

Chairman's Statement
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**Highlights and recommendations of the Regional Expert Consultation
on Connecting Asia-Pacific's Digital Society for Building Resilience**

Experts were of the view that the power of high-speed broadband holds key promises for building knowledge networked societies that could bring transformative changes in socio-economic and environmental spheres. ICT infrastructure and broadband in particular are fast becoming a meta-infrastructure that bring efficiencies and transform the services provided by all other infrastructures, including social services such as education and health.

However, in the context of the regional digital divide in Asia-Pacific, which has evolved into a growing knowledge divide, a key broadband challenge is how to make it effectively accessible, affordable and reliable to all, for a seamless network of ICT connectivity in the region.

Experts recognized that a significant part of the issue lies with regional and international connections depending almost exclusively on a few submarine cables. Wholesale costs of connectivity remain on average 5 times higher in Asia and Pacific compared to Europe or the US. Furthermore, submarine fibre optic cables are increasingly exposed to various hazards that threaten reliability. Consequently, taking advantage of Asia-Pacific's huge landmass, transnational terrestrial cable networks could offer a complementary solution to submarine cable networks to increase reliability and access as well as, under the adequate regulatory conditions, stimulate competition across routes and hence reduce bandwidth price, while providing added redundancy and lower latency.

Experts recommended that various bilateral, regional and transcontinental initiatives continue to be pursued, while also exploring new ways to reduce infrastructure costs by synchronizing the roll-out of terrestrial fibre optic cables with other infrastructure development, notably highway construction, for example, using regional connectivity offered by ESCAP's intergovernmental agreement on the Asian Highway. Building regional data centers to promote local accessibility and reduce the region's reliance on

submarine cable systems may also be considered. Experts also noted that open access principles are a key requirement in bringing down costs for universal access to broadband connectivity, as proposed in LIRNEasia's Longest International Open access Network (LION).

Experts noted that present, future and near-future ICT innovations with the necessary enabling policy environment, would drive social progress and economic development, and strengthen societal resilience. Experts noted that the use of, for example, innovations in the interactivity and visualization power of computer games are being used for training in disaster preparedness and disaster risk reduction. At the same time, experts emphasized the need for universal, reliable and affordable broadband. Utilization of Universal Access Fund to provide subsidized broadband roll-out plans could also assist in achieving the desired goal. Good practices such as Pakistan may be considered. Experts also took note of the Republic of Korea's near universal roll-out of ultra-high speed connectivity and its plans aimed at building a smart society that would address future megatrends related to ageing, growing risks and uncertainties, an orientation to humanism and people power, and technological development that would evolve towards human-like technologies.

At the same time, given the wide variety of experiences in the region, the experts recognized that with the advent of near ubiquity of phone use among the poor, and declining hardware and user costs, the mobile telephone remains the preferred way to reach the poor. The experts noted a continuing gender bias in mobile phone usage, while internet and computer use was very low among the poor, SMS use was slightly higher, voice connectivity was almost ubiquitous, and awareness of "more than voice" services such as mobile banking, government services, health is low and usage was almost zero.

The development of "more than voice" services with content that is people-centric, meaningful and usable by the poor would need to be further developed, to ensure that applications such as mobile money and financial transactions, provision of government services, timely and accurate agriculture related information continue in the future to improve information flows and provide the poor with enhanced choices and improved decision-making. A regional forum focusing on development of mobile based applications and services may be formulated. The forum may invite

developers, software companies, mobile operators and governments to work on enabling mobile as a building tool for a digital society.

Experts were of the view that government policy has an important role to play in creating an enabling environment. They also identified a growing role for harmonized communications standards, analytical software, as well as the appropriate use of social media, and crowd-sourcing. In fact, crowd sourcing can be one of the most appealing models to solve and address community-based issues through the public participation as recently demonstrated in the case of Nepal that has used it to obtain more accurate and location-specific information on forest fires.

Policy challenges remain in addressing issues on security, trust, privacy and intellectual property protection to effectively exploit the substantial potential of transformative applications that are enabled by: i) the Internet of Things, ii) Big Data, iii) the increased availability of public data, also known as Open Data, iv) Cloud Computing including G-Clouds aimed at delivering public services. These trends provide significant opportunities to empower citizens, enhance competitiveness and stimulate private public partnerships involving new business models, value chains, and academia-industry collaboration.

The experts took note of the important roles for Government in the above areas, together with the associated opportunities and challenges, as highlighted in a paper commissioned by ESCAP. These include the need for creating conditions for technology transfer and innovation infrastructure, new models for education and skills to develop human capital, developing appropriate governance mechanisms and sharing good practices so as to encourage adoption and take full advantage of these technologies for Asia Pacific's Digital Society.

The experts reiterated that ICT policies require forward thinking planning. Given the wide divergence in country-specific contexts, these policies should address design-reality gaps, leadership commitment and change management, poor academia engagement, funding shortfalls and infrastructure bottlenecks. Sustainable solutions are often affected by funding shortfalls and in this regard, it was suggested that a regional ICT innovation fund with the purpose of assisting entrepreneurs from LDCs in start-up innovations could be explored. Experts also stressed the need for governments to aggressively build human resource skills in ICT innovations.

The experts noted the innovative initiative of Sri Lanka regarding its 1919 Government Information Centre (GIC) call centre which not only provides information related to government services to those who do not have access to the Internet, but also constitutes an alternate mode for the public to obtain information fast and conveniently. They also took note of other initiatives such as the private sector e-channelling initiative that has been successful in improving the efficiency of setting-up and paying for medical appointments through the use of mobile phones.

The experts took note of the “meaningful broadband” model in which meaningful referred to usable, affordable and empowering broadband. The initiative as formulated by the Digital Divide Institute is built on continual assessment of five “innovation domains” including 1) public and regulatory policy, 2) technology, 3) finance, 4) management and 5) ethics. Indonesia has formally adopted this model, and Thailand, Cambodia, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan are exploring its adaptation. According to the model, ethics is the aspect that joins all other domains. When combined, they could emerge to establish a “national meaningful broadband ecosystem” which continually adapts next generation technologies to the needs of mass-markets. The model does not generate incremental change in legacy systems but elicits transformational societal changes towards inclusiveness and sustainability. It was recommended that ESCAP work with Digital Divide Institute’s Meaningful Broadband Coalition to share best practices, and define sub-regional and regional aspects of the model.

The meeting provided an overview of various aspects of the United Nations Convention on the Use of Electronic Communications in International Contracts, 2005 (the "Electronic Communications Convention"), including: its drafting history and scope; its underlying policy goals; its interaction with other fundamental international trade law texts, such as the Convention on the Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Arbitral Awards, 1958 ("New York Convention") and the UN Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods, 1980 (CISG); and a description of the on-going efforts to adopt the Electronic Communications Convention in Thailand. Particular attention was given to the benefits arising from the adoption of the Electronic Communications Convention both in States that have already legislation based on UNCITRAL uniform texts (such as the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand) and in States not having yet

adopted any legislation in the field, or having only partial and unsatisfactory provisions.

The meeting also offered an overview of the several initiatives in the B2B and B2G fields that are being implemented or are about to be launched in Sri Lanka, such as the national electronic single window, electronic payments systems, and several B2G applications, for instance, in the field of road traffic regulation. It was stressed that all such initiatives found an enabling legal environment in the Electronic Transactions Act, 2006, which, in turn is based on the UNCITRAL Model Law on Electronic Commerce, 1996. It was further illustrated how such environment would become even more supportive of private enterprise when updated and completed with the formal adoption of the Electronic Communications Convention. In that respect, Sri Lanka announced its intention to pursue ratification of the Electronic Communications Convention, to which it was an early signatory, in the near future. It was further indicated that Thailand is likewise pursuing accession to the Electronic Communications Convention, in the framework of the revision of its Electronic Transactions Act.

Experts noted that as trade continues to be a key engine of growth for development in the Asia-Pacific region, countries have increasingly used ICT to reduce trade transactions costs and to maintain or enhance their competitiveness, as well as to make it easier for more businesses to engage in trade. Many governments are in the process of developing an electronic single window and other ICT-based platforms to replace the numerous paper based documents with electronic documents. The experts emphasized the importance of re-engineering procedures before the application of ICT on those.

Experts discussed various legal and operational aspects of the establishment of an enabling legal environment for electronic single window facilities, both at the national and at the international levels. Details were provided on

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