Participants at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva took note of the power of information and communication technologies to fundamentally transform the relationships between government and citizens and businesses and civil society, with far-reaching ramifications for a country’s development. The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to support and facilitate government processes can serve many ends, such as improving service delivery, increasing information and service access, enhancing citizen empowerment, simplifying business processes, and enabling effective government decision-making. Resulting benefits include increased transparency, reduced corruption, cost efficiency, revenue growth, reduced costs, and greater convenience for citizens.

Since the Summit, there has been an urgent focus on the deployment of ICTs in government with a view to improving the quality of governance. A crucial prerequisite for the realisation of this vision is the creation of a coherent national ICT strategy that integrates ICTs with national development plans and conceives a policy framework in which to embed various public sector reform initiatives. The Geneva Plan of Action and subsequent Tunis Agenda recognised this need and encouraged governments to develop national e-strategies and undertake requisite capacity-building initiatives.

Remarkable progress has since been made in the area of national ICT policy-formulation and strategic planning. An International Telecommunications Union (ITU) study on national e-strategies for development identified at least 161 economies – representing 84 per cent of ITU member states – as meeting the WSIS target of instituting a national ICT strategy by 2010 and noted 14 countries that were in the process of creating one. The focus of this article is to highlight the Commonwealth Secretariat’s approach in this vital area, using the development of the Kingdom of Tonga’s National ICT Strategic Plan as an illustrative case study.

The Commonwealth Secretariat and ICTs for development

The Commonwealth Secretariat works with countries to build the capacity of the public sector to institute reforms involving ICTs. Further, through the Commonwealth Connects programme, the Secretariat has endeavoured to bridge the digital divide by sharing ICT resources across the Commonwealth. Through a range of capacity-building workshops and technology transfer initiatives, the Secretariat tries to maximise its impact by tapping into existing Commonwealth networks, with an emphasis on facilitating multi-stakeholder partnerships between governments, the private sector, civil society and the international donor community.

As a flagship programme of the Secretariat, it builds capacity of key policy-makers in national ICT strategic planning initiatives. The workshop focuses on discussing and applying the various stages, approaches, best practices, methodologies, techniques and tips that are required for successfully designing and implementing a national ICT agenda. In keeping with the spirit of South-South cooperation, stressed by the Commonwealth, the workshop is designed to be interactive and collaborative, and encourages dialogue between various countries in attendance to enable policy and technology transfer. At the end of the workshop, attendees develop an action plan for advancing the ICT programme within their countries.

Creating a National ICT Policy and Strategic Plan for the Kingdom of Tonga

A Pacific regional workshop on National ICT Strategic Planning was organised by the Secretariat in late 2007 at the request of Pacific countries that were acutely aware of the need to integrate ICT strategies into their national development strategic planning efforts. The workshop was well attended and much progress was made to sensitise key stakeholders on national ICT policy and strategic planning. To maintain momentum coming out of the workshop, the Government of Tonga and the Secretariat agreed to develop a National ICT Strategic Plan aimed at incorporating Tonga’s disparate ICT programmes into a national development planning framework, set out in Tonga’s Strategic Development Plan Eight (SDP8). Subsequently, the Secretariat provided technical assistance to the Department of Communications within the Prime Minister’s Office to create a National ICT Policy and National ICT Strategic Plan for Tonga.

The profound development challenges faced by Tonga are reflected in SDP8. It delineates eight national development goals to be achieved by a series of strategies, articulated in the plan, which involve the deployment of modern technologies. There was early recognition that the pace of realisation of SDP8’s objectives could be accelerated if the development strategies were sequenced and executed within a coherent ICT strategic planning framework.
Hence it was clear at the outset that Tonga’s National ICT Plan ought to be comprehensive and closely integrated with SDP8 to maximise development impact. To ensure this result, the plan was drafted using a consultative and collaborative approach involving more than 75 stakeholders, representing different sectors of Tongan society, including government, the private sector, the IT community, academia and civil society. Six Working Groups were established to develop the National ICT Strategic Plan. The Working Groups each focused on a specific area of ICT and created action plans for each area, including the following: 1

1. Provision of ICTs in homes and communities
2. Education and skills development
3. e-Government
4. Industry growth and economic development
5. An enabling technical infrastructure
6. ICT related legislation.

The ICT Strategy was created in early 2008 using a methodology used across many Commonwealth countries that comprises six key stages:

1. Development of the National ICT Policy
2. Establishing the current state of ICT in Tonga using:
   a. an internal e-Readiness assessment
   b. benchmarking against comparator countries
3. Developing Action Plans for each of the six Working Groups
4. Development of an integrated National ICT Strategy
5. Presentation and acceptance of the National ICT Strategy

The working groups, aware of the complexity of the policy setting and strategic planning exercise, emphasised in their approach the importance of identifying dependencies between action plans. Cross-disciplinary meetings were held regularly to identify, discuss, analyse and document dependencies so that areas of collaboration and the appropriate progression of development activities may be determined, with the larger aim of realising Tonga’s development goals, laid out in its SDP8. Over a period of six months Tonga created a forward-looking, comprehensive, multi-dimensional and sustainable National ICT Policy and Strategic Plan reflective of the country’s development aspirations and priorities. Highlights of Tonga’s National ICT Strategy include:

- The take-up and adoption of ICT in industry to be stimulated through several initiatives, including the development of a national e-commerce policy and strategy and sector-specific ICT policies for agriculture, tourism and fisheries, etc.
- A Technical Infrastructure Action Plan to provide affordable, high-speed and reliable connectivity across all five island groups.
- Legislative review to bring the legal infrastructure in line with the requirements of an information society.

The way forward

Tonga’s National ICT Policy presents a cogent vision of the future of the information society in the country and the National ICT Strategic Plan provides key stakeholders in government with a practical roadmap to utilise transformative ICTs in the service of Tonga’s economic development and the social welfare of its people. Turning this vision into reality will require political will, unwavering leadership, sustained action and adequate funding, as well as flexibility and foresight by primary stakeholders, in order to secure the confidence and contribution of both key actors in industry and the public.

Presently, the challenge before the government is implementation. To manage this, the Government of Tonga has shown the foresight of building a phased approach to implementing the Strategic Plan. The plan has been sequenced into a series of implementation ‘waves’ according to its complexity. The first of these phases, called Pathfinder projects, consists of a series of small but strategically important initiatives, designed to build momentum, show tangible results, demonstrate government will and lay the strategic foundation for larger, longer-term initiatives. Pathfinder projects touch upon critical elements of the Strategic Plan, including universal access, national education policy, e-government, e-health, e-commerce, infrastructure and legislation.

Long-term goals are centred on creating an informed society where ICT infrastructure, assets and knowledge are sufficiently diffused throughout society upon which effective electronic governance and a healthy knowledge-based economy can be founded. If the initiative is seized by policy-makers and the mix of policies, projects and activities set out in Tonga’s National ICT Strategic Plan are executed effectively, the long-term vision of a connected Kingdom and its attendant benefits need not be realised too far in the future.

Endnotes
2 It is important to note that national e-strategies is used as a broad term that encapsulates both the national ICT strategy – a general plan on how to advance a country’s social and economic development using ICT – and the many e-strategies that break down the general ICT strategy into sector-specific policies such as e-health, e-learning and e-government. See International Telecommunications Union. (2010). National e-Strategies for Development: Global Status and Perspectives. Geneva.
3 Ibid.