

Europe, South Korea, dominate global IT development (Update)

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Two men access the internet on their laptop at a press conference in Stockholm, February 2009. Sweden has come out on top of the International Telecommunications Union's latest five yearly index on computer development.

North European countries and South Korea have the fastest and most widespread telecoms and computer growth in the world, the UN's telecommunications agency said on Monday.

More than one-fifth of the world's inhabitants surfed the Internet while mobile phone subscriptions exceeded the four billion mark by the end of 2008, according to the the International Telecommunications Union's latest five yearly index.

Although information and communications technology developed in all

154 nations surveyed between 2002 and 2007 - with the exception of 117th placed Myanmar -- it was still a largely rich country phenomenon.

Sweden led the index of overall ICT development followed by South Korea, which gained two places, Denmark, the Netherlands, Iceland and Norway. The top 20 was dominated by western Europe, North America and Asia.

European growth since 2002 outstripped that of the United States, once the spearhead of Internet use.

The United States fell from 11th to 17th place overall, despite having some of the cheapest services especially for broadband.

"Some of the figures related to mobile (phone) penetration for example, also households with Internet access, are not as high in the European countries," said ITU market information head Susan Teltscher.

The "digital divide" between rich and poor only narrowed marginally over 2002.

Fixed line, mobile and broadband services in developing countries were also costly to the point of being "prohibitive" in many instances or largely confined to business use, according to the ITU.

Singaporeans enjoy the cheapest prices -- ranging from 0.2 percent of Gross National Income per head for mobile phones to 0.8 percent broadband.

But in the poorest countries, especially in Africa, prices for mobile services can reach up 50 times incomes per head, and about one fifth to half of incomes for fixed line or broadband.

The ITU said a state policy choice helped South Korea thrive despite relatively low per capita incomes compared to western European countries.

"In South Korea the government has practised a very IT focused policy, making it one of its priorities, resulting in a faster evolution towards the information society," said Teltscher.

Overall, the improvements in the index were largely down to greater access -- the availability of technology and infrastructure.

But usage, which is often tied to education or skills and individual wealth, was progressing at a much slower rate, the ITU said.

Developing countries still suffered from limited access to infrastructure.

But they are nonetheless the world's biggest cellphone users.

There were 4.1 billion mobile subscriptions worldwide at the end of 2008, compared to 1.3 billion fixed lines, and two-thirds of them were in use in developing countries against half five years ago, the ITU said.

Teltscher said the development of mobile broadband networks could help bridge the rich-poor divide as it is rolled out in countries like China and India.

Several developing or emerging countries, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, China and Vietnam, were among the most dynamic areas of overall IT growth, albeit from low levels.

The other fastest growing countries were Luxembourg, the United Arab Emirates, Ireland, Macao and Japan. The most dynamic overall development was in eastern Europe.

The index is based on 11 criteria including the availability of information and communications technology, usage such as the number of households with a computer, Internet users, as well as skill and literacy levels.

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