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ICTs for development



“There is a huge scope to accord prime space to development issues and improve the quality of coverage of development news in the mainstream print and electronic media”. This was the major consensus at the Second Regional Consultation on Cross Media Partnerships and Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) that opened on 27th May. The workshop was organised jointly by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) in partnership with the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), New Delhi and the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore (IIMB).

The first day of the consultation brought together a range of owners, editors and senior development journalists representing the language, mainstream and specialty media, chiefs of the corporate decision making divisions of large media houses and senior representatives from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (I&B) of the Government of India.

Opening the Consultation, the former Prime Minister of India, Mr. I K Gujral said that The Human Development Reports (HDRs) had impacted upon thinking and policies the world over as their philosophy was dynamic and people-centred rather than simply growth-led. The

emergence of new technologies also needed to be understood in the context of their relevance for human development. Lauding the expansion of the Indian language media in a big way over the years, Mr. Gujral said this had helped bring to the fore issues of poverty, gender equity and social transformation. Mr. Gujral cautioned that Government-owned media need not be commercially-driven as its central responsibility lay in promoting social change communication.

Speaking on the occasion, the I&B Secretary, Mr. Pawan Chopra said when Prasar Bharati was founded the idea was to have a media organisation that was free from not just political pressures but also immune to commercial pulls. He said that the Government in India had from the very early days made a conscious effort to be inclusive in its communication which is why the number of radio and television stations in the country had grown in a major way since independence. “The need now was to invest in capacity and competency-building for community-based communication”, the Secretary said. Citing examples of the Government’s efforts to enable affordable access to television to a majority of people in the country, Mr Chopra said the Government was working on free-to-air Direct to Homes (DTH) television which will enable receipt of multi-channel programmes for large sections of people.

The UNDP Resident Representative and UN Resident Coordinator in India Dr. Brenda Gael McSweeney, in her introductory remarks, said that while the share of Information Technology (IT) and IT-enabled services in the economy was beyond debate, yet the somewhat unglamorous information and communication technologies for development, especially

the C between I and T gets crowded out of most policy and discussion fora. She also said that ICT is the key tool with much greater potential for rapid social change and human development

The Chief of Asia and Transition Economies Unit of UNDESA, Dr. Alexei Tikhomirov said ICTs had made a major impact on most aspects of our social lives, particularly in enhancing participation in decision-making leading to greater accountability.

Lamenting the trend towards shrinking space for development stories in the media, noted development journalist Darryl d' Monte, Chairperson of the Forum of Environment Journalists, said even the regional media was following the profits-alone model of the national media. A fallacious premise was being made that development news does not sell and is not of much interest to the people. Citing a recent international environmental poll that confirmed that across the world people had shared concern related to health and environment, he asked why the media was not putting greater spotlight on issues of common concern.

Television journalist Vikram Chandra said the challenge was to strike the right balance between development news and other forms of news so as to allow for a large viewership. Noted journalist and editor of Saptahik Outlook, Alok Mehta said that one of the serious emerging concerns for the language media was that while in the past it derived inspiration from the mainstream media on editorial content and ideology, today it was taking cue from the profit-making plans and strategies of the big media, leading to commodification of the news. Noting that there was a growing demand for informed and analytical writing — 53 per cent of readers in

Ms Surekha Subarmal from UNDP addressing the regional consultation



Bihar surveyed by a newspaper poll said they like to read the edit page — Mr Mehta said that the challenge was to cover development news in a manner that elicited reader interest.

Offering a corporate point of view, the Brand Director of The Times of India group of publications, Rahul Kansal said that his group sought to meet the generic expectations from the newspaper of its largely-urban readers and to that extent believed in being astute and insightful in covering news rather than occupy a high moral pedestal. “There is huge scope for increasing positive news and limit the overdose of negative news”, Kansal admitted. “We see ourselves as a consumer brand, no different than any other consumer item”, Kansal said.

Consultations on the first day also focused on the role and scope of community radio for empowerment of communities and inclusive communication.

The second day's discussions highlighted the use of free and open source software in the area of ICT for development.

Describing Open Source Software as an area of far-reaching relevance for rural development and community-based initiatives, Mr. R. Chandrashekar, the Joint Secretary for E-Governance, Ministry of Information Technology, said that a number of fora within the Government were actively promoting and advocating for non-proprietary software. “We have to keep in mind a discerning consumer who wants quality and value delivered at an affordable price, and Open Source Software meets this requirement well”, he said.

Speaking at the Consultation, Dr. S Ramakrishnan, the head of Software Development

in the Department of Information Technology, Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, made a strong case for the promotion of Free and Open Source Software. He called for greater localisation of Open Source Software and vendor support for user groups. He said that the Government recognises a tremendous scope for public-private partnerships and is considering pilot initiatives and supporting the NGOs working the field. He said that the need of the hour is to spread the word and encourage the people to look at Open Source software as an efficient alternative.

The Consultation highlighted successful case studies in the use of Open Source Software in various areas. Mr. Sanjay Jaju, District Collector of the West Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh and pioneer of the much-acclaimed e-governance initiative *Saukaryam*, discussed how the use of Open Source Software has enhanced the administration work in his district. Mr. Venkatesh Hariharan of IndLinux made a compelling case for promoting Open Source Software in the area of Indian language computing. Mr. Ravi Gupta, Director CSDMS, emphasized the role played by open GIS software and the un-supportive GIS policies of Indian Government.

The recommendations of the Consultation emphasized that Open Source Software has implications for human development, and thus the issue of technology should be considered not in isolation but in the context of development. Discussions during the Consultation yielded a consensus about Open Source Software being the way forward, and the need for developing support mechanisms for bringing about an open source software revolution. ■



A panel on the use of free and open source software in the area of ICT for Development