Digital Accessibility Workshop

Outcome Document

Colombo, Sri Lanka

May 2017
Overview

According to the United Nations, it is estimated that one in six people (in Asia and the Pacific) live with disability – that is some 650 million people. Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) often face challenges that restrict them from participating in society on an equal basis including access to, and use of, information and communication technologies (ICTs). To name a few, these barriers include limited (or none) accessibility features for online content (including the websites), limited adaptability in functionality of products and services, and weak policy frameworks to support the provision of an accessible digital environment. Being online has become a core part of life today and with more and more services - ranging from government services to banking to retail - being made available digitally, not being able to use such services becomes a major challenge for PWDs.

Starting December 2015, the Internet Society Asia-Pacific (ISOC APAC) Bureau in collaboration with local stakeholders including government, industry and civil society, facilitated a series of endeavours to highlight digital accessibility issues in Pakistan. These resulted in action towards addressing the digital needs of PWDs, including policy measures.

Building on the success and learnings from our work in Pakistan, ISOC APAC has planned two workshops on digital accessibility in 2017 in other parts of the Asia-Pacific to help catalyze action in these countries. The first of these workshops was held on 31st March, 2017 in Colombo, hosted by the ISOC Sri Lanka chapter.

Key Discussions:

Session 1
Moderator: Manique Gunaratne (Employers’ Federation of Ceylon)

The session invited PWDs and (website, mobile applications) developers to an interactive dialogue on accessibility standards and design principles. The moderator delivered a detailed presentation on common website usability problems faced by persons with visual or hearing impairment. Her presentation
also explained accessibility guidelines and highlighted some easy to implement features that developers need to consider when building accessible websites and mobile applications.

In the ensuing discussion, it was observed that most of the developers were not aware of accessibility issues nor the available techniques to help make their products PWDs friendly. The participants were then divided into four groups to brainstorm on accessibility challenges and come up with ideas on how to improve accessibility in the applications they build.

Affordability of assistive technologies, cultural issues, digital literacy, limited access to local language content and connectivity were some of the key challenges mentioned by PWDs that limit their access to the Internet and use of mobile technologies.

Session 2
Moderator: Naveed Ul Haq (Internet Society)

The second session was focused around a panel discussion on the broader policy and technology landscape for digital accessibility in Sri Lanka. The Hon. Secretary, Ministry of Telecommunications & Digital Infrastructure, Government of Sri Lanka and Mr. Senarath Attanayake, member of the Uva Provincial Council was part of this discussion.

It was learnt that the Sri Lankan Government issued a policy directive (in 2010) to improve both accessibility and usability features of all government websites. However, it’s implementation remained slow – primarily due to limited capacity of website developers and administrators.

The PWDs in attendance made a range of suggestions on how accessibility issues could be addressed. These included:

- Adoption of standards by the government for designing accessible websites and services
- Improving accessibility of emergency services
- Support for relay services
- Improving accessibility of local information
- Involvement of PWDs and their representative organisations in policy development
- Establishing a framework to embrace digital accessibility in Sri Lanka.

**Priority Actions and Recommendations**

The workshop concluded with the following priority actions and recommendations:

- The Internet Society Sri Lanka Chapter will identify the top 10 widely used government websites to the Ministry of Telecommunication and Digital Infrastructure. The Chapter will also assist in facilitating the improvement of accessibility features in these websites.
- Structure training programs on web accessibility for government employees (especially developers and webmasters) with the support of the Ministry.
- Encourage the establishment of research centers on assistive technologies in public universities.
- Support the development of local content accessible to PWDs.