Digital Strategies for Development Summit
Plenary 5: Connectivity (10.45am – 12nn)
Panel Discussion
Concept Note

Background

Asia and the Pacific region have experienced strong growth in broadband internet connectivity. For the first time, over 50% of the global fixed broadband subscriptions come from the geographic ESCAP member countries, followed by Europe (23.1%) and North America (15.2%), according to the latest ITU data. Some of the region's ICT advanced economies top major ICT indicators. The UN DESA's E-government Survey 2014 ranked the Republic of Korea, Australia and Singapore as top 3 countries, followed by Japan and New Zealand at 6th and 9th respectively in the world. The ITU ICT Development Index 2015, which measures ICT access, usage and skills, ranked the Republic of Korea at the top of the list, followed by Hong Kong, China (9th), Japan (11th) and Australia (13th).

Despite these impressive growths and expansions, the gap—as measured by fixed broadband subscribers—continues to widen and is unlikely to close without targeted intervention. In fact, the broadband growth commonly observed in Asia and the Pacific has been primarily driven by one single country with more than 50% of the fixed broadband subscribers for Asia Pacific. This trend has increased the broadband connectivity share of Asia-Pacific in the global total to more than half. However, broadband connectivity level among ESCAP members varies significantly with the slowest progress observed among ESCAP low income countries. According to ITU data, there are 21 Asia-Pacific economies with 2% or lower adoption of fixed broadband per 100 inhabitants in 2014. Digital divide in Asia Pacific is widening and it could continue if no targeted policies are put in place.

Panel Discussion

In this light, ESCAP through its resolution 69/10 embarked upon its initiative the 'Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway' to improve regional broadband connectivity, through a dense web of open access cross-border network infrastructure, integrating them into a cohesive land and sea-based fibre infrastructure with the ultimate aim to increase the international bandwidth for developing countries in the region and to lower the broadband internet prices. Furthermore, in 2015, ESCAP Resolution 71/10 asked the ESCAP secretariat to promote the sharing of experiences, good practices and lessons learned in ICT for DRR, management and response, and building e-resilience, thus leading to the formation of AP-IS Working Group.

Subsequently, in collaboration with the Ministry of Science, ICT and Future Planning of the Republic of Korea, ESCAP is able to promote and enhance regional cooperation for the development of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway through this Digital Strategies for Development Summit. A panel discussion on the theme of 'Connectivity' has been arranged to be moderated by ESCAP during the Summit with Panelists from different representations/expertise.

The objective of the panel discussion of selected prominent speakers is to tease out thoughtful ideas of how Asia-Pacific economies may tackle this mixed performance (digital divide). In particular, what policy prescription and regulation are working and what not and how we can promote regional cooperation. Through this process, the discussion will engage and inform the audience on the policy and regulatory challenges on ICT connectivity in the region.

Panelists

ESCAP in collaboration with eSociety (Information and Communications Technology Office, Department of Science and Technology of the Republic of the Philippines) have selected knowledgeable panelists to contribute to the panel discussion. As such, the following have been invited and confirmed to participate:

1.   Mr. Yeong Ro Lee
      Executive Researcher
      National Information Society Agency (NIA)

2.   Mr. Rajnesh D. Singh
      Regional Director
      Asia-Pacific Reginal Bureau
      Internet Society

3.   Mr. Byungki Oh
      Vice President
      Global Business Group
      KT (Korea Telecom)

4.   Ms. Natasha Beschorner
      Senior ICT Policy Specialist
      World Bank Office Singapore

5.   Mr. Sione Veikoso
      President
      Pacific Islands Telecommunications Associations (PITA)

Issues/Question for Discussion (1.15 hour)

1. *Access* – 21 ESCAP member countries have 2% or less broadband penetration. Eight of the 21 countries are Pacific island countries and 5 countries are in South Asia. What are the challenges encountered by these economies and how could it be addressed? (10 minutes)
2. *Affordability* – Price disparities continues to be a problem, in particular for fixed broadband. In your own experience, what is the key factor determining affordability of broadband internet? (10 minutes)
3. *ICT Connectivity* – While overall broadband connectivity has improved in Asia and the Pacific over time, country level performance varies dramatically. What factors do you think contribute to this varied performance? (10 minutes)
4. *SDGs* – ESCAP member countries have recognized the importance of ICT as a contributor to SDGs and the need to bridge the digital divide have promoted regional ICT connectivity among member countries. How could ESCAP member countries achieve better connectivity through such an initiative? (10 minutes)
5. *ICT Demand* – ICT connectivity tap into new demands. What opportunities do you see in developing country economies through better ICT connectivity? What targeted policies should be promoted to achieve this? (10 minutes)

Expected Outcome

It is expected that ESCAP will have the opportunity to advocate for the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS) through this Summit. In addition, consolidating good practices and lessons learnt on ICT connectivity issues at the regional level would be useful. In addition, other potential sub-regional pre-feasibility studies could be considered with various partners and stakeholders in the future, based on the discussions and dialogues. ESCAP's participation will also strengthen the linkage with initiatives on digital inclusion which will be highlighted during the conference. Finally, ESCAP will promote the WSIS resolution on regional review as mandated to undertake, and build constituencies for such a review.