60 FM stations were operational. These filled critical information gaps that television cannot address, attending particularly to local and regional languages.

An official study by PEMRA declares that Pakistan has the potential for over 850 viable FM radio stations, enabling even far-flung communities in information-dark areas to benefit from locally relevant coverage. Radio has the potential to accelerate the pace of socioeconomic transformation sweeping Pakistan. Already the information consumption patterns of Pakistanis have changed as audiences receive information in real time and in local languages. Assisting radio stations to develop information relevant to local communities represents a major opportunity to make communications a cornerstone of the grassroots development process in the country.

This is the bright side. The rapidly evolving legal environment in Pakistan challenges the newer, smarter media to react to critical reform issues in their coverage of the legal rights of citizens, and to realise their potential to educate the public on socioeconomic and political concerns. But the exploding number of radio stations face a chronic shortage of journalists qualified to cover these complicated issues, and to make them understandable to grassroots communities in their own languages. These radio stations need technical assistance to play a more active role in public discussion and to participate in political processes.

Community broadcasting on a mass scale is a relatively new phenomenon – one that has not been served by the dozen or so universities in Pakistan that teach journalism. Some of these universities are only now coming to grips with the need for professional broadcast journalism degrees that can meet the requirements of an emerging community broadcast industry. Internews Network, an international media development non-governmental organisation (NGO), is the only organisation currently helping universities develop broadcast journalism curricula for students and strengthening broadcast journalism generally. This includes investigative journalism courses for radio and television journalists, building campus radio stations and production facilities, starting media law clinics for broadcasters, advocacy and lobbying on media law reforms with stakeholders, and research on media issues.

The challenge of ensuring a community orientation for the radio stations is made more complicated by the fact that the radio stations are set up as commercial enterprises. At the heart of this problem is a technicality. PEMRA issues licences through an open bidding process, which brings “big money” into play at the cost of broad stakeholder involvement. As a result, most operational FM stations in Pakistan are not run by community-based organisations (CBOs) or NGOs.

Several licensees are permitted to run FM stations in multiple cities. In many cases a licensee runs stations in cities or regions where it has no roots, and therefore no stake other than promoting business interests or carving out large slices of advertising revenue for itself.

PEMRA insists that by its very nature every FM station in Pakistan currently has to profile its audiences and respond to local needs. As a result it says the stations are de facto community stations, and that “big money” can only be good for the sustainability of the enterprises.

Despite the challenges, in varying degrees Pakistani commercial FM broadcasters are doubling up as community service centres, at times serving their listeners by offering a variety of information and programming geared towards the local area. This includes paying attention to particular interest groups that are poorly served by other media outlets, and making space for local voices and marginalised groups such as women, CBOs and NGOs.

Such is the success of FM radio stations as local information sources in Pakistan that they have even attracted the attention of ultra-conservative clergy who wish to create new captive audiences. Clerics in parts of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP), tribal areas and some parts of Balochistan – all bordering Afghanistan – operate unlicensed, small-range one-way broadcasts, sermonising to increase new spheres of influence for themselves over communities that do not have access to traditional media.

In some instances, mullahs operating these illegal “suitcase” mobile radio stations have been instigating sectarian or ethnic violence that killed about 25 people in 2006 alone. The authorities have conducted crackdowns against these illegal stations, but because they are easy to get up and running, and are low-cost, they crop up again soon after they are closed down. This phenomenon is restricted to areas where no legal licences have been issued, and will continue until PEMRA allows local community-based groups to undertake legal broadcast operations.

The relatively recent phenomenon of private radio in Pakistan has shown the following characteristics:

- Improved timeliness, accuracy and credibility of information flow to communities
- Increased relevance of information reaching local communities
- Increased reach of information to isolated, information-dark areas
- Improved two-way communication flows between and among stakeholders
- Increased flow of information between communities and policy-makers
- Empowered local communities, through inclusion of their voices in the media
- Ongoing attention to the needs of communities in times of disaster
- Increased understanding of the role of local media in emergencies
- Increased space for independent media and professional journalism.

However, the situation on the ground would be altogether better if the radio stations could find roots in a development perspective. A strong policy advocacy campaign is required to encourage PEMRA to consider working with civil society organisations (CSOs) and creating non-profit community radio licensing for nominal fees.

FOSS in Pakistan

FOSS¹¹ made its way into Pakistan between 1999 and 2004 through a top-level intervention by the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunications (MIT)¹² and grassroots interventions by various civil society voluntary community initiatives. These include the Pakistan Linux User Community (PLUC),¹³ the Free and Open Source Software Foundation of Pakistan (FOSSFP), the Ubuntu-Linux Pakistan

11 <www.fosspf.org/fossohy>.

12 <www.moitt.gov.pk>.

13 <www.linuxpakistan.net>.

Team (Ubuntu LUC),¹⁴ the Linux Professional Institute (LPI),¹⁵ and the Computer Society of Pakistan's Special Interest Group on FOSS.

In 2003, the MIT set up a Task Force for Linux and as a result the Open Source Resource Centre (OSRC) was established by the Pakistan Software Export Board (PSEB) in January 2004 in Islamabad. The centre promotes FOSS in the local IT industry, and also conducts training. Other public sector institutions have joined the drive behind FOSS, such as the Pakistan Computer Bureau, which has trained 4,000 government officials on various IT issues.

The PLUC was formed in December 1999 and now has over 3,500 members. Meanwhile, the FOSSFP and Ubuntu LUC launched the National FOSS Mass Awareness Campaign (FOSSAC). The campaign aimed to educate 7,000 people, notably women, from over 506 organisations nationwide. It provided free-of-charge training, certifying over 4,800 Ubuntu Linux users and distributing 10,000 FOSS CDs. It involved a public sector university partner that donated 700 computers, 22 trainers and 600 volunteers to manage the campaign for four days (16 to 19 August 2005). The FOSSAC case study was highlighted during the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Tunisia as an example for other countries to learn from.

Within the context of software piracy, nearly all sectors of society are still unaware of the potential benefits of FOSS as an alternative to pirated proprietary software. According to international agencies, the rate of software piracy was 82% in 2006. This was only one percentage point lower than the 83% reported in 2005, despite the government's strict measures to ban the illegal production of CDs and DVDs.

Widespread open source adoption is still lacking within the public and private sectors, due to the absence of concrete policies for FOSS procurement. Widespread adoption and use of FOSS is also lacking amongst CSOs, and can be attributed to a lack of awareness and know-how. Similarly, the country lacks a telecentre programme in the rural regions that can benefit from the combination of FOSS and low-cost refurbished computers.

There is also a lack of women participating in FOSS activities, although small numbers of female students are receiving Linux training as part of the IT curriculum in higher education institutions. Gender-based CSOs continue to lack FOSS capacity.

Pakistanis speak over 70 different regional languages, with the English-speaking community making up less than 10% of the total population. In order to take ICTs to all corners of the country, localised Urdu language content needs to be developed. This includes the translation of software for desktop and server sides. Such efforts are already being made by FOSSFP and Ubuntu-Linux.

FOSS priority recommendations for Pakistan are:

- The government should invite multi-stakeholder partnerships to develop its technical capacity and encourage the formulation of concrete policies that mandate the wide use of FOSS in light of WSIS recommendations.
- FOSS should be adopted within higher education, while the inclusion of women and youth should be the priority of all ICT and FOSS-related activities. A Women Linux Users Group should be formed, and where there are religious or social constraints, women-run telecentres should be established.

- The government should take measures to combat software piracy through making citizens aware of their software freedoms through FOSS capacity development. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) should be encouraged to use FOSS instead of pirated proprietary software.
- Multi-stakeholder partnerships should be formulated to educate all sectors of society about Digital Commons and alternative copy-righting such as Creative Commons, GPL, Open Standards and Open Content.
- The government should support language localisation efforts, such as those making various Linux distributions available in Urdu.
- The government should encourage the funding of small businesses initiated by women and youth that involve FOSS-based service delivery and business models.
- Telecentre initiatives should be established to promote ICTs and universal access in all rural regions by deploying low-cost refurbished computers running FOSS, instead of pirated or costly licensed proprietary software packages.
- International donors should be encouraged to include FOSS policies in their funding guidelines.

Participation

The government of Pakistan was part of the WSIS process and actively participated in the global event through the MIT. However, both civil society and the private sector were not represented at the event. A steering committee on the WSIS was formed, but that too had no representation from civil society or the private sector. The committee's membership is still not known.

The one and only WSIS consultation inclusive of all stakeholders was conducted by the Sustainable Development Networking Programme in November 2003.¹⁶ This consultation resulted in an agreement on the greater inclusion of various stakeholders in the WSIS process, but this never happened in subsequent years.

A project that was to be implemented between the Geneva and Tunis phases of the Summit was also agreed on. However, funding could not be provided by the government.

The project had the following three goals:

- Using ICTs to provide the necessary information and to support interaction between different stakeholders, including excluded groups. The information was to focus on education, health, and welfare. A central feature was that the ICT-based interactions would have taken place in Urdu, and possibly other regional languages.
- To adopt a truly multi-stakeholder approach, bringing together the public sector, civil society and the private sector in a clearly defined, balanced and equal relationship.
- To support, from the ground up, the emergence of a multi-stakeholder strategic process for implementing the WSIS in Pakistan.

A large official delegation headed by the prime minister of Pakistan participated in the WSIS in Geneva. At the Summit itself, the honourable prime minister spoke about his government's focus and keenness to harness the potential of ICTs for economic advancement

¹⁴ <www.ubuntu-pk.org>.

¹⁵ <www.lpi.org>.

¹⁶ See <www.wsis.sdnpg.org>.

and the social development of the people of Pakistan. In particular, he mentioned that his government had earmarked a significant part of its resources to build the necessary infrastructure, and to develop ICT applications in health, education and public sector management. However, nothing seems to be planted on the ground.

One might believe that the personal presence of the prime minister of Pakistan at the WSIS was a clear indication of the priority accorded by the government to the WSIS process, and to the use of ICTs for social and human development in the country. However, one could also argue that more could have been achieved if there had been proper planning and serious pre-event preparations. In addition, there was never any gender consideration in the composition of the delegation. Only two women participated in the Tunis phase of the WSIS,¹⁷ but as individuals, one being part of the WSIS Youth Caucus, and the other representing a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) forum. Among other things, this skewed representation resulted in Pakistan becoming a villain in civil society circles.

Various caucuses on diverse themes such as gender, youth, special people, science and trade were set up with representation from all over the world, but unfortunately Pakistan had no planned presence in any of these (other than the youth caucus in the Tunis phase). One can say that Pakistan as a nation never gave WSIS serious thought or considered how it could impact on the country's long-term future.

Conclusions

Even though the government is committed to the development of ICTs in Pakistan, the country is a graveyard of many failed and unsuccessful projects. Unfortunately, the government seems committed to implementing every initiative on its own, without the involvement of CSOs or other relevant stakeholders.

On the other hand, CSOs have no access to funds to pilot innovative, development-oriented projects. Government rules and procedures do not facilitate access to funding, a situation that needs to be changed immediately.

There has been no consultation with CSOs before embarking upon big ICT-related projects. In ICT development projects, commercial interests nearly always take precedence over development interests. The exorbitant FM radio licensing fees is one example.

It is also clear that mainstreaming gender in the development process is not a priority for the government. There have been no initiatives where gender empowerment through ICTs could be addressed.

Unfortunately, the government takes massive loans from the World Bank and others but there are practically no checks to gauge the success of the initiatives they spend the money on, or ways of helping to root out corruption in the implementation of projects. There are hardly any monitoring and evaluation processes.

There is a serious lack of capacity in a whole range of different fields which needs to be bridged immediately if the country intends to make any advancement in the field of ICTs for development. Pakistan's IT Policy and IT Action Plan need an immediate review. Strong policy advocacy is required from CSOs, and continuous engagement with the government at all levels is needed, so that the goal of people-friendly and people-centred policies can be achieved. ■

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GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH has three interrelated goals:

- **survey** the state of the field of ICT policy at the local and global levels
- **encourage** critical debate, and
- **strengthen** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

The report discusses the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process and a range of international institutions, regulatory agencies and monitoring instruments.

It also includes a collection of country reports which examine issues of access and participation within a variety of national contexts.

Each year, the report will focus on a particular theme. In 2007

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH *focuses on participation.*

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Third World Institute (TeM), and follows up on our long-term interest in the impact of civil society on governance processes and our efforts to enhance public participation in national and international forums.



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