

A JOINT STATEMENT OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE ASEM WORKSHOP ON BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Kuala Lumpur, 1-2 December 2009

Despite the impressive growth of the digital economy in the industrialized world and its increasing penetration into developing countries, many nations still face challenges to fully benefit from the opportunities offered by Information and Communication Technologies. The different speed of ICT take-up in wealthy and developing countries has created a global digital divide hampering the potential for economic growth and increased quality of life.

The Heads of State and Government of the Seventh Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM7) in Beijing on 24-25 October 2008 agreed on the need to enhance cooperation in the fields of innovation, science, and technology among ASEM partners so as to narrow the digital divide and ensure sustainable development.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) put forward as one of its principles "a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life."

The ASEM ICT Ministerial Meeting held in Ha Noi in November 2006, among other things, acknowledged "the different levels of ICT development among ASEM members, particularly the digital divide between developed and developing countries." The Chairman's statement recognised that "in this regard, cooperation in ASEM on promoting ICT applications represents an opportunity to close the gap as well as to foster the partnership between Asian and European countries."

Cognizant of the importance attached at various international forums to the efforts to narrow the digital divide, the participants of the ASEM Workshop in Kuala Lumpur acknowledged that an inclusive Information Society provides better quality public services and promotes quality of life.

The participants exchanged best practices and lessons learned at national and international level and discussed practical solutions how to address the main ICT for Development challenges.

The participants acknowledged that the situation of the ICT infrastructure in ASEM countries is very diverse and noted that Connectivity is a basic need for residential and non-residential end-users. There is no "one-size-fits-all" solution due to the diversity of socio-economic environments, level of competition, density of population, geography. In such a context, mobile data, Next Generation Fiber Access Network and satellite have to be considered in a holistic approach.

The participants reviewed and endorsed the ITU methodology based on the following steps: (i) an assessment of the national current situation followed by (ii) a review of

regional best practices and (iii) a comparison with international best practices in order to (iv) discuss the pros and cons of each model in order to develop (v) policies (building blocks) and (iv) regulatory guidelines.

Affordable access to technologies and services was recognized as a major issue for developing countries. The participants agreed that adopting free and open source systems (FOSS) not only lowers language barriers and makes the use of ICT tools more available but it also offers a sustainable choice in terms of licenses, version stability, training costs and energy consumption. As the Mobile Web is becoming increasingly popular in Asia this may be an area where Asia could take the lead in implementing standards and developing new services. Strong policies, including measures against cybercrime and other security threats, must also be in place.

The participants agreed that capacity building embraces a large number of issues such as human resource development, organizational, institutional and legal framework development as well as production of local content and relevant applications. It has been observed that due to high illiteracy levels and low IT awareness in many developing nations, there is a wide e-readiness gap between the capacities needed for successful ICT and what actually exists. Hence, the issue of human capacity building is downright vital for such countries and should be seen as a pre-requisite for ICT implementation. The participants called for making ICT training a compulsory part of curriculum at the school and college level. Community programmes could be initiated and encouraged to make the adult population in all segments of the society ICT literate and technology friendly. The participants recognised that standardization is a very important factor in capacity building. They backed the idea of a globally harmonised regulation ensuring interoperability at all times.

The participants emphasized that policy and regulatory environment based on principles such as transparency, establishment or reinforcement of independent telecom regulatory authorities, innovation-driven approach of fixed-mobile convergence and openness has a determinant impact on investment and is a prerequisite for progress towards integrated ICT. The participants reaffirmed the need for pro-active regulatory policies on ICT in all ASEM countries and called for fostering public policy objectives such as e-inclusion and for using ICT as an instrument of social development. Looking at commendable practices on ICT regulation within the ASEM framework as well as debating ICT policies with the largest possible audience in order to improve confidence in ICT, participation and ownership in ICT projects was also encouraged.

The extension of the Trans-Eurasia Information Network (TEIN), a high-speed research and education network, to South Asia was celebrated as part of the Workshop. Through its extension to seven countries in South Asia it will now link over 45 million researchers, students and educationalists in 8,000 institutions, enabling closer collaboration to underpin critical projects, education and research across the region.

The participants appreciated the achievements of TEIN3 as vital infrastructure for reducing the digital divide within research and education in Asia, which is enabling those in developing countries to collaborate effectively in regional research and

educational programmes. Participants appreciated how the TEIN programme is benefitting both users, and humanitarian objectives in a wider society.

The participants regarded continued support for the TEIN programme, beyond its current 2011 term, as essential for further development of the Information Society in Asia. They called on the European and Asian governments of ASEM to work together urgently with the TEIN programme partners to support the long term sustainability of the programme, and for further awareness-raising to users.