

The report (The use of Information and Communication Technology in Parliament - Benefit Cost Analysis) in brief

ICT has become an essential tool in supporting the work of legislative bodies throughout the world. As they have grown in sophistication, ICT have acquired the necessary flexibility to assist parliaments in their most important responsibilities: making laws, overseeing the executive, and communicating with citizens.

In recent years, Parliament has begun to exploit advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to support its many functions and modernize the institution. The Information and Communication Technology Agency of Sri Lanka (ICTA) which was established under the Information and Communication Technology Act, No. 27 of 2003, to provide assistance to government agencies in implementing Information and Communication strategies in government institutions came forward to assist Parliament. Under the sponsorship of ICTA, an ICT strategy was evolved under the e-Parliament project which includes 11 ICT projects to suit diverse needs of the institution. Sequel to these activities, the UNDP has commenced implementing the said strategy.

In this context, the report is primarily concerned with three objectives:

- Identify gaps in Parliament in terms of core parliamentary and administrative functions.
- Propose suitable improvements congruent with the institution.
- Evaluate suitable approaches and delineate the best approach with the view of achieving the envisaged objectives of Parliament.

Identification of issues

Although lack of effectiveness and efficiency are the focal points, difficulties in accessibility, transparency, and resource consumption are also identified as major issues. The report also reveals collaboration problems with external and internal entities as well as communication problems, data & process redundancies and availability issues. Some of these introduce error proneness and introduce the risk of data loss. Furthermore, the present context is not conducive for information retrieval, tracking, forecasting, and predicting trends or patterns, while information is not disseminated to relevant stakeholders on time.

Proposed process improvements and benefits

The application of ICT can allow both qualitative and quantitative improvements to the way Parliament works: facilitating improved access to information and services and having a direct effect in both intra and extra parliamentary work. Accordingly, proper ICT convergence can bring down the recurrent costs and improve the quality of services.

With this view, Parliament needs to view the initial cost as an investment for improving internal capabilities. Towards a modern Parliament, the investment means that the institutional readiness to support critical parliamentary activities such as preparing and managing complex documents, recording and publishing the legislative activities that occur in plenary sessions in near real-time, and enabling enhanced communications between Parliament and its stakeholders.

The following are some of the benefits that the use of ICT can bring about for its stakeholders.

MPP can access electronic data stores and document repositories that hold confidential information on parliamentary and committee proceedings through the intranet from anywhere at anytime. Even more, they can submit documents to Parliament while they serve their constituencies and participate in legislative functions and constitutional affairs using computers at their convenience. They can communicate with the public and other institutions via e-mail, discussion groups, blogs etc.

The public can communicate with MPP and the Secretariat electronically through the web portal through which the Public's confidence in their representatives and the image of the institution would be improved. The parliamentary web portal can provide them with access to parliamentary information such as Hansards, Bills to be passed, Acts of Parliament, and Amendments to Acts of Parliament, Committee Reports, and Annual Reports at their convenience.

All administrative units and offices within the Secretariat can be interconnected through a communication network supported by state-of-the-art technologies. All the departments can be supported by a Document & Workflow Management System that would integrate the processes and ensure integrity, efficiency, and effectiveness of information exchanged across functional borders in a seamless manner. Even more, other institutional functions can be drastically improved and resources can be managed effectively via proper ICT integration.

Recommendations

The findings of the study makes evident that there is a substantial gap between what is possible with ICT to support the values and goals of Parliament and what has been accomplished.

In this context, the institution must first improve its weaknesses for which the external opportunities must be exploited. Towards this direction, Parliament may seek assistance from donors, international organizations and particularly from other parliaments in order to develop the capacity to transform from the current weak status to its next level of an ICT enabled Parliament.

The report delineates three options that Parliament may pursue with the view of achieving the envisaged objectives, out of which the third approach - the Strategic Approach - certainly leads the institution in reaping the envisaged benefits. It facilitates many benefits compared with the investment; however, Parliament needs to view the initial cost as an investment for improving internal capabilities. Furthermore, this approach includes four perspectives that warrant sustainable improvement with the view of realizing the envisaged objectives of Parliament.

To realize the envisaged institutional objectives and to build a technical infrastructure that is directly supportive of the work of the parliamentary and administrative functions of the institution, there must be a shared vision among the key stakeholders in favor of the approach recommended.

This approach facilitates the institution in realizing the envisaged objectives. Even more, it is capable of delivering several tangible and intangible benefits, most of which are essential ingredients of a contemporary parliament.