

Aspiring for a broadband revolution

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There are more mobile phones and computers in the world's poorest countries than ever, but it's far too early to declare that the technological divide between industrialized and developing nations is shrinking.

Granted, organizations such as the International Telecommunications Union are quick to point out that in absolute terms, the digital divide is indeed shrinking, if one is simply to calculate the number of fixed-line and mobile phones as well as Internet connection that are used in the wealthier nations compared to those in poorer countries. That index number was four in 2004, compared to nine at the end of 2000, according to the ITU.

Still, that doesn't mean that those living in impoverished regions are finding themselves going increasingly online.

For instance, the proliferation of broadband has been critical for the Internet to take off as a means to go about daily life, from filing taxes and obtaining government documents online to shopping for clothes and keeping tabs on bank accounts.

"Have you tried downloading a document on dial-up recently? It's almost impossible," said Vanessa Gray, a telecommunications analyst at the market, economics and finance unit of the ITU. Nonetheless, 97.3 percent of all broadband subscribers in the world are from North America, Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, while only 0.2 percent are found in the Middle East, despite the sizeable wealth of the Gulf states, while a mere 0.1 percent are found in Africa.

"So if countries do want to benefit the most from (information and communications technologies), they must have a critical mass using broadband," Gray said in an interview with United Press International.

That's where setting up global standards may help, or so the United Nations agency is hoping. As telecommunications bureaucrats from the ITU's member states continue to debate in Doha to come up with a final telecommunications policy resolution to be adopted by all for the next four years by Wednesday, one key issue at stake is how to make broadband more available across the globe.

There is no doubt that broadband has led to a surge in productivity and cost-cuts in countries that have embraced it, not least the example of British Telecom reportedly saving at least \$103 million each year directly as a result of broadband use as telecommuting led to increased output from workers as well as fewer sick days claimed by each employee. For other businesses too, having clients purchase goods online and demand information via the Internet has made sizeable cost-cuts possible.

As a result, the "political will to have broadband" by nations big and small is undeniable, said Doreen Bogdan, head of regulatory reform at the telecom development bureau of the ITU. She told UPI that one way to ensure that more countries adopt broadband is to make it cheaper for telecommunications operators to provide the service and to encourage competition in the sector. That could be done by making certain governments have less strict policies about granting licensing fees, and to make it easier for smaller operators to be in the market by having less stringent obligations about setting up the infrastructure.

"With the right framework, there can be new investments and smaller players" entering the broadband market that could make it take off even in the lesser developed nations, Bogdan added. Some countries have

been particularly creative about introducing broadband, with India being a good example of how the country has combined gas and electricity lines with broadband, thereby making it cheaper to install the fiber optics needed for connectivity as it simply follows the routes created by the utilities networks.

Of course, access to broadband means a far greater flow of information rapidly, something that not all governments across the globe might necessarily welcome. Furthermore, in the case of many countries that have embraced broadband in recent years including the United States, there has been no national policy on getting the country wired, but rather it has been the result of consumer demand and private-sector-driven investments.

Some developing countries, however, are making strides from the top down in getting their nation wired, with Rwanda being a lead example, Bogdan said.

"The president (of Rwanda) is committed to ICT ... it's an amazing story of growth in a really short space of time," she said, adding that by encouraging regulatory reform in the sector, the ITU could help be a driving force in igniting a broadband revolution worldwide.

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