

Turning on the rural broadband tap...

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Between 25 and 40 per cent of Europeans have no affordable, effective access to the 1s and 0s that constitute the ABCs of the rapidly emerging knowledge economy. The figure used depends on the definition of 'rural', but there is a real lack of rural broadband access generally.

The problem is especially damaging given the enormous impact cheap, fast internet access can have on rural economies, and the comparative low economic development of Europe's rural regions.

The lack of digital services stems in part from lack of compelling quantitative data to illustrate their positive impact on rural communities and economies. But A-BARD produced a draft of convincing qualitative examples that hammer home the advantages of broadband access.

A-BARD spent the last 19 months studying all factors affecting rural broadband. It studied technology, applications, commercial and political issues and wrote case studies outlining specific rural deployments throughout Europe, from the Group Broadband Schemes in Ireland to the ROWANet projects in the Czech Republic.

The project analysed various technical solutions to broadband deployment, including technologies like ADSL, cable, satellite, WiMAX and even the promising powerline broadband system that could supply Internet access via the electricity grid.

"There's no doubt that for rural communities WiMAX could provide a solution to many of the access problems, but it's a technology that's been

promised for a long time and while pre-WiMAX is available, real WiMAX is still not commercial. Besides, each community needs to be assessed individually to find the best solutions for the local situation," says Martine Ruzza, from MAC, a partner in the IST-funded A-BARD project and the coordinating organisation.

Applications, too, are an issue. "One of the obstacles to broadband deployment is that it is hard to demonstrate the need for specific applications and the impact they would have. But there are many applications like e-government, e-health, e-education as well as e-commerce, that would have an enormous impact on rural areas," says Ruzza.

She cites the Irish example where people can pay for their motor tax online. Public services like these are particularly vital for rural residents, who might otherwise need to travel 30 or 40km to pay their tax. That can take a whole day. Doctors are also widely dispersed, and libraries tend to be poorly resourced. All these factors mean broadband can have a huge impact on local quality of life, but it can also reduce dramatically the cost of delivering public services.

Even though the case may be compelling, there remain a number of issues like how to justify the business case, or develop public-private partnerships for the broadband provision. A-BARD identified and studied these issues, too.

The ultimate aim is to develop a set of recommendations to act as a basis for policy decisions. "We are in the analysis phase now, studying all the information we collected through meetings, workshops, research and case studies, and our aim is to provide a practical set of simple recommendations that can be adapted to the wide variety of access issues throughout Europe," says Ruzza. The goal is to provide an effective and efficient means to identify policy actions.

And, as A-BARD's case studies demonstrate, it is a very worthwhile goal. In Sweden, in the Sörmland region, broadband enabled a local hairdresser to expand her business dramatically.

"The city of Katrineholm in Sörmland is a very popular destination for weddings, so a local hairdresser set up a website and convinced other businesses to provide a 'one-stop-shop' where couples can arrange everything for their wedding, from accommodation to hair and everything else," says Ruzza.

In Poland the Online Agricultural Exchange provides farmers with news and research, and also enables them to buy and sell their produce. There are two aims: open lines of communication between business and farmers, and improve revenues for farmers.

The Cybermoor project, headquartered in the town of Alston, population 2200, in the UK's Pennine mountains, revitalised local democracy, stimulated local business and developed a real sense of local community, all through locally developed Web content delivered via broadband.

"House prices in Alston developed significantly because people looking for a better quality of life, would start moving there once broadband became available," says Ruzza. Many of Europe's rural regions are becoming depopulated as locals move to the city. Broadband is an essential utility to encourage migration the other way.

It's a great demonstration of the power of Web technologies to bind communities together, but it also underlines the difficulty in making a case for rural broadband. While it's hard to cite the number of jobs created, lives saved or the amount of inward investment prompted by broadband deployment, A-BARD's studies demonstrate conclusively the profound, positive change it can generate for communities that most desperately need support.

Source: [IST Results](#)

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