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<th>Asian communications : the way ahead an UNDP perspective</th>
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Thank you to AMIC for inviting UNDP to give some closing remarks. The UN system, including UNESCO, ITU and UNDP has been working with Asian peoples and governments for more than 35 years, so I will first say a few things about the way behind, before talking of the most important thing: Asian Communication: the Way Ahead.

Asia is unique in many ways. The variety of languages, the variety of cultures, and the variety of religions all contribute to a richness of creativity and communications, with Malaysia being a microcosm of the whole continent. In Asia, communications has moved from its oldest and richest form - oral/folklore, to print, to print media to electronic media to multimedia. Information technology and the internet. Communications has often been the glue that brought societies together, the fuel that drove commerce, spurred trade, enriched cultures, and improved peoples' lives. The history of Malaysia is a good example of this, and continues to be.

Communications has been key to the Asian Renaissance (the acting Prime Minister of Malaysia writes about); to intra-Asian cooperation; and to Asian cooperation with other parts of the world. This has led to a cross fertilization of ideas and cultures, and economics - a cross-fertilization which has the potential to make everyone better off, and make the world a more peaceful, and prosperous place. These are exactly the ideals which underlay the reason for the existence of the United Nations. Improved access to information and communications is a big reason that more progress has been made against poverty worldwide in the last 50 years than in the last 500. Communications has served development.

But what of the way ahead? With current trends will communications serve development? What are the challenges? There are two contrasting scenarios:

1. The Communications Revolution is used to bring people together. The internet, in particular by its “no borders” egalitarian structure has tremendous potential to bring people together, and to give all people new opportunities. The most recent human development report prepared by UNDP says poverty can be eradicated in the world over the next 20 years. To date, Asia has made more progress in this direction than any other region. Especially in Asia, which in many areas of communication is a leader, or getting to be one. there is the potential for new communications technologies to help take out of poverty the 950 million Asians who still are poor. Communications could be vital to the implementing the strategies called for in the report, such as:

   • initiating people centred policies that give individuals, households and communities expanded access to economic, political, social, environmental and personal assets. Better communications and access to information can facilitate such access.
   • creating a political environment so that poor people and poor communities can be better heard. The internet and other technologies are already powerfully facilitating such two-way communication in the industrialized countries and in some developing countries. It has the potential to do more.

2. The Communication Revolution instead accentuates differences. It still may bring an educated, IT friendly group of people through the world closer together, and make them more tied culturally/politically etc. But it may also reinforce their position as an elite, and leave others further behind. It may foster growth which is ruthless (by making the rich richer and the poor poorer), voiceless...
(by disempowering more people), rootless (by destroying national and local cultures), jobless (by creating new industries that don’t generate jobs), and futureless (by accentuating conditions that lead to non-sustainable development). The 1997 Human Development report describes a number of trends, which if continued, may bring this second scenario to reality. Among these are:

- despite its potential to raise incomes, so far globalization is hurting poor people, not just poor countries. For example, terms of trade for the LDCs declined a cumulative 50% over past 25 years. The communications revolution by supporting globalization, could accentuate these very serious negative effects.
- currently the poor are being left with little access to information superhighways, since they lack both the vehicles - Pcs/telephones - and the education and skills to drive them. If this low level of access continues, they more be left on the side of the highway forever.

The challenge facing the world is obviously to create scenario one, but without in any way limiting the dynamism of the current communications revolution. Measures must be taken to ensure scenario 2 does not come about. Things such as distance learning, culture specific programming, media coverage of sustainable development issues, which are all already being done, must continue to be done and be linked with supportive macro-economic and social policies. The result should be that communications in Asia reduces the marginalization of people and countries rather than increases it. However not enough is being done yet. For example 2/3 of internet users are in industrial countries, and use is growing faster in the “North” than in the “South”, despite very important increases in internet use in developing countries. In summary, the gap is widening.

Yet Asia, with its long traditions of rich communications and culture, its increasingly educated and healthy populations, its dynamic economies, and its “green field” for application of information and multimedia technologies, is today better placed than any other part of the world to use communications for the development of all. The communications revolution should lead to a brighter way ahead for Asia.

What is UNDP doing to help include the developing countries, particularly the least developed countries, in the benefits of the communication revolution. Currently, UNDP is funding the participation of people from LDCs in the Internet Conference and associated training. It is also developing a $4 million regional programme called the Asia/Pacific Development Information Programme which is to improve access to information in Asia. Among its activities will be:
- providing national governments and sub-regional organizations the basis for understanding issues on the global information highway.
- gaining a consensus in understanding the importance of information and knowledge sharing to sustainable human development
- helping to connect more countries and people to the internet and its potential benefits such as telemedicine and distance learning.

As well, similar programmes are being developed and implemented in Africa, the Arab States and Latin America. Globally UNDP is committing more than $20 million to such work. We are also pleased to be supporting an AMIC project on the use of multi-media technologies to reduce poverty in South Asia - a project dealing exactly with the issues I have spoken of.

The INET meeting next week will be an opportunity to examine these issues more and to find the way ahead. The way ahead should and must be, a communications revolution that brings people together, and does not marginalize more.