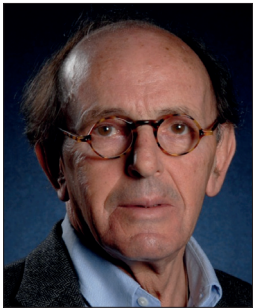


Collaboration in ICT

INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH V. TABONE

CHAIRMAN, COMNET



JOSEPH V. TABONE presently serves as Chairman of COMNET, an international Foundation set up to promote collaboration in ICT development between Commonwealth member states. He has operated at senior management and Board level in Canada and Malta, and has worked extensively in several other countries in major strategic initiatives. Some previous positions include Chairman, Ontario Systems Council, and Executive Director, Management Information Systems, in Canada. Assignments in Malta have included Chairman, Management Systems Unit Ltd, Chairman Malta Communications Authority and Chairman, Euro-Mediterranean Regulatory Group.

What are the aims and remit of COMNET?

COMNET is an independent Foundation which was set up in the mid 90s at the instigation of the Commonwealth in conjunction with the government of Malta, with the specific aim of promoting collaboration between member countries as well as providing assistance in capacity building in matters relating to Information and Communications Technologies (ICT). We have run training programmes in different countries on ICT Strategic Planning, tackling cybercrime, e-Government, Business process re-engineering, or how to set up frameworks for the liberalisation of telecommunications.

How has technology developed in Malta since independence in 1964?

Malta which had been colonised throughout its history gained its independence from Britain in 1964 and it immediately set about making its challenging transition from a military to a self-sustaining market-based economy. In an effort to protect jobs the then prevailing policies of government in the 70s and early 80s were technology averse, mired in the misconception that computers replaced people and jobs. As an example the telecommunications infrastructure had been allowed to deteriorate with lengthy delays simply for getting a telephone line, there was a ban on the importation of computers and punitive licensing tariffs to buy and install a Fax machine. As a result Malta was not keeping up with other countries in the gradual incursion of technology in business, in government and in the home. Given these policies, by the latter part of the eighties Malta had much catching up to do.

A new broom sweeps the room, and this is precisely what the newly elected government of 1987 set about doing. The new administration not only set about remedying this state of affairs, but immediately set about exploiting the transformative potential ICT to fast track the country's social and economic advancement of the country.

It had a clear vision of where it wanted to go and the challenge was in its translation of this. One of the means of doing so was the development of a three pronged National ICT strategy which it launched in the early 90s. The first of these set about defining a programme of investments aimed at upgrading its obsolete

telecommunications infrastructure. A second prong was education; at one end of the spectrum, it sought to introduce computers in the classroom as an aid to teaching at the junior level while at a secondary level, it embarked on a course to turn out computer literate students; and at a tertiary level there was a significant investment in the development of technical, computer science and informatics curricula. One can imagine that all this entailed very significant investments in the acquisition of technology, educational software, in plant and programme development at the University of Malta and the then existing polytechnic. The third part of the strategy addressed a specific and defined business niche for Malta. This was an aspect that was important given Malta's size and we had to decide whether our opportunities lay in building electronic equipment at one end of the scale to developing sophisticated computer software at the other.

A related initiative of the time was government's development of what we would to-day call an e-Government strategy underpinning a major re-organisation of its public governance institutional set-up. Common to both strategies were clearly laid out implementation plans and concomitant financing.

A subsequent phase of reform a few years later was the creation of regulatory frameworks, including telecommunications, aimed at liberalising and diversifying Malta's economic activity and creating the conditions conducive for attracting investment and ensuring competition.

Why is this initiative pioneered in Malta?

It was as a result of the historical developments described in the earlier answer and their attendant transformational impact that the Commonwealth spotted an opportunity for Malta to share its experience with other member countries that could be facing similar challenges. The COMNET Foundation was precisely set up to facilitate such knowledge and technology transfer. Malta has historically benefited from its Commonwealth membership for example by means of capacity building support, access to scholarships and its participation in various networks. In setting up COMNET government saw this as an opportunity to reciprocate to the Commonwealth, by way of sharing its experience including some of its ICT asset base with other member states.