POLICY GUIDELINE ON INFORMATION SHARING

September 2006

Royal Government of Bhutan
Ministry of Information & Communications

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1.0 BACKGROUND

We have now entered the Information Age, where access to and availability of information ON TIME is seen as critical to attaining our development goals and objectives. The Royal Government, thus, fully recognizes the need to promote an information-rich and knowledge-based Bhutanese society.

A policy objective underpinning the Bhutan ICT Policy and Strategy (BIPS) is to create a Bhutanese info-culture. As Bhutan moves towards constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy, ICT and media can help in boosting the internal efficiency of Government and improving the ability of citizens to access key information and services. ICT and media can help to create interactions between citizens and Government where citizens can identify their needs. With rapid modernization taking place in the country, Government decision-makers, citizens and businesses will increasingly demand access to information to assist them in making better decisions.

Creating a culture of open and free sharing of information will not only enhance efficiency in all sectors of the economy, but most importantly increase transparency, a basis that will help attain efficiency, accountability and professionalism within the system. Good governance is founded on active citizen participation and this will allow citizens more opportunities to participate in governance, through access to government procedures, direct communication with public servants and elected representatives, as well as communicating among themselves on matters relevant to themselves.

Due to rugged mountainous terrain and dispersed settlement pattern, citizens frequently need to travel days to access public services. ICT and media can be used to take these services closer to where they live. ICT and media has enormous potential to improve the livelihoods of low income people by reducing the cost of providing services to traditionally marginalized communities and facilitating the build up of constructive social capital. ICT and media contributes to poverty reduction by enhancing the efficiency of the economy, enabling better delivery of public services, and creating new employment opportunities for the poor and disadvantaged. Access to information plays a crucial role in improving living conditions of the poor and promotes integration of isolated communities into the global economy.

In view of these, the Royal Government recognizes information as the most valuable asset in every aspect of task each agency performs, and not to perceive information sharing as a threat to their autonomy and respond with substantial resistance. It is, therefore, important to raise further awareness among agencies on the potential benefits of information sharing.

2.0   NEED FOR INFORMATION SHARING

Major efficiencies gained by effective information sharing include the following:

- Information available within an agency can be used by other agencies and citizens for multiple useful purposes thereby increasing the value of such resources in a cost effective manner;
- Data combination from multiple sources and creation of new data sets promote new research, which further will increase the resource base.;
- Assist educators and researchers to participate meaningfully in the field of governance and in the country's overall development;
- Information made freely available help citizens make informed choices particularly as the country evolves politically towards a democratic constitutional monarchy; and
- Help strengthen confidentiality of certain information as determined and classified by agencies.

Considering these multi-faceted benefits, it is felt that information should be made as widely and freely available as possible while safeguarding the privacy of participants and protecting confidential and proprietary data. Hence, it becomes of paramount importance that a policy guideline on information sharing be established.

Thus, the need for information sharing can be viewed specifically from three angles:

(i)   Information sharing between and among public agencies

All government agencies, private organizations, business houses, inter-governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations collect, process and use a plethora of information and data. In other words, each agency is a warehouse of information which, if used in a coordinated manner, would complement or simplify other agencies' tasks. Agencies would then know the types of data and information available with other agencies, and prevent them from gathering the same or similar information. This will avoid duplication and waste of financial resources and man days consumed in processing and collecting such information and data. Data combination from multiple sources and creation of new data sets will facilitate informed decisions on policies, plans and day-to-day affairs of agencies. Also, importantly this will facilitate equitable and uniform flow of public information among agencies and eliminate the traditional territorial culture because "Information is Power". Hence, there is an urgent need to encourage and promote greater flow of information and data sharing between and among public agencies.

Any information and data, of public relevance, collected through survey and research work must be made available to other agencies for possible use in their work domains. This will not only result in saving limited resources but also ensure consistent use of standard information and data by all agencies. After all, while the nature of each agency's functions and activities may be different

from that of the other, they are all eventually geared towards fulfilling the common goal of enhancing good governance and improving delivery of public services.

(ii) *Information sharing between public agencies and citizens*

The Royal Government seeks to promote a transparent, accountable, efficient and professional government system to serve all citizens. The one and only way to achieve this is to promote a system that facilitates citizens' access to information on government policies, laws, regulations, development programmes and priorities that are being pursued by each agency, including public corporations and autonomous bodies, to achieve the overall development goals and objectives.

The draft Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan enshrines that "A Bhutanese citizen shall have the right to information" and guarantees "freedom of press, radio and television and other forms of dissemination of information, including electronic".

The Government provides various services to the citizens – from rural timber to agricultural extension, health and education services to numerous other public facilities and services such as permits and licenses. The process of applying for and availing these services are currently not easily perceptible and comprehensible to the ordinary citizens. This must be improved upon in keeping with the Good Governance Plus recommendations to enhance the standard and quality of service delivery through strengthened information base. Hence, there must be free flow and sharing of information and data between public agencies and citizens. This would enable citizens to make informed decisions and choices and to participate meaningfully in public policy and administration, and contributing towards creating a transparent and inclusive government.

(iii) *Information sharing among citizens*

Horizontal sharing of information among citizens is equally crucial in creating an informed society that will contribute towards building the existing network of social capital within and among communities. The concept of social capital recognizes that local networking and local information sourcing from within rural communities are powerful drivers for ICT utilization and media coverage in the rural context. ICT and media provide the solutions to constraints posed by distance, geography and demography.

At the rural level where people do not have access to ICT and media facilities, information sharing is being facilitated through institutionalization of Community Information Centers (CICs) in all the gewogs. In the urban areas, citizens must be encouraged to share more information and data using available public information sharing platforms.

The establishment of CICs will allow communities to be networked into their own information generating activities and interests. For example information sought by one community contact is, conditionally, provided to every relevant community within a dzongkhag or in all the other dzongkahs. Through this network, every community will be a peer to other communities and can see what all other communities are learning and experiencing on a daily basis. The principle sources of information, news, opinion and discussion within the network should be the communities themselves through the experiences of their own peers.

Such a network concept will require a central hub, a National Information Center (NIC) that is supported by an information exchange that constantly collects, standardizes and redistributes community information generating traffic from all participating communities across the country using a community Intranet. It would also be Internet-enabled.

3.0 INFORMATION TO BE SHARED

Information should be made as widely and freely available as possible. However, it is not limitless and must take into account privacy of participants and protecting confidential and proprietary data. There are certain types of information such as the ones that concern the security, law & order of the country and the ones that have certain strategic values which cannot be made freely accessible. It is a universally practiced norm to maintain confidentiality about certain types of information in the general interest of the country. Hence, this guideline addresses only those information considered absolutely necessary in fulfilling the overall national objective of creating an informed society.

An agency that commissions a survey or a research work usually has ownership rights over the document produced. However, since the idea is to maximize the benefits from the resources invested by allowing the use of information in the document by other public agencies, the concerned agency will make these materials available online on its website. Where an agency considers any information or document as having sensitive elements in it and therefore wishes to restrict its use only by bonafide users, the agency may institute a requirement for prospective users to make a specific request for its use. In such a case, the relevant documents will not be readily available online, but information regarding the availability of such a document, its title, date and name of author will be made available. In other words, each agency will have the liberty to share information as per its own information sharing security and data protection policy.

Apart from this, it is mandatory for all agencies to provide access to all data and information, research findings, reports and publications of all sorts in their websites. In addition, all government agencies shall provide the following information relating to their functions, policies and services that they provide to citizens:

a) Organization – Name, brief background, organizational structure, who's who, location, contact numbers and addresses;
b) Functions – Organization's policies, mandate, functions, past achievements, future plans and priorities;
c) Documents – Reports and publications (Acts, Regulations, Rules, etc.) of the agency;
d) Services – Types of services provided, procedures, rules, and processes, amount of fees and levies if any, timeframe for providing such services etc.;
e) Forms – Application forms and other documents to be used to apply for services, along with clear procedures and contact person;
f) Where possible, agencies shall promote the system of online application and approval.
g) Procedures for filing complaints and address of the contact person.

4.0 INFORMATION SHARING MECHANISM

Information sharing will be implemented deploying one or a combination of the following media:
a) Electronic – creation of respective websites or feeding information to the Government Web Portal managed by the Ministry of Information and Communications;
b) Print – Information handouts, supplements and leaflets; and
c) Broadcast – awareness and education programmes through talk shows and other available means. This will particularly be an effective means for reaching those larger section of the society who are either illiterate or who do not have access to internet.

5.0 IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

5.1 The Policy Guideline has been approved vide Executive Order dated 30 August 2006 which also mandates the MoIC to take a lead role in coordination, monitoring and backstopping of ministries and agencies on information sharing.
5.2 A multi-sectoral implementation team is to be formed immediately.
5.3 Respective PPDs or equivalent entities of Ministries and agencies will sensitize and provide information to the ICT Unit in the respective organization for hosting and simultaneous updating of the websites/database in consultation with the concerned authorities.
5.4 Focal points in Community Information Centers in Gewogs will play a very important role in facilitating information to the public, as well as sharing local and community information with other Gewogs, Dzongkhags and with central Ministries and agencies.