TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND ICT FOR ALL

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Eagerness to communicate with each other remained a perennial human urge from the earliest history of mankind. This eagerness to know the others and each other has led to the formation of society and freed individuals from isolation. Now, for this society to survive, flourish and prosper, its elements needed to interact well with each other. While constraints of geography, distance, political boundaries of nations etc. made such interaction limited, telecommunications and the internet came to rescue and became useful tools in the recent years for human welfare and progress. If man has to get along well with his fellow men, if business has to thrive, if society has to exist in harmony, if nations have to co-exist and co-operate, there must be adequate telecommunications and the internet facilities between elements of the society whose interdependent needs have to be met. As society progressed and became more complex, these mutual interdependencies increased with new dimensions and demand. Both telecommunications and the internet, particularly wireless and fiber optic communications, in the recent past have seen tremendous development to match that demand.

The world telecommunication day every year reminds us about the success and potentials of the quickly developing sector of telecommunication in the country. International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is helping the world to communicate with each other since its inception in 1885. The ITU organized a World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva in December 2003 to explore the opportunities of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for the benefit of mankind. The 11000 delegates from 175 countries to the summit agreed on the importance of ICTs as an essential requirement for creating an Information Society and embraced the idea of universal, accessible, equitable and affordable ICT infrastructure and services as a key goal. The WSIS endorsed a Declaration of Principle and a Plan of Action which :
- Create a common vision of the information society.
- Establish a framework which will involve all stakeholders.
- Set out an agenda for universal accessible and affordable access to ICTs.
- Create a voluntary digital solidarity fund.
- Meet the challenges of Millennium Development Goals through ICTs.

ICTs can play important role to meet the Millennium Development Goals which are:
- Eradication of poverty and hunger.
- Achievement of universal education.
- Promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women.
- Reduction of child mortality.
- Improvement of maternal health.

- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.
- Ensure environmental sustainability and
- Development of global partnerships for development.

WSIS sets out the following ten global reference targets which are to be achieved by 2015.

1. Connecting villages and community access point
2. Connecting Universities, colleges, secondary and primary schools
3. Connecting scientific and research centers
4. Connecting public libraries, cultural centers, museums, post offices and archives
5. Connecting health centers and hospitals and
6. Connecting all local and government departments by ICTs.
7. .Adopting School level ICT-based curriculum.
8. Ensuring all of the world's population to have access to TV and Radio services.
9. Encouraging to develop and facilitate internet content in all world languages.
10. Ensuring that more than half of the world's inhabitants have access to ICT within their reach.

Government of Bangladesh is fully aware about the importance of telecommunication and ICT to build Bangladesh as an ICT-driven nation comprising a knowledge-based society and adopted ICT as a priority tools to fight hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy and discrimination against marginalized groups and areas. To create an equal and affordable opportunity for all to information facilities, the Government has taken some positive initiatives :

- Development of telecommunication infrastructure in the country through both public and private sector.
- A high-powered task force was formed long time back and recently reconstituted.
- National Telecom Policy was approved in 1998.
- National ICT policy was approved in 2002.
- Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) started functioning since 2002. The commission has been provided with necessary authority to act as the regulator and watchdog for the telecom sector of Bangladesh. As a result we are enjoying multi-operator competitive environment. Recently, BTRC did a number of highly commendable jobs like checking and controlling illegal VoIP call termination business, realizing huge fines from some mobile operators who were involved in illegal VoIP business, earning lot of revenues as levy from other telecom services and offering of about Taka 1500 crores to national exchequer, formulation of International Long Distance Telecommunication Services (ILDTS) policies which was approved by the cabinet and now in the implementation process, issuing of licenses to International Gateways (IGWs), Interconnection Exchanges (ICXs), Internet exchanges (IXs), IP telephony, call centers, cancellation of licenses of invalid operators etc.
- Introduction of new private operators in fixed line system (PSTN) including Dhaka zone has created a competitive scenario in the country. This will definitely increase the teledensity and teleaccess further, which in turn will facilitate the dissemination of ICT.

- Copyright Law was amended by Jatiyo Sangsad incorporating computer software issues.
- Postal department has introduced e-post services.
- Easy loan facilities are available for SMEs to promote ICT.
- The country is now connected with the information superhighway through BTTB owned SEA-ME-WE-4 submarine cable and more private connections by submarine cables are underway.
- BTTB has recently been converted into a public limited company BTCL to improve its functionality and operational efficiency, to face new challenges of telecommunication services.
- All the district HQ and Upazillas have already been brought under Digital Telephone Network.
- Installation charge of telephone connection has been reduced, order has also been given to reduce connection time.
- Local, NWD and International call and Internet usage charge has been reduced.
- Leased internet access charge for Govt. organization, educational and research institutions, software exporters etc. has been reduced.
- Friendly taxation measure has been taken for ICT equipment.
- ICT incubator under operation and setting up of an ICT park in Gazipur is under process. A Road-map for further ICT development is now being formulated.

In order to have universal, affordable, equitable and accessible ICT facilities, the following recommendations can be made :
- Telecommunication/ICT infrastructure should be strengthened and extended to the rural and disadvantaged areas. Special projects should be taken in the Annual Development Program with adequate allotment of fund.
- ICT-based curriculum at all levels of education should be made mandatory. Adequate facilities such as computer network , broadband internet and skilled teachers should be ensured. English is primarily the language of computer science and ICT. Learning English language must be given emphasis. Appropriate training programs should be designed and delivered to the ICT professionals for enhancing their skills. Human resource development in ICT should be given the top priority.
- Multi-purpose community center with phone, computer, internet connectivity, email facility should be established in phases up to at least Union level.
- ICT awareness campaign through mass media should be strengthened and developing web sites in Bengali language should be encouraged for our common people.
- All taxes and duties on import of telecommunication/ICT equipment should be made as low as possible.
- Initiatives should be taken by the Government to ensure active participation of all stakeholders – private sectors, NGOs and civil societies in the process of building an ICT-driven nation by 2015.
- International and Regional cooperation should be sought for sharing and transferring technology/knowledge and financing telecommunication/ICT projects which are crucial for building the information society.

- Internet connectivity costs should be further reduced and more submarine links to global internet trunk should be established to ensure uninterrupted connectivity.
- SMEs in the telecommunications and ICT sector should be further promoted.
- All government organizations/offices at all levels should be instructed to introduce more and more ICT-based services. All employees should gradually be trained in ICT knowledge to take care of their ICT-based services.
- The newly reconstituted Task Force on ICT should meet more frequently to see progress and take appropriate action in time to accelerate the progress.
- BTTB and TeleTalk must be freed from all kinds of bureaucracies, they must be allowed to work independently with full authority .
- Finally, the Government must strengthen BTRC by giving them full authority, equip and facilitate the regulatory body, strict and forceful laws/regulations must be framed and ensure that BTRC regulations are implemented and followed strictly.