

Information Society Development in Hong Kong

Response of The Hong Kong Council of Social Service to the Public Consultation on Digital 21 Strategy

December 2006

Introduction

- 1 At the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS, Tunis 2005), representatives of governments, including the Chinese delegation, iterated an unequivocal support for the Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action adopted at the first phase of the WSIS in Geneva in December 2003.
- 2 There is a global consensus and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, so that people everywhere, regardless of their characteristics can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, and to achieve their full potential. Many believe that economic divide has given birth to the digital divide, which is then translated as a vicious cycle of poverty. Digital inclusion therefore is believed to have crucial bearings on the anti-poverty movement.
- 3 Meanwhile, at the recent International Telecommunication Union World Forum 2006 held in Hong Kong, the keynote speaker, Nobel Prize Winner Professor Muhammad Yunus emphasized that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) should not only be relevant to economic development, but should also be deployed to help eradicate poverty in all countries and regions. ICT, if properly used, should be an effective tool for social, cultural, and political development.

Digital Divide in an Affluent Digital City

- 4 The ranking of Hong Kong in most ICT scales is already quite high. The recent Digital Opportunity Index (2005) sponsored by the International Telecommunication

Union ranked Hong Kong a world second, just below South Korea.

- 5 Nevertheless, there is still a gap between the disadvantaged groups and their mainstream counterparts in utilizing ICT. And in fact, the higher the computer and internet penetration rate Hong Kong has attained, the more desperate would be the situation of those who fail to participate effectively in the information society.
- 6 The Council has taken part in the Impact Analysis Study on the Degree of Digital Inclusiveness in Hong Kong conducted by the University of Hong Kong. Results of that research project confirmed the existence of such a huge gap. For Hong Kong to become a people-centre, inclusive and development-oriented information society, participation of all is important to narrow the gap. Further in-depth research would be necessary to help design appropriate actions to cater for the needs of different disadvantaged groups.
- 7 Hong Kong has been endowed with the most advanced ICT infrastructure, ready for contributing positively to building a caring and harmonious information society. In Hong Kong, digital inclusion policy should be a prominent and critical part of the overall strategy in the eradication of poverty. In this context, we applaud the general direction of taking a holistic approach to digital inclusion as indicated in the consultation paper.

Focusing on the Most Needy

- 8 In the last few years, there had been quite a range of government initiatives aiming at the promotion of ICT in general. That included carnivals and festival type of community programs, television show, visits and tours at advanced ICT sites, public seminars and short classroom sessions to allow participants to experience ICT briefly. As the computer culture in Hong Kong has matured rapidly, it is believed that the need for awareness promotion for general public would have diminished. Public funds should now be targeted towards the needs of the most underprivileged. The Digital Inclusiveness study mentioned above constructed a Digital Inclusion Index (DII) which provides an indication on the nature and magnitude of the needs of different disadvantaged groups. According to DII, for instance, people with disabilities and elderly persons are far behind other disadvantaged groups as far as digital inclusion is concerned. Moreover, people with hearing impairment score far below other disability groups. We believe that more targeted action should be launched to help these groups in particular. The DII should become the objective

foundation upon which program planning and goal setting take place. We believe that regular updating of the Index would be very important.

- 9 The Council is supportive of the provision of government services via electronic means. E-government initiatives nevertheless, like all ICT strategies across the board, must have pro-disadvantaged elements built in. Experience in other countries has indicated that e-government programs without a pro-poor angle would widen instead of narrow the poverty gap (ref: <http://www.apdip.net/projects/e-government>). In the case of Hong Kong, there is a particular challenge to increase the e-government services adoption amongst disadvantaged groups. The Government should provide more effective and practical assistance for the disadvantaged population to become users of e-government services.

Access Divide and Community Based Cyber Centers

- 10 The Council supports the ultimate objective of providing affordable and universal broadband connectivity for every citizen, as indicated in the consultation document. Associated with the pro-poor principle we are advocating, access to information should be a right for every citizen, and access to Internet should be a utility service available to all. For those who lack the ability to help themselves in this aspect, assistance from the government would be crucial. Therefore, we consider that Internet connection fee should be recognized as a special allowance item in Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) scheme for the elderly, the disabled and students, and families in need. We note that, in the same spirit, the costs of phone installation, safety alarm, and telephone monthly fee have already been included as special allowances in CSSA.
- 11 The consultation document has rightly pointed out that cyber points (or cyber centers) in the community needs to be enhanced to bridge the access divide. For students from low income families, utilizing such centers is one significant way to gain access to Internet outside school hours. Since students from low income families would have obtained the necessary computer skills and knowledge from schools, provision of suitable hardware and software would simply address their needs. For other disadvantaged groups, there are certain complications.
- 12 It seems that effective engagement of the disadvantaged groups in ICT utilization has to rely on the internal force from within the community. Both overseas and local experience indicated that the mere provision of training classes would be less

effective as expected. Learning of ICT skills is believed to take place best from within interest-group type of settings where mutual support is available. Adoption of ICT as part of daily living also depends on other facilitating factors in the community such as the availability of community-based computer recycling programs; technical skills refreshment opportunities; low-cost phone-based and on-site technical support and opportunity for volunteering.

- 13 The Council is supportive of the idea that cyber-centers should be established as community ICT hubs in low-income areas for the abovementioned activities to take place in a one-stop, coordinated fashion. While accessible equipments are basic elements to include in those community-cyber-centers, the centers' services must be bundled with suitable peripheral facilities, program plans and most of all the necessary human resources to carry out the plans and manage the cyber-centers. We consider knowledge in the needs of the disadvantaged; good management; quality support service (technical and emotional) and participation of volunteers as key success factors for the cyber-centers.
- 14 Non governmental organizations in the social service sector are active players in the community offering digital inclusion programs for the disadvantaged. Most of the programs so far appear to be scattered and transient. There is also a huge constraint in physical space if computer recycling programs were to happen around the localities. It is possible that if further resources are available, the networks and existing expertise of such NGOs could be leveraged to the ultimate benefit of the disadvantaged population.

Widening the scope of Digital Inclusion

- 15 People-centred and development-oriented information society should go beyond the mere concern of access provision. There is a spectrum of social issues in information society carrying imminent threat to humanity in general. Locally the community has started to realize the social costs of information society development. Internet addiction and other improper use of ICT, for instance, require a concerted effort to tackle. The HKSAR government has a conspicuous role in leading the community in identifying and addressing those issues.
- 16 While we support the continuous effort to address the Access Divide, we should also start to study the emerging Application Divide and Content Divide. Application Divide refers to the fact that disadvantaged groups, even given access to ICT, remain

at a very low level of usage due to the unavailability of appropriate applications. Since disadvantaged groups are of a smaller population compared to mainstream society, dependence on the market force to address the Application Divide would not be effective. Content Divide refers to the lack of suitable content for specific disadvantaged groups due to similar reasons. Obviously, the disadvantaged groups themselves need to be empowered so that they could take up a major role in either the creation of content, or the development of portals and tools that could lead users to appropriate content. We urge the government to take the lead in addressing these two emerging types of divide.

- 17 Closely related to the Content Divide and Application Divide is the availability of suitable assistive devices for people with disabilities. A long term strategy in supporting the research and development activities; commercialization and promotion of utilizing assistive technology is needed.

Strengthening the Steering and Coordination

- 18 Obviously, the many issues to tackle during the course of information society development are far beyond technological considerations. To ensure proper design and implementation of ICT strategies so as to bring benefit to all, especially to those whose voices are hardly heard, it requires a higher level of coordination across government bureaux and participation of different stakeholders in society. It is suggested that a cross-bureaux Information Society Development Committee be established to steer the commitments at the policy level.
- 19 In South Korea, the Korean Agency for Digital Opportunity and Promotion (KADO), a quasi-governmental organization, has a mandate to form a common information access and utilization environment in which the digital-deprived may benefit equally from informatization. KADO is playing a pivotal role in coordinating state-wide digital inclusion programs; conducting related research; and to prevent misuse/abuse of ICT in information society. One of the functions of KADO is to posit international informatization leadership via stimulation of international cooperation and information gap closing exchange. We encourage the government to support such exchanges so as to tap the expertise of KADO into the implementation of local digital inclusion programs. We believe that in the long run, the Information Society Development Committee we propose should need an executive arm like KADO at the operation level. We encourage the HKSAR government to consider the KADO model.

- 20 We are supportive of the setting up of a digital inclusion taskforce as the first step towards the Information Society Committee, which has a wider mandate. We opine that the taskforce should comprise of representatives from various government bureaux; ICT industry; professional bodies and non-governmental organizations to formulate relevant appropriate strategies and initiatives.

Leveraging Multi-stakeholderism

- 21 Multi-stakeholderism is one of the key principles raised in the global agenda of information society development. The organization of WSIS itself is a manifestation of that principle. Private sector and civil society organizations' participation was not only encouraged but was also considered as fundamental to the whole process. The general belief is that if we were to build an inclusive information society, effort from government alone would be far from adequate. In Hong Kong, the positive experience of Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF) has proven a formula in which government input could serve as a catalyst of tri-partite cooperation between government, private sector and civil society organizations.
- 22 We fully support the government to continue sponsoring the DSF. Since its inception in July 2004, DSF has organized two batches of application. Out of a total of 119 applications, DSF has supported only 13 projects. It is unfortunate that the DSF could not support more of such applications, which indeed were of very good quality, due to funding constraints. Recently, DSF has been gaining more support and recognition from the commercial sector. Although donation from commercial enterprises is gradually developing, we consider continuous support from the government as still a necessity at this stage.

Other Suggestions

- 23 We support the notion of facilitating “more affordable access to industry software solutions for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).” Most non-governmental organizations are experiencing the same difficult financial situations as the SMEs. The programs for the SMEs should also cover non-governmental organizations, which are the corner stone for social development.
- 24 To create a digitally inclusive society, it is important for ICT professionals to have a deeper understanding of the disadvantaged groups. The government should continue

to encourage ICT professional bodies to participate in digital inclusion programs. Besides getting training in ICT, students should appreciate the impact of ICT upon social development. ICT graduates with such perspective would be in a better position to design more relevant and appropriate systems and applications for the disadvantaged groups. The government should also formulate corresponding policies for the ICT training institutes so that the appropriate curriculum would be established for the students to learn more about digital inclusion and the impact of ICT upon the society as a whole.

- 25 Industrialization inevitably would lead to some forms of pollution. In the same manner, informatization of society is apparently producing undesirable side effects entailing huge social costs. Digital divide, internet addiction, and child pornography are some examples of such undesirable side effects. Similar to the fact that factories are paying extra levy to help tackle pollution, we believe that businesses that benefit most from the informatization process should help address the side effects. We propose that the government should create a designated fund using related income such as the Spectrum Utilization Fee to establish a sustainable reserve for digital inclusion initiatives in the community.

Conclusion

- 26 While we acknowledge the need for Hong Kong to evolve into a knowledge economy in which ICT adoption is an integral part, collective actions both at the policy level and the operational level, are required to bridge the digital gap. Effective bridging of the gap, being a very demanding and complicated task, warrants the establishment of a high level, multi-stakeholder Information Society Development Committee. We urge the HKSAR government to consider the experience of South Korea as reference; and leverage the existing network of NGOs in the community to establish one-stop community-cyber-centers, so as to develop a more inclusive and caring information society.

Submitted By

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