

NATIONAL INFORMATION POLICIES: ARE THEY POSSIBLE TO FORMULATE?

For the information professionals and specialists who have been involved in the processes of accessing, managing, disseminating, and examining the use of information by the various target groups within society, the requirement for an effective National Information Policy is an accepted given. It is seen as an imperative to ensure better coordination and cooperation between information systems and services; to make the most effective use of scarce resources, and ensure the ready accessibility of information to decision-makers at all levels within the society. Indeed, organizations such as UNESCO and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) have invested heavily over the last twenty years in assisting countries in formulating what has come to be called as National Information Policy.

In my following comments, I would like to underscore the critical need today for governments to invest in the development of national policies, again, please note the emphasis on the plural, for it is evident that to respond to the current needs of information access and utilization, policies are required to address the sectors of communication, information, and the new technologies related to these disciplines.

I also hope to put forth the case, that to date, National Information Policies, whether developed in the North or South have not, on the whole, been successful, and this is due to the lack of participation of the key stakeholders in the policy formulation process. Within IDRC, we have examples of National Information Policies that have been championed by the senior policy makers and the highest level decision makers in government. They have been strong advocates of the importance of information in the socio-economic process, and have voiced their long term commitment to the implementation of the policy. I have already acknowledged the strong support given to National Information Policy formulation by the information professional community. Why then have we not witnessed numerous examples of the successful implementation of these policies?

It is my position that a third level of stakeholder, until this current period, has been absent from much of the policy formulation process. Those who are the ultimate beneficiaries of



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the policies have not been involved in the consultation process, they have only been the receivers of the outcome of the process. The beneficiaries are those who will receive, be influenced by, and hopefully support the strategies, and action plans that evolve from the information policies.

My thesis therefore is that for National Information Policies to be successfully formulated, all stakeholders must be involved in the process. As each category of stakeholder will contribute to the process in a different manner, it is essential that those who are charged with the task of delivering the final policies understand fully the various perspectives of the key stakeholders, and that they ensure that these are reflected in the policy formulation. What exactly is meant by National Information Policies? It is important that our understanding of the context as well as the concept are clear, as we run the risk that is most common amongst information professionals, who assume that they are communicating effectively. It is, unfortunately, the nature of our current vocabulary, for it is a vocabulary that is being used at all levels in the society. Almost every individual has some understanding of the concept of Information Society, the Information Highway, or Knowledge Industries.

It is important to be clear that National Information Policies are not and should not be confused with national information strategies or perhaps more importantly, national information plans. The later two, strategies and plans answer the questions "how" and the "mechanisms" required for implementation. To a large measure, it is this confusion that is also responsible for the non-successful implementation of National Information Policies.

Although the concept of National Information Policy has been discussed in the literature and funded by some donor agencies since the mid-seventies, it is as recent as 1988, that the rationale for formulating National Information Policies was the imperative to ensure better coordination and cooperation between information systems and services. The focus was on the library, information and documentation centres, and how they could be more responsive to a clearly defined target group. Although this rationale is still valid and the concept of cooperation is extremely important, there has been a very interesting shift within the last three to four years. With the universal concern with National and Global Information Infrastructure, in

shorthand referred to as the Information Highway, the purpose, structure, and emphasis of National Information Policies have changed significantly.

As an example of this, I would like to refer to the province of Ontario, in Canada, which via a multi-disciplinary task force established an Information Policy in early 1990. The Task Force identified the role of the, in this case Provincial, Information Policy as a instrument to :

- 1) Ensure that the critical role of information in the society is realized;
- 2) Identify the impact and legal implications of information and information technology on the economy, the political structure and the larger society;
- 3) Provide the framework to persuade the government to develop a strategic information framework that will guide future policy development, legislative changes, the design of government programs and strategic alliances between the private and public sectors; and
- 4) Finally to underline the pivotal role libraries and other publicly funded information providers must place in providing equitable cost-effective access, timely dissemination and people who help.

Using another Canadian example, in 1992, a National Summit on Information Policy was held. It was seen as a unique opportunity to focus on the strategic importance of information and to discuss agendas that would allow all within the nation to maximize the benefits stemming from information resources. A policy framework was created in a hope that members of the society could map out a strategy and action plans to deal with extremely complex issues. In anticipation of the question: "and what is the status of the National Information Policy itself"? Bluntly put, the policy has never been formalized. Why? As I have stated before, all the critical stakeholders were not present. Basically information professionals, in the public and private sector were speaking, quite eloquently, to themselves. The beneficiaries were not present to discuss requirements and describe the profile of those who would benefit. As well, those who control the resources, both monetary and human were not present to provide input regarding the feasibility of the recommendations submitted. As an optimist, however, it can be said that a start has been made.

For the formulation of a set of National Information Policies, there are at least six critical issues that must be fully addressed:

- * **EQUITY OF ACCESS.** The enhancement of the access to information, the protection of privacy, and the recognition that equitable access to information be accepted as a basic principle in any democratic society is fundamental.

Within the context of individual and group empowerment, access to information and knowledge provides the basis for personal growth and informed participation in the democratic life of our communities, and our nation. If there is to be true equity of access to information and its sources, individuals, groups, businesses, and labour must all have access to the information, the technology, the training and the assistance that public institutions support. Perhaps most importantly, the right of access to information must be guaranteed to those who are limited by physical and other disabilities, by illiteracy and by economic disadvantage. The issue of universal access must be addressed fully!

- * **HUMAN RESOURCE CAPACITY BUILDING.** . Within the context of Information Policies formulation, major attention must be given to the development of human resources and capacity. Human resources programs, especially education, training and research and development programs must be consistent with the current information environment. There must be a better understanding of how people learn and focus placed on critical-thinking skills.

- * **INFORMATION RICH AND INFORMATION POOR.** What is required to prevent the widening of the gap between the information rich and the information poor. It is widely recognized that one of the major risks of this current information age with the new information and communication technologies, high skill requirements, and often high costs, is that it can introduce another series of negative stratifications within the society. Clearly, without government involvement in setting public policies, the information age could result in an expanded definition of rich and poor. A commitment must be conveyed to the reduction or hopefully the removal of economic, geographic, technological and other barriers which threaten to create two classes of

citizens, the information rich and the information poor.

- * **ECONOMIC BENEFITS AND PROSPERITY.** Clearly an issue is the maximization of economic benefits or economic renewal and prosperity. Information is a tradeable commodity and a resource for enhanced economic growth. The efficient use of information in the business and commercial sectors can lead to increased productivity. It can extend market penetration, lead to new products and add higher value to products and services. Thus, it is appropriate for the various levels of governments to work together to develop a set of integrated policies to ensure the creation of strong information and communication sectors in the nation, and where possible, harmonize policies.

- * **INFRASTRUCTURE AND GOVERNANCE.** Due to the current technological developments, we are in a position to discuss governments speed with which they can become fully interconnected and universally accessible to the electronic highway, thus the requirements for strengthening the infrastructure and the governance of information. Countries, North and South, are making major investments in information and the infrastructure it supports. The issue to be addressed is what are the appropriate policies to ensure that the information is accessible and usable. For example, how can the government best manage and provide access to the information it collects and organizes, and how this resource can be used to stimulate the development of both commercial and non-commercial information services and activities?

Also within the context of infrastructure, is the issue of the development of standards and practices for the retention, preservation, and retrieval of information of historical and research significance, regardless of its format.

- * **INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY.** One of the most difficult set of issues to be addressed by National Information Policies is intellectual property, privacy and freedom of information. Given that information is essential to the creation of a new system of wealth,

then it is only appropriate that the development of such information must be fostered and the creators of the information must be recognized and compensated. Should National Information Policies reflect the role and rights of the creator of the information as it addresses universal access?

A major hurdle to overcome related to this issue is that universal systems of information raises concerns about the use of personal information. How can appropriate safeguards and controls on the use of personal information be developed? It would appear that privacy guarantees are a prerequisite to open information sharing.

In considering these key issues that are critical in addressing the formulation of National Information Policies, there are two important points of caution that should be highlighted. The first is that of balance. We know that information can have different values. It can be a resource for social benefit and as stated previously, it can be a tradeable commodity with economic value. The issue, therefore, is to find the proper balance. This is a critical aspect for policy consideration - how to determine the balance between social benefits of open access to information with the commercial value of information as a tradeable and thus saleable commodity.

The second point is the role of technology. There is no debate that technology will continue to push social and economic development in the future. It is inevitable. However, the degree to which technology itself will set the direction of such development will depend on the presence of public policy, with input from all the stakeholders. To paraphrase the conclusion from the Canadian National Summit on Information Policy, if the purpose of an information policy is to achieve the optimum public good, then it must be a public policy.

As my concluding comments, I would like to refer to three experiences IDRC has had in assisting countries and regions in establishing what was considered Information Policy. Initially, I had assessed these initiatives as successful. However, over time, the indicators for determining success seems to have been modified.

By referring to these projects, I hope to underscore the importance of the need for clarity of meaning in the terminology used. For in the first example, what was really being developed was a National Information Plan; and in the second example, the support was to develop the Strategies for ensuring cooperation and a high and formal level of coordination of several national information systems.

In 1978, in Bolivia, at the highest level of government, it was decided that all information programs and activities supporting research and public policy sectors needed to be coordinated centrally. This was not surprising, for there was a dearth of human and financial resources in the country, yet there was a critical need for information and the supporting infrastructure to meet the nation's socio-economic development needs. Significant resources, both nationally and internationally were directed to what at that time was considered a model for National Information Policy formulation. In this case, the information community was somewhat supportive of the initiative, for at least the policy seemed to address the need of human resource capacity building. The extent to which the information community was involved in designing and formulating the policy is lost in corporate memory of the various agencies involved. What is known, however, is that the beneficiaries, the researchers, the middle level policy makers, the information intermediaries were not involved in the policy formulation process. It was a top down and external process.

Thus, while the government of the day remained in power, the National Information Policy development process continued to develop. However, when the government changed, as governments do, there was no advocate group to sustain the momentum of the activity. There was no mechanism to demonstrate to the new government that continued investment was required to ensure that the objectives of Equity of Access, Economic Benefit and the Value of Information, and strengthening the Information Infrastructure were achieved. Although there continues to be an agency in Bolivia today with the responsibility for national information coordination, a National Information Policy does not exist.

The second example comes from the Caribbean. On the surface, it would appear that this is one of the most successful examples of information policy formulation, for all fourteen Heads of Governments in the English speaking Caribbean agreed to the

critical need to harmonize the existing national information systems and services to the mutual benefit of the information needs of the region.

By 1989, most of the Island States in the Caribbean had established well developed National Information Systems. The well documented model for this is Jamaica, which via a well organized community of information professionals and the full support of the office of the Prime Minister had developed a National Information Plan. This Plan, not policy, established a set of mechanisms to ensure national coordination of all information initiatives and services at the public sector and university levels. The maximization of limited resources was achieved, and many of the components of the Jamaica plan are still performing very strongly. It is interesting to note, that via this plan, the National Library of Jamaica was established.

However, in 1987/88, when the Caribbean Heads of Government agreed on the importance of a regional information policy, what in fact was created was a most impressive strategy and action plan for the linkage and interface of the several national information systems and services. The strongest components of the strategy and action plan were cooperation and sharing. From this perspective, the Regional Strategy for Information in the Caribbean continues to be a success, however, the original perceived objective of formulating a Regional Information Policy has not been achieved.

In the final example, the question of success or failure is too soon to pose, although several years have passed. In 1990, a report was published on the National Information and Informatics Policies in Africa. This was within the context of the Pan-African Documentation and Information System, in Addis Ababa, PADIS. Although it is not clear at this time about the status of the various policies that were being formulated, it is interesting to note the terminology change from "policy" to "policies", and the inclusion of the technology dimension in the discussion of policy formulation. I believe that this is one example that should be monitored very closely, for there may be important lessons to be learned. Both the importance of stakeholders and beneficiaries being involved in the formulation process are highlighted in the report.

The literature will show that much has been written about National Information Policy formulation, the criteria, and even

the creation of supporting guidelines. All of this is important for laying the foundation stones for where I believe we must now focus our attention. Perhaps it is due to the impact of the new technologies on the information and communication fields, and the critical role that the private sector is beginning to play in the organization and utilization of information, that the importance of National Information Policies has become paramount. In considering just the six critical issues I have cited earlier (and I am certain that there are many more) only underscores this point. It is important to note that as we meet, the Caribbean Community is once again exploring the formulation of a set of Regional Information Policies. This exploration is being driven by the issue of the role of telecommunications and physical connectivity amongst and within the island states. In trying to move forward in this area, it became apparent that a policy framework did not exist for the region and critical regional policy issues had not been adequately formulated.

One can not lose sight of the current flurry of activity surrounding national and global information infrastructure, or the information highway. Country after country is either establishing advisory councils or task forces to study the implication of the information highway on their societies, or their reports have already been released. Canada is in this later category. What this means is that at all levels in the society, there is a recognition that national policies are required to ensure the information resources, and the carriers of that information indeed reach the various target groups in the society, in a form that can be clearly understood and universally accessed. There is now the recognition that there are many stakeholders with very different perspectives, and that if there is going to be true social and economic development within a nation, then these perspectives also must be understood and that as policies are being created, the interest of the various stakeholders must be key components of the formulation process.

Thus to answer my own question, is it possible to formulate National Information Policies? Not only do I believe that it is possible; it is essential for the social and economic development of a nation.

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