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Dr. Noeleen Heyzer

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A Three-Fold Plan to Strengthen ICT for Development in Asia-Pacific

20 Nov 2012



Your Excellency, Group Captain Anudith Nakornthap,
Minister of Information and Communications Technology of Thailand,

Your Excellency, Air Chief Marshall Thares Punsri, ,
Chairman National Broadcasting & Telecommunications Commission of Thailand,

Undersecretary Louis Casambre, Information and Communications Technology Office,
Department of Science and Technology of the Philippines,

Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

As the most inclusive intergovernmental platform for our region, ESCAP is where our member States connect and collaborate, to drive inclusive and sustainable development. A

very warm welcome, therefore, to the third session of the ESCAP Committee on Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

I would, in particular, like to recognise and express our appreciation to His Excellency the Minister of Information and Communications Technology of Thailand, who joins us today to inaugurate this session. My special thanks also go to His Excellency the Chairman of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission, and His Excellency, the Undersecretary of ICT of the Philippines, for their participation today.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

ICT for Sustainable Development

We are in a time of great transition. Asia-Pacific is a centre of gravity of global economic growth, however it faces the persistent problems of poverty, hunger, jobless growth and growing inequalities. In addition it also faces an ever-growing number of trans-boundary issues, such as the financial crises, commodity price volatility, natural disasters and climate change.

In the face of this “New Normal” of global turbulence, uncertainty, and volatility, the Asia-Pacific experience is showing that we cannot continue to grow first and distribute later, nor can we grow first and clean up later. Our challenge is to create a new, better model of development for 21st century economies. In the words of the UN Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon: “With smart public policies, governments can grow their economies, alleviate poverty, create decent jobs and accelerate social progress in a way that respects the earth’s finite resources”.

To live up to this challenge and to build shared prosperity and the future we want, the Secretary-General speaking on World Telecommunication and Information Society Day earlier this year, called on all countries to optimize the power of ICT to support sustainable development, arguing that by gathering, analyzing and spreading information we can accelerate action to protect natural resources, combat climate change and help people – especially women and girls.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

ICT Potential in Asia-Pacific

Nowhere is this more evident than in the countries of Asia and the Pacific. ICT is both an engine of economic growth and a valuable source of innovation. These are technologies which have spurred a virtuous cycle of skills, employment and investment in applications and tools that are fundamental leaps in innovation. These are not just better ways of doing old things, but radically new ways of doing previously impossible things.

The spread of connected sensors and wireless networks can lead to smarter and more resilient cities, opening up tremendous possibilities for improved and more efficient traffic, water and energy management systems. The flood of data that is created by the interaction of vast networks of mobile phones, computers and sensors – known as Big Data – creates opportunities to save lives, reduce poverty and enhance inclusive and sustainable development.

Transforming these large data sets into meaningful, useable information, reveals trends and

patterns that can be useful to policymakers in many fields of human endeavour. Data collected through mobile devices and the Internet, for example, could help policymakers to better understand rural population health trends, or to identify deadly outbreaks of diseases in remote areas.

In the government sector, ICT can also play an important role in modernizing services, as well as to enable information to be created, accessed and shared in new ways. For example, government cloud computing – or “G-clouds” – can open the gateway for government e-services to be delivered more quickly, at lower prices and on demand at any time, anywhere and for all.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Asia-Pacific ICT Divides

These remarkable successes however, are only one-side of the story. Asia-Pacific is still the most ICT divided region in the world. With only six per cent of our people connected to high-speed and affordable broadband services, the divide has broadened in those very technologies which are vital to knowledge-networked societies and achieving a sustainable future for all.

The Asia-Pacific divide is both digital and geographic. We have an income divide, an educational divide and finally an age divide – and these are holding us back as a region, and slowing development.

Rising inequality – both income and non-income – over the past two decades, poses one of the greatest challenges to policy-makers of our region. In this regard, technological progress has often widened these gaps – separating those with education and knowledge from those without.

The knowledge divide also translates into an age divide, as the market is driven by, and rewards, the uptake of new technologies by the youth and young adults. In other words, our knowledge society is organized around systems in which initiatives and rewards are shifting to people with the ability and resources to provide the right knowledge at the right time.

We are also faced by a cross-cutting gender divide. Asia-Pacific women and girls, regardless of geographical location, level of income and age, have less access to knowledge-enhancing software applications and ICT.

These are challenges that Asia-Pacific must confront as it moves toward a society where all individuals, men and women, young and old, rural and urban, are able to fully participate in the information economy.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Excellencies,

3-Pronged Approach to Strengthen ICT for Development

It is clear, therefore, that much work remains to be done – which is also why this meeting of the Committee is so important. The Secretariat, in analysing these challenges, has suggested for your consideration and decision, a three-pronged approach aimed to strengthen ICT policy coordination for more inclusive and sustainable development in the Asia-Pacific region:

First, the need to build a regionally connected infrastructure for a seamless regional information space, that will deliver broadband to all, affordably, at any time and anywhere – to strengthen what I call people to people connectivity. In-depth studies are underway, that will offer pragmatic options for policy-makers in terms of the costs involved and the benefits of developing ICT as a meta-infrastructure - that can lead to reduced material usage in all other infrastructures, including smart transport and energy grids.

As a meta-infrastructure, ICT offers the potential to break the barriers of geography, connecting far-flung villages with booming megacities and rural producers with urban consumers. Some of the findings of these studies will also be presented in our 2013 Theme Study, in terms of building e-resilience to economic and natural shocks. I am pleased to inform you that we are also developing an interactive regional map of the routes of fibre-optic cables. This will be the first of its kind, and it will put us in a position to more precisely identify communication choke-points, missing links and investment opportunities. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has emerged as an active and supportive partner in this endeavour.

Second, Ladies and Gentlemen, Excellencies, is the issue of cutting edge technologies and innovations as one of the pillars of resilient growth and sustainable development. Towards this end, a new ICT Compact between government and the private sector can be forged, to harness the transformational power of ICT. Building regional connectivity, through enhanced public-private partnerships, can put Asia-Pacific on a path towards inclusive and sustainable ICT-accelerated development. An important component of this work is our role in the Global Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development, and the regional contributions to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) review process.

Third is the issue of capacity building in ICT for development. ESCAP's Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology for Development (APCICT), in Incheon, Republic of Korea, is at the forefront of assisting member States with ICT capacity building. APCICT's flagship capacity building programmes have already made great impact through their needs-based and demand-driven approach. It is fitting that this year, for the first time, the Seventh Session of their Governing Council is meeting in conjunction with this Committee, highlighting the importance of embedding capacity building in the intergovernmental planning process for ICT policies.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

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