

CPTU e-GP Portal Custom or Customized?

Wild claims cast shadow over World Bank funded electronic tendering system of Bangladesh; and No to local IT

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The CPTU web site claims that it is a custom built solution owned and operated by CPTU. The contractor says it is a micro portal of an Indian company. Recent press reports led the company to change its claim but it hardly establishes the website is truly custom built or a hodgepodge of some Indian company e-GP engine with interfaces from Bangladesh. The change of the claim that it is a micro e-procurement portal at the behest of CPTU hardly makes everything right. Why did the company make this claim in the first place? Where is the site located and who operates and controls it? And who will operate and maintain it?

The fact that this Electronic Tendering System of the Government of Bangladesh is being developed with World Bank funds under the Public Procurement Reform Project II, one would have expected the sanctity of the system would be foremost. The weaknesses of the Electronic Tendering System are already making initial users exasperated. There were instances of one agency being able to see another agencies dashboard. Similarly on occasions the dashboard of one Tenderer has been exposed to another Tenderer. The privacy of the users is a must if any government agency is expected to use the system. The findings of Tender Evaluation Committee members can all be overruled by the Chair of the committee as only he can give the approval. The system does not take into account the opinion of other Tender Committee members who may have found the bidder non-responsive.

In the CPTU website it is stated that it is the National e-Government Procurement (e-GP) portal of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. The website is developed, owned and being operated by the Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU),

IME Division of Ministry of Planning. The e-GP system provides an on-line platform to carry out the procurement activities by the Public Agencies - Procuring Agencies (PAs) and Procuring Entities (PEs). It states that the e-GP system is a single web portal from where and through which PAs and PEs will be able to perform their procurement related activities using a dedicated secured web based dashboard. The e-GP system is apparently hosted in e-GP Data Center at CPTU, and the e-GP web portal is accessible by the PAs and PEs through internet for their use.

The e-Government Procurement Electronic Tendering System introduced under the Public Procurement Reform Project (PPRP) is being supported by the World Bank and will be used by all the government organizations which will help in ensuring equal access to the Bidders/Tenderers, efficiency, transparency and accountability in the public procurement process in the country.

These statements in the CPTU Home Page do have any room for ambiguity regarding the scope of the Electronic Tendering System and its ownership. Apparently the contract for "e-GP System Development and Implementation Consultant" it mentions that Bangladesh "will own the IPR and copyright of the e-GP software for use in Bangladesh only". The "developed and owned" software is restricted to use only to Bangladesh. What does this imply?

At the moment the CPTU is in the process of handing over the operation of the system to the Hyderabad and Ahmadabad companies and virtually no Bangladesh professional input is there. Bangladesh Government IT experts and academics feel that the people to man this system are available in Bangladesh and such exclusion of Bangladesh experts is unnecessary. It is expensive

and it is creating dependence on some overseas private entities unnecessarily. The CPTU is using its goodwill with the World Bank of having carried out some reforms through creating the Public Procurement Act and Public Procurement Rules to get the largely unacceptable e-GP system accepted but in control of the developers in Ahmadabad.

The project was designed to give the Operation and Maintenance to Bangladesh companies. The CPTU instead is giving the O&M to the companies from Hyderabad and Ahmadabad. In the Project Appraisal Document of the World Bank, which is available in the web, it is clearly articulated the development of the e-GP system with the assistance of an International Consultant but nominated Bangladesh company with experience to be associated and take over the project for sustainability. This plan has been overturned in favour of giving the operation and maintenance to the foreign companies where the presence of Bangladesh personnel or the nominated Bangladesh Company hardly exists. The Data Center is to be remotely managed and the roll out of the e-GP system to a large number of government agencies will be by overseas personnel that basically push costs up enormously.

As a background to the procurement under the Project is concerned a Nepalese IT Engineer, Rajesh K Sakhyia, with no experience of building similar government electronic procurement system was engaged as "e-GP Implementation and Monitoring Consultant" for a period of fifteen months. This was extended to thirty three months to cover four years of the project so far as stated in the PPRP II Procurement Plan Version -5 available in the Internet. Over twenty companies applied for the e-GP system ▶

development but of the six prequalified of which only two submitted the bids i.e. GSS America InfoTech Limited India, and PricewaterhouseCoopers. The lead company did not have any e-GP system development experience but their sub-consultant C1 India did. C1 India left the GSS America InfoTech Limited India consortium prior to signing of the Contract. The C1 was subsequently replaced by abcProcure or e-Procurement Technologies Limited. When the contract was awarded about 100 man months was added to the offer. Dr. Paul Schaffer was the International e-GP consultant involved in vetting related e-GP procurement and changes in vendor supply of Hardware and software it is reported.

The input of the International e-GP Implementation and Monitoring Consultant went up from 15 man-months to until now. There was local capacity in terms of consultants which was sidelined. It is now very clear as to why this has been so as the compelling increase in dependence demonstrates.

The World Bank website states that "The objective of the Second Public Procurement Reform Project is to improve performance of the public procurement system progressively in Bangladesh, focusing largely on the key sectoral ministries and targeting their implementing agencies. It would be achieved by strengthening the ongoing reform process and moving it further along with the following outputs: (i) enhanced capacity in creating a sustained program of developing skilled procurement professionals, (ii) strengthened management and monitoring of procurement in target agencies, (iii) introduction of electronic government procurement in those agencies and CPTU on a pilot basis, and (iv) creation of greater public awareness of a well functioning public procurement system by engaging civil society, think tanks, beneficiaries, and the private sector. All these actions are key elements in effective implementation of the procurement law/regulations. "There are 4 components to the project of which" Introducing e-Government Procurement (e-GP), which will support piloting e-GP on a phased approach in the target agencies to make the system more transparent and lower costs" is one.

The World Bank has been very clear and determined in setting the objectives of the project. The long term sustainability of the e-GP system was clearly enunciated in the PAD (Present Approval Document) through the Nominated Sub-Consultant in Bangladesh. This has been ignored and 1

The screenshot shows the abcProcure website interface. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links for Home, About Us, Products & Services, Why abcProcure?, Our Clients, Career, Contact Us, and Register Now. Below the navigation, there is a section titled "Featured micro eProcurement sites" with two paragraphs of text. The main content area is titled "Government Sector" and displays a grid of logos for various government agencies and organizations, including State Bank of India, SIDO, National Chamber of Commerce & Industries Ltd, NCTE, NALCO, MAHAGENCO, Infosys Global Security Solutions India Limited, National Health Commission Limited, BDL, and others. A date stamp "30.05.2012" is visible in the bottom right corner of the screenshot.

Java Developer and 1 Tester is envisaged from Bangladesh. CPTU has formally advised the inability to interact with the Nominated Sub-Consultants in spite of being presented with local resources and costs.

There was a full-fledged local team of professionals who were never appropriately used or consulted to get the project done on schedule. There were many consultancies on-going under the PPRP Project but apparently these resources virtually never interacted to exchange valuable knowledge to advantage from each other's expertise. The fonnal Wrap-up Meetings of the Appraisal Missions would be the only occasion where these different Consulting groups came across each other. Stakeholder input and stakeholder buy-in could be much greater if the concerted input of the different resources were leveraged.

The obliteration of the Nominated Sub-Consultant by ignoring how and why this position was created will basically lead to planned obsolescence of the domestic capacity that has been generated during the period of the PPRP I and PPRP II. Furthermore knowledge transfer has been to the Nominated Sub-Consultant who provided a qualified and experienced local team of software

developers to understand, contribute, assimilate and propagate as necessary.

The stigma of the abcProcure claim in its website that Bangladesh e-GP system is their "micro eprocurement portal" can have lingering effect amongst the Users in Bangladesh. They earlier claimed that they catered to the entire Government procurement in Bangladesh. At the moment it is being tried out in four Target Agencies. The Prime Minister and Finance Minister have publicly states their desire to roll out the system in many Government agencies. The robustness and integrity of the system is in question. This is further aggravated by the effort to sideline Bangladesh inputs in operation and management of the system. There are over hundred of engineers and professionals in the Target Agencies who are aware of the difficulties in the system. Until now it appears that everyone is co-operating for the success of electronic tendering. When doubts creep in about the soundness and sanctity of the system the possible benefits of a huge reform project will be lost. With credibility of the CPTU bespoken or "micro eProcurement" portal is in question, the Bangladesh people may be denied the benefits of early implementation and acceptance due to activity of abcProcure. ■