

Policy Initiatives, Ground Realities and Way forward for making ICT and Telecom services accessible to Persons with Disabilities

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Background

- How this project started ?
 - ITU requested NTA to propose some projects where ITU can extend its assistance for the year 2012.
 - NTA responded with few projects and ITU chose to extend its assistance on “**ICT Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities in Nepal**” which NTA gracefully accepted.
- ITU proposed the name of two experts in this field, Ms. Nirmita Narasimhan (ITU Expert on accessibility) and Ms. Archana Gulati (ITU Expert on universal service policy Matters) to come up with a “National Framework on ICT accessibility for persons with disabilities”.
- This was endorsed by NTA with detailed Terms of Reference (ToR)
- This Mission is currently on a field-visit of which this workshop is a part, where the mission can get direct feedback from the stakeholders.

Why is it necessary to make ICT accessible to the differently abled people

- Access to Information is a basic human right accepted worldwide, hence persons with disabilities (PwDs) cannot be an exception
- “It is now realized that the access to appropriate technology creates adequate opportunity for the Persons With disabilities that promote their overall development and empowerment, opens door for the equality, non-discrimination and participation. Any newly developed information technology must take into consideration the needs of the readers from the beginning of the development of these technology, otherwise that might be

Why is it necessary to make ICT accessible to the differently abled people

the violation of their human rights since latest technology are still outreached to more than two-third of the world's Disability community living in developing countries while the situation is more worsening in the under developed countries like Nepal”

- Birendra Raj Pokharel, National Federation of the Disabled-Nepal
- With ICT being one of the basic and effective tool to reach the masses and accelerate national growth, Nepal is also well positioned to utilize its present penetration for the overall individual and national development including PwD.
- Likewise, persons with disabilities can also make themselves ICT literate and enjoy the benefits associated with it if the ICT tools are made PwD friendly.

Why is it necessary to make ICT accessible to the differently abled people

- As the Digital divide between developed and developing countries, rural and urban areas keeps on increasing, the digital divide is also widening with those who have access to it and those who do not. As majority of the people who do not have access to ICT come from the sizeable number of persons with disabilities and old age population, It is very much required to take those people onboard the mainstream of ICT uptake.
- Rather than taking this mismatch as a problem, it should be taken as an opportunity. When we are moving towards having a nationwide coverage and near to 100% penetration (assuming uneven distribution of mobile phones and ICT facilities), only those left will be people with disabilities and the growing number of old age people who are mostly illiterate. Hence, introducing accessible technologies to serve them will be a market opportunity rather than liability for the service providers.

Policy Initiatives

- International Initiatives
 - Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Nepal became the 86th country to ratify the convention on 07 May, 2010.

For the purposes of the present Convention: "Communication" includes languages, display of text, Braille, tactile communication, large print, accessible multimedia as well as written, audio, plain-language, human-reader and augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, including accessible information and communication technology;
 - An Initiative out of WTDC-06 (Resolution 56) creating awareness & skills to mainstream disability issues:
 - Equal opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs)
 - Supporting member states meet obligations under Article 9 of the UN Convention for Rights of Persons with disabilities.

Policy Initiatives

- National Initiatives

- Various Acts, Regulations, Byelaws, Policies and other documents endorsed by the Government of Nepal have directly or indirectly addressed the issue related to PwD.

For e. x. Protection and Welfare of the Disabled Persons Act 2039 (1982), The Protection and Welfare of Disabled Persons Rules, 2051 BS (1994), The Children's Act, 2048 BS (1992), The Social Welfare Act 2049 BS (1992) etc. to name few.

- Likewise, there are several ICT related Acts, Regulations, Byelaws, Policies etc. that do not specifically speak about accessibility by persons with disabilities. Such prevailing legislative documents need some amendments before they will become disability friendly.

Ground Realities

- Works are being carried out by different government entities, INGOs and NGOs albeit not as expected whereas ICT sector is growing very rapidly. Hence, persons with disabilities are being left out of the mainstream of Telecommunication and ICT development.
- There is a lack of visible coordination between the people working for the person with disabilities, either through government or through private initiative.
- At present, there is no clear demarcation between ICT and telecommunication as in the past, and it is getting more blurred day by day. Likewise, the work scope of different ministries, and their departments is also getting overlapped thereby duplicating the time, efforts and money spent.

Ground Realities

- Not all existing Acts, Rules, Bylaws, Policies etc. clearly mention about the rights of and obligations to the PwD
- Greater experience sharing is generally not happening and it is also not always possible in absence of set mechanism in place.
- Experience and expertise required may be diverse to accomplish some task, which is generally not always available within the same ministry, department or organization under consideration.
- Financing for the projects related to PwDs is taken as a liability. They are generally carried out as a one-off social responsibility projects rather than a long term viable solutions to PwDs.

Way Forward

- In this context, the coordinated effort is the need of the hour and we have to ensure that the time, efforts and money spent are utilized efficiently, thereby benefitting the targeted people.
- Experience sharing between the people working for the PwDs should happen from time to time.
- All the related Acts, Rules, Bylaws, Policies should be amended to make them PwD friendly.
- Investment on projects for PwDs should not remain as a liability, they should be turned into a market opportunity, as they are still the niche market service providers are still to explore.

Way Forward

- Further, initiatives to make mobile and ICT services accessible to PwD cannot always sustain on the one time grant, loan etc. However, we can look into ways to make them self sustainable by showing value in it, thereby attracting more PwDs to subscribe to different types of mobile and ICT services.
- Few such initiatives can be to invest in pilot projects which makes accessing mobile and ICT applications exciting and easier for PwDs. Once door is made ajar, the world of opportunities will be automatically available.

Way Forward

- Pilot projects can be funded through any existing funds created to serve the marginalized community.
- One such fund is the Rural Telecommunication Development Fund (RTDF). To kick start the initiative, pilot projects can be launched in the rural areas, which might not benefit only PwDs in rural areas, but also in urban areas, if it proves to be effective.

Recommendations to NTA

In Section 4.7.1 of the draft report prepared by the mission, It has been recommended that NTA can do the following to promote telecommunications accessibility:

- Formulate a policy / Code of good practice for accessibility of telecom products and services through a consultative process involving persons with disabilities and their representative organizations.

NTA's view: It can be initiated with immediate effect as it seems it does not require any legislative change. Further, NTA hopes to get sincere and dedicated support from organisations working for persons with disabilities, industry and other stakeholders

Recommendations to NTA

- Include accessible service delivery, especially access to emergency services, as part of the license terms of operators.

NTA's view: *This requires detailed discussion with the operators as it might require technical adjustment to the network. It can be implemented immediately if operators are ready or can be implemented with necessary software/hardware modification within some agreed timeframe.*

Recommendations to NTA

- Identify accessibility as a criterion for good quality of service and establish systems for assessing and benchmarking the same.

NTA's view: Operators are of the view that the present QoS criteria are stringent and so many and they are not able to meet most of the benchmark when the survey is carried out by NTA. However, NTA can dwell on identifying accessibility as a criterion for good quality of service and if done so, systems should naturally be there to assess and benchmark the same. We might again look into ITU's help into it during the ITU's assistance to Nepal next year on Improving Quality of Service of Telecommunication Service.

Recommendations to NTA

- Use the Rural Telecommunications Development Fund for providing basic fixed, mobile and broadband services for persons with disabilities in both rural and urban areas using assistive technologies. This could include Launching pilot projects and programmes for funding accessible ICTs, funding of development and deployment of open-source assistive technology such as screen readers for mobile devices in local languages which could be bundled along with connections by service providers, maintaining an accessible website and work with other telecom related government agencies to also have accessible websites, encouraging service providers and manufacturers to maintain accessible websites with a dedicated web page(s) containing information about their products or services for persons with disabilities, Incentivize/Mandate service providers to design special tariff schemes and packages to encourage mobile usage amongst persons with disabilities, undertaking periodic surveys to gather and publish data on telephony/mobile services/internet adoption and use by persons with disabilities, encouraging international cooperation in this area, mandating that at least some percentage of public access facilities (community telephones) provided through universal service are accessible to persons with disabilities, the local government should be able to request for such a facility based upon the number/type of disabled population, Identifying and adopting internationally recognized accessibility standards for telecommunications products and services such as those developed by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the International Standards Organization (ISO).

Recommendations to RTDF

- Use the Rural Telecommunications Development Fund for providing basic fixed, mobile and broadband services for persons with disabilities in both rural and urban areas using assistive technologies.
- NTA's view: *Launching Pilot Projects and Programs, making some public access facilities accessible to persons with disabilities, giving fund to local government to establish such facilities can be carried out through RTDF. This might not be much of a problem if such initiatives are carried out in rural areas, but to carry out such initiatives in urban areas might require change in the legislation related to use of RTD Fund.*

Recommendations to RTDF

- Use the Rural Telecommunications Development Fund for providing basic fixed, mobile and broadband services for persons with disabilities in both rural and urban areas using assistive technologies.
- NTA's view: *However, maintaining accessible website, maintaining accessible websites with dedicated web pages containing information about products and services for disabled people, Incentivize or mandate service providers to design special tariff schemes and packages to encourage mobile usage among persons with disabilities, undertaking periodic surveys to gather and publish data related to ICT use and adoption by persons with disabilities, encouraging international cooperation, etc. can be done without use of RTD Fund and can also be mandated. If concerned agencies are encouraged to use their own fund, the process might be simpler as well.*

Recommendations to RTDF

- Identify accessibility of telecommunication and mobile services for persons with disabilities as a specific mandate of the universal service obligation.
 - *It can be initiated with the public consultation with all the stakeholders. As this requires legislative change, the process might be time consuming.*
- Implement pilot and large scale projects and programmes to provide basic and special telecom services for persons with disabilities. These could include provision of services such as relay service, subsidized cost of mobile phones, low tariff plans or development of specialized software or provision of specialized services like daily news or library service.
 - *Can be initiated as a short term project or confined to some geographical area such as rural area. They should be later planned to be developed into self sustainable model. Special/low tariffs, subsidized cost of mobiles, development of specialized software can be encouraged.*
- Prescribe accessibility as a key criterion for projects to be supported by the Fund.
 - *Can be implemented immediately*

Recommendations to RTDF

- Ensure that call for proposals, tender documents and all other documentation and information published by the RTDF is accessible to persons with disabilities.
 - *It is doable but it might need detailed System Analysis and Design.*
- Require service providers to provide equal levels of access to persons with disabilities as part of universal service agreements.
 - *Not immediately implementable as it might require Technical modification into the system. In depth discussion with the service providers will be required before it is implemented.*
- Maintain an accessible website.
 - *Can be implemented within agreed timeline*

Recommendations to RTDF

- **Fund accessible ICT centres with assistive technologies in schools/special schools through a pilot project scheme.**
 - *Can be implemented immediately in rural areas. If successful, the same model can be implemented in urban areas with legislative arrangement.*
- **Fund accessible community telephone/internet centres for public access in rural areas. This would also benefit the illiterate population.**
 - *Can be implemented immediately in rural areas.*
- **Fund pilot projects/schemes for providing mobile access by way of special tariffs and appropriate handsets with/without bundled content as per requirements of persons with disabilities.**
 - *Can be implemented immediately in rural areas. If successful, the same model can be implemented in urban areas with legislative arrangement.*

Expected outcome of the workshop

- To make all the stakeholders especially those involved in providing ICT services aware of the rights of the persons with disabilities in using ICT technologies.
- To share and exchange experience between the participants. More importantly, build a good rapport for future cooperation.
- To provide a single platform for the ITU experts to hear and incorporate the views of the stakeholders, give their opinions, and finally come up with the "National Framework on Making ICT and mobile phones accessible for persons with disabilities" that will be readily implementable taking onboard all the stakeholders.
- More importantly, to get the feedback from the concerned agencies on the recommendation put forward by the ITU in its draft report that will be addressed properly by the ITU experts in the final report.

Thank you for your kind Attention !!!

Any Questions ???

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