E-Government in Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan

1. Background

It is widely recognized that effective, transparent and shared information management has a significant impact on improving efficiency, accountability and transparency in the civil service; increasing alignment of external resources with national plans and priorities and improving the effectiveness and efficiency of reconstruction and development. The government of Afghanistan recognizes this itself and has emphasized the critical nature of improved information management to support development.

Information management in Afghanistan, typical of that found in a post emergency situation, is often chaotic and rarely well organized, relying on complex or inappropriate processes and rarely geared to promote transparency or sharing of information. Data is generated by multiple users: government departments, NGOs, the UN Agencies, and the private sectors. Data is fragmented, stored in multiple locations and formats, making it difficult to bring data together to provide a comprehensive view.

Enterprise architecture is an effort to optimize the power of sharing and reuse, it is unfortunate that most of the offices have not yet made the transition from manual culture to an environment of sharing and reuse.

2. e-Government Concept

Government activities that take place by digital processes over a computer network, usually the Internet, between the government and members of the public and entities in the private sector, especially regulated entities. These activities generally involve the electronic exchange of information to acquire or provide products or services, to place or receive orders, to provide or obtain information, or to complete financial transactions. The Government of Afghanistan through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) is exploring how the internet and other information technologies (IT) will impact on the productivity and performance of the ministry and how e-government will foster new and deeper citizen involvement within the governing process.

These technologies can serve a variety of different ends: better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information, or more efficient government management. The resulting benefits can be immense; less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth, and/or cost reductions.

E-Government does not imply the adoption of ICT technologies in government without accompanying changes to people, processes and structure. Often it is erroneously believed that the provision and computerization of government ministries business operations is E-Government. E-Government goes beyond computerization to include change management process that seeks to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the
government to better serve its customers (citizens).

3. e-Government Design Project

Based on the Project document “Defining E-Government for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs”, received from MoFA it articulates a broader goal of the project as to assess readiness, define the long-term vision, and to identify a “first-step” pilot program for e-Government at the Ministry. The overall purpose of the e-Government initiative is to:

- Design a model e-Government architecture for the MoFA that re-invents work processes, and organization with the use of ICTs, to improve the internal operations of the Ministry, i.e. “e-Administration”.

- Identify simple, feasible pilot opportunities for the MoFA to begin providing “e-Services” directly to its costumers, e.g. citizens here and abroad, businesses, other government institutions, and NGOs.

- Build capacity and raise awareness of e-Government concepts and practices at the MoFA, across all Government Ministries, and society at large.

4. The e-Government Framework

The basic requirement for effective E-Government planning and implementation is the adoption of the “Whole” and not the individual “Part” approach. This means the whole of the national Government of Afghanistan should be ideally taken as a single enterprise and the architecture, systems and standards to be developed accordingly. AIMS understanding is that MoFA however, wishes to develop and implement an EGovernment through a pilot project and to scale up to include the entire ministry in the country and including Embassies, Consulates and Diplomatic Missions in the world . With lessons learned in this project, the MoFA E-Government will in future be scaled up to other ministries and then nationally including the whole country. In the process, the planning and implementation framework, standards and guidelines developed and implemented at the pilot level would be adopted and replicated throughout the entire ministry, then its external entities and then other ministries and organs of the government. Developing only one or few key departments of MoFA would not reap the full benefits of E-Government. The integration of business processes and information resources cutting across the boundaries of departments, geographic location is prerequisite for an effective E-Government.

An analysis of the MoFA departments, Offices, Embassies, Consulates, Diplomatic Missions & Citizens (major stakeholders) in terms of data, information, business operations reveals several fundamental problems for implementing an E-Government to support efforts ministry-wide. First, the stakeholders are working with different mandates, different interests, deadlines and different goals. However, these disparate approaches have many common needs, such as data quality standards and a sound information management plan.
With proper design, E-Government can promote data/information sharing while protecting data security, access to information and while promoting increased integration of operations for the benefit of the ministry. E-Government can enable all stakeholders to work more for the good of the ministry, by helping ministry workers to provide complete and accessible data, information, and resources.

Despite the immense benefits of E-Government that has seen sharing of data/information within entities, it must be noted that these changes can be painful. E-Government like any IT projects breeds resistance to change, and this is manifested in unique ways at each institution. This resistance is affected by different stakeholder roles and stereotypes (e.g., Departments vs. Departments, Central vs Provincial, In-country vs Outside Afghanistan). An E-Government designed for the MoFA must meet the needs and missions of a broad spectrum of its stakeholders. In the final analysis, "the challenge lies in striking a balance in the degree of centralized storage, administration, and procedural control while serving the needs of each of departments, missions, citizens for streamlined data documentation, access, and compatibility.

**Human resources**

AIMS have been involved in human capacity development in Afghanistan targeting government ministries for the past years. These have been in the areas of Technology Awareness Workshop, Basic English and Computer literacy, Database management, and GIS. The AIMS Database and GIS training courses have been hierarchical from Assistants, to Technicians, Specialists and for the managers. Quite a good number of GoA staff has been trained and some equipped in their ministries with the enabling environment.

This training though introductory enabled a lot of ministry staff to posses the requisite ICT skills needed in the day to day operations.

Moving from ad hoc file based information management environment which was primarily in the domain of the MoFA entities to an E-Government is challenging. The key to the success of this is the people involved and, an adequate training and support for it. With a good training and support programme, the number of knowledgeable ICT users within MoFA and citizens and customers will expand. Without such a programme, the good intention often ends up with a handful of ICT experts and a failed effort at bringing an effective and efficient government to the citizens.

An extensive training programme will be developed to help users learn how to work within the E-Government structure, develop new skills and keep up to date on technological changes. Individual users typically do things a little differently from their colleagues, and these differences are amplified as new users add their own idiosyncrasies when it comes to using ICT. Formalized training will help ensure consistency in training across the ministry.

After the deployment of a functional E-Government and people trained, they will need
sufficient support to enable them to do their jobs effectively. The key to user support is providing a timely response so that problems can be resolved and users can get back to work.

**Collaboration and Partnership**

Collaborations & Partnerships are often established as a result of or in support of an E-Government, because the E-Government presents many opportunities for partnership and corporate re-engineering. Information access enables groups to do things in new ways, provide new services and information products and lessen reliance on "traditional" approaches.

Collaboration and Partnerships are an effective way of achieving consensus. Instead of each departments and projects acting independently, Collaborations and Partnerships create a sense of shared responsibility for the products and its use.

**5. Design of the MoFA e-Government Architecture**

In proposing any architecture for MoFA we would have to take consideration of the following;

• The MoFA is a multi location enterprise
• It has Offices in all provinces of Afghanistan
• It has operational linkages with various departments and ministries of the GoA, which are also widely dispersed
• The customers for the services of MoFA are the other organs of the government, external governments, business and citizens who are also widely dispersed though out the country and outside the country
• With the poor physical communication infrastructure in the country it is logical that the E-Government architecture for MoFA be optimally web-based.

In proposing the Afghanistan MoFA architecture we have classified the components into six categories or building blocks. The categories are a useful construct to identify the required business functionality in a generic service delivery process, together with the components that need to exist to provide that functionality. These categories are:

User access;
User services and guidance;
Service enabling tools;
Connection tools;
Business delivery systems; and
The surrounding e-government environment - governance, policy and management regime.

On the basis of the Afghan context & the Six components considered, we propose a Three tier Web based architecture for the Afghanistan MoFA E-Government (Figure 1)
consisting of the following core layers:

1. A front-end web portal gateway, the front end provides a single point of accessibility to users, seeking information and e-service from the MoFA
2. A middle layer that maintains the hardware and software tools for information resource integration, collaboration and messaging and delivery of e-services.
3. A back end layer, which will house its information content, databases and software applications. An integrated IM system will be created that takes into account the business processes of all MoFA departments and units.

However, it is worthwhile to note that the architecture is not:
• A plan for a hard-wired common infrastructure - either at a business process or ICT level;
• A set of standards - it does not replace the existing standards, but rather it will embody it; or
• A quick fix to existing Information Management and Information Technology problems.

6. The way forward

Work Plan

The development of e-government will be divided into two phases;

1. Piloting of e-service for MoFA in Kabul Office
2. Development of e-Administration for Kabul MoFA Office
3. Development of the entire components for MoFA Regional Offices
4. Development of the entire components for Diplomatic Missions

Next Steps and Decision Points

• Submission of this concept paper that would lead to further discussions on the e-government development to clarify issues and questions raised,
• Formation of a Project Board known as the E-Gov Project Board (EGPB) to be composed of MoFA, AIMS, and other concerned partners
• Request from MoFA to AIMS to develop a Scoping document detailing the project plan, systems development methodology, resources required, time frame and budget.
• Initial assessment of MoFA and development of Scoping document
• Approval of the scoping document,
• Formal letter from MoFA requesting AIMS to embark on the systems development,
• Agreement/MOU signed between MoFA & AIMS,
• Commencement of systems development.
Figure 1: Afghanistan e-Government Architecture

Interoperability Framework

Policies and Standards
Business rules
Policies and Standards e.g. Privacy, security, Authentication, Interconnection, Data Exchange and Web service integration.

Agencies

E-Services
Pilot Project

Governance
Regional Offices
Dynamic Measures
Business Partners