Pilot Project Scheme

Access to ICTs and ICT Enabled Services for
Persons with Disabilities in Rural India

Concept Paper, July 2011

'To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems...'

-Article 9 of the U.N Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS & IT
DEPARTMENT OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS
UNIVERSAL SERVICE OBLIGATION FUND
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Universal Service Obligation Fund
Department of Telecommunications

1. Introduction

Background

1.1   India is home to one of the largest disabled population in the world. As per census 2001, 21.9 million Indians suffer from some form of disability[1].Seventy five per cent of persons with disabilities live in rural areas. A good percentage of these would either be unemployed and/or illiterate.

1.2   ICTs can play an important role in facilitating the socio-economic and political inclusion and mainstreaming of Persons with Disabilities ("PwDs") as ICTs can enable them to access various services (health, education, government services etc), information, employment opportunities etc and most importantly, to communicate effectively in spite of their particular disability.   However for ICTs to play this role, the ICT services must be available, affordable and be truly "accessible". According to the ITU tool kit on e-accessibility, '[a]ccessibility is a measure of the extent to which a product or service can be used by a person with a disability as effectively as it can be used by a person without that disability[2]'.

1.3   In recognition of the significance of ICTs, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ("UNCRPD" or "Convention"), has stressed the obligation of the State to ensure access to the same for PwDs[3]. The Convention was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 13, 2006 and has been signed by 146 countries as of September, 2010, of which 90 have ratified it, making it an enforceable legal instrument since May 5, 2008 (when the 20th ratification occurred). India ratified the Convention on 1.10.08.

1.4   Article 9 of the Convention defines ICT accessibility as an integral part of Accessibility Rights[4]. Article 21 on Freedom of expression, opinion, and access to information specifically states that 'States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice….' Communication is defined by the Convention as including all possible means of interaction that may eliminate barriers. Communication "includes languages, display of text,

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[1] (sight/speech/hearing/mental) at http://www.disabilityindia.org/table10.cfm
[2] http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/sis/PwDs/Documents/e-Accessibility__Final_.pdf
[3] The Convention defines persons with Disabilities to include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on equal basis with others.
[4] E- accessibility Policy Handbook for Persons With Disabilities

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 include accessible information and communication technology". ICT accessibility is in fact included in all sector-specific accessibility accommodation and both Articles 9 and 21 state that even private entities need to take accessibility into account when providing products and services[5].

Role of USOF

1.4   The Universal Service Obligation Fund of India (USOF) came into being with effect from 1.4.02 with the passing of the Indian Telegraph (Amendment) Act 2003 in December 2003. The Fund which is headed by the USOF Administrator, has a mandate of providing access to Telegraph (Telecommunications) services to people in rural and remote areas at reasonable and affordable prices. The Fund has initiated a large number of schemes aimed at promoting public and individual access to telephony and broadband services in rural India.

1.5   Ensuring that PwDs in rural India are able to effectively access telecommunications services, is an important facet of bridging the digital divide. Given its mandate, USOF appreciates that special initiatives and schemes are required to this end. In fact USOF is aware that addressing the need of individual and public access to telecommunications services by PwDs in rural India will also benefit the significant proportion of rural Indians who are aged or illiterate and need assistive technologies (ATs) to enable meaningful ICT access. An example of the same would be text to speech technologies which would enable the visually impaired and illiterate/ semi-literate to communicate and to access news, information and e-services in audio format. Similarly, speech to text ATs would benefit both PwDs and illiterate/semi-literate to communicate and could facilitate them to perform ICT enabled/related jobs. Keeping this in view, it has been decided to launch a scheme of pilot projects for enabling PwDs in rural areas to access ICTs and ICT enabled services.

1.6   Accordingly, in October 2010, USOF circulated a concept paper on 'Connecting Persons with Disabilities through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Mobile Phones in Rural India' prepared on its behalf by the Centre for Internet and Society. The concept paper and feedback/proposals received from stakeholders are available on the USOF website at http://www.usof.gov.in/usof-cms/disabled.htm.

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[5] Ibid

2. Scheme Description

2.1   In keeping with its mandate of Universal service and in recognition of the vital role that ICTs can play in facilitating the daily lives of PwDs, enhancing their well being and productivity and enabling their active participation in society, it has been decided to launch a scheme of Pilot Projects for access to ICT facilities combined with ATs for PwDs in rural India.

2.2   These projects would address accessibility in terms of hardware, software and human interface. The projects are envisaged to cover persons with various forms of disability including inter alia sensory (including vision and hearing), cognitive and motor disability. In this initiative, USOF would like to enlist the assistance of various stakeholders including inter alia telecom service providers, telecom equipment manufacturers, mobile and internet/broadband content providers, NGOs, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment etc.

3. Objectives

3.1   In recognition of the role of ICTs in helping PwDs to achieve self reliance and in facilitating their inclusion in mainstream society, this scheme seeks to provide PwDs in rural India with meaningful access to telecommunications facilities and through telecommunications facilities, to enable them to access public services, information, educational and employment opportunities.

3.2   To this end, USOF intends to undertake a variety of pilot projects to facilitate access to ICTs for PwDs. This would take the form of facilitation with regard to provision of appropriate ATs by way of telecommunications infrastructure (mobile phones and computers/servers), assistive software and content (including real time information and data bank of books and other printed matters relevant to PwDs). The projects would also cover the aspect of training of both facilitators and PwDs in the use of ATs.

3.3   It is hoped that these pilot projects would effectively demonstrate and highlight the utility and positive impact of AT enabled ICT access for PwDs and this would encourage service providers and other stakeholders to take up such initiatives on a larger scale in order to address the needs of PwDs.

4. Project Categories

4.1 The following project categories are envisaged so far. However other project types may also be considered.

A. Setting up of ICT centres equipped with appropriate ATs for PwDs in educational/rehabilitation/vocational training institutions in rural areas.

B. Provision of special handsets with/without access to bundled content for PwDs in rural areas.

C. Public access to ICT facilities with ATs in villages or in/near rural institutions dealing with PwDs.

5. Benefits/Anticipated Outcomes

• Through this initiative it is primarily hoped to enrich the lives of the PwDs who are provided with ICT enabled access to information, skills and employment opportunities under the scheme.

• The scheme is expected to result in enhancement of self-reliance of PwDs covered and in their integration with and mainstreaming into society. The pilot projects would thus be expected to contribute to the social, political and economic empowerment of PwDs.

• It is also envisaged that the success of these pilots will effectively demonstrate the utility and benefits of AT enabled ICTs to the Persons with Disabilities and their families in rural India and to institutions/organizations dealing with PwDs, on the demand side, and to service providers, equipment manufacturers and content providers etc, on the supply side.

• This scheme is expected to provide an impetus to the development of ATs and relevant content in accessible formats in regional languages.

• Finally, it is expected that the success of these projects will lead to scaling up of such initiatives to the national level under both

commercial and CSR agendas of service providers/telecom manufacturers/content providers.

6. Anticipated Roles and Responsibilities/ Support Sought /

- *USOF:* To evaluate and approve project proposals from interested participants; to provide subsidy for projects launched under the scheme; to evaluate and compile scheme results for further scaling up of the scheme.

- *Telecom Service Providers*: To offer special tariff plans for PwDs; to coordinate with content providers, equipment manufacturers and NGOs/organizations working for PwDs to formulate project proposals and lead the implementation of projects under the scheme.

- *Educational/Vocational/Rehabilitation Institutions for PwDs*: To communicate the needs of PwDs; to make necessary arrangements for incorporating use of ATs to make ICTs accessible to PwDs; to train trainers/facilitators and PwDs regarding use of ATs. To facilitate in the development of a data bank of training material, books, reports, journals etc in accessible formats.

- *Equipment Manufacturers*: To offer discounts on equipments, such as mobile handsets/telephones/computers etc equipped with necessary ATs and to participate actively in the scheme.

- *Application and Content Developers*: To identify demand of different kinds of content for PwDs in coordination with concerned NGOs and institutions and to convert and deliver the content in easily accessible formats.

- *Non-Governmental Organizations*: to identify and convey the requirements of PwDs and to facilitate scheme implementation including training of trainers/facilitators, PwDs, operators of public access points/ICT centres and help by way of handholding throughout the project duration.

- *Concerned Ministries and Departments of Government of India*: To offer necessary assistance and support to USOF and other project participants to ensure realization of objectives of this scheme.

7. Projected Timelines

(i) September 2011

- A meeting of all stakeholders shall be organized wherein the scheme will be presented and discussed. Presentations may be made and ideas exchanged.

- A period of 6 weeks shall be given for project submission as per prescribed format.

(ii) October -November 2011

- Evaluation of project proposals shall be carried out

(iii) December 2011-January 2012

- Signing of Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs)/Agreements with project applicants

- **Formal launch of Scheme**

(iv) December 2012-January 2013

- Completion of projects and evaluation of the same.

(v) February-March 2013

- Comprehensive scheme report

- Seminars to share the experience/achievements

- Review for scaling up in case of successful pilots

8. Contact Information:

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For updates on the Scheme, please refer to
http://www.usof.gov.in/usof-cms/disabled.htm