http://www.futuregov.asia/blog/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=FutureGov+Updates+218&utm_content=FutureGov+Updates+218+CID_b19c586c9b300ecf8508126fafa0c0dc&utm_source=Newsletter

Moving Towards Meaningful e-Inclusion

By Clarice Africa | 16 January 2013

The 'Fixed-broadband sub-basket' measures the general affordability of broadband internet services. It is part of The International Telecommunications Union's (ITU's) ICT Price Basket which measures the aggregate affordability of three 'sub-baskets' – fixed telephone, mobile cellular and fixed broadband Internet services, and is then computed as a percentage of average Gross National Income (GNI) per capita.

According to ITU's 2012 report:"Measuring the Information Society" (refer to page 86), the countries with the most 'affordable fixed broadband sub-basket' are all high-income economies, including Macao (China), Singapore, Switzerland, United Kingdom, South Korea and Japan.

Fixed-broadband sub-basket — essentially, the cost in acquiring broadband for individuals — in those countries is very low, and hovers around 0.3 per cent of the Gross National Income (GNI) per capita in Macao (China). Meanwhile, the list of countries with prohibitively expensive fixed-broadband services is dominated by low-income developing countries like Gambia, where the price ranges to about 747.4 per cent of GNI per capita.

The statistics derived from this are used as a comprehensive benchmarking tool to measure how accessible telephone, mobile cellular and broadband internet services are in different countries.

Broadband in itself is a platform for the benefit of the people. It is made more meaningful if it is affordable and isn't an expensive necessity, and it is made more empowering when people are able to create ideas through it and innovate.

The Community e-Centres

While making sure that every citizen is "connected" cannot be done overnight, I would like to highlight a growing initiative that is reaping tangible benefits in bridging the digital divide - this project is called Telecentre or Community e-Centre.

Community e-Centres (CeCs) are public sites often situated in remote rural areas that enable people to gather information, create, learn, and communicate with others by using the ICT tools provided.

CeCs offer the community with access to ICT based equipment and services such as computers with internet access, printers, e-mail and other collaborative applications. They feature a broad range of services and applications aimed at catering to the needs of the community at very affordable prices.

Examples of such services are capacity building, information awareness campaigns for health and other pressing issues, telemedicine, applications and placement for employment, conduit for government services, public e-library and even Business Process Outsourcing for CeCs to be self-sustaining.

CeCs are able to overcome issues in affordability as majority of their services are either subsidised or available for a minimal fee. In addition, they also allow the unserved and underserved communities in remote rural areas to not only access the internet but also build up their capabilities and skills necessary to improve their daily lives and communities.

Several countries now have their respective National Telecentre initiatives, examples of which are the Philippines' Community e-Center network, Malaysia's eBario and Sri Lanka's Nenasala project.

CeC Project in Laos

In the aspect of telemedicine, a company I worked with previously was engaged with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on a CeC project in Lao PDR . The project entailed the implementation of e-health training for village workers in rural areas, and while there are healthcare centres in place, villagers from far flung rural areas had to travel hours on foot to seek medical attention, and it is even more difficult to travel during unfavourable weather conditions because some roads are impassable.

With this project, medical training is provided virtually to village health workers and health staff through ICT mediums available in CeCs.

After the project monitoring and evaluation was done by ADB, it was found that health in rural communities improved, based on the reduced child mortality numbers in surrounding communities.

I remember our consultant telling me about a Laotian woman who had to travel four hours on foot with a sick baby on her back to get to the nearest health centre. He told me how the woman was so happy now that she would no longer have to make such long journeys just to get medical attention or even to get information on how to improve both her and the baby's health, since it's now mostly available in CeCs.

The 'meaning' of connectivity

It is because of stories like these that we become witnesses to the transformational benefits of being "connected". Meaningful e-inclusion pertains not only to bridging the digital divide and connecting the unconnected: it should also make sure that people with disabilities – whether blind, deaf and mobility impaired — are not excluded from the transformational benefits of innovation and are not left behind.

In addition, public sector organisations and NGOs should work together to spur the creation of local content online. It should reflect the culture, values and heritage of communities to make e-services and other such activities more relevant to citizens and more responsive to their needs and interests.

ICT initiatives which aim to engage citizens online may fall short unless attention is given to local interests and content. This applies not just to “inclusion” initiatives which seek to engage the marginalised or indigenous sectors but to all kinds of services launched by the government, from CeCs to mobile apps and information portals - your message is effectively sent across if citizens are able to relate to it.