



Ministry of Telecommunications and the Information Society/ITU/ASETA International Seminar

"Closing the Digital Divide through the Development of e-Strategies"

Quito, Ecuador, 26-27 November 2009

The Ministry of Telecommunications and the Information Society (MINTEL), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the Association of Telecommunication Enterprises of the Andean Community (ASETA) organized this international seminar to discuss four themes relating to the use of ICT strategies and applications for closing the digital divide: 1) ICT norms, policies, programmes and developments; 2) policies and strategies for e-readiness and digital inclusion; 3) programmes and experiences relating to content, services and applications; and 4) programmes and experiences relating to universal access and infrastructure for access.

During the seminar, 21 speakers from the Andean Region, as well as representatives from regional and international organizations, shared their experiences on the use of ICTs and ICT applications for digital inclusion. Some of the entities represented at the seminar included telecommunication ministries and regulatory authorities, telecommunications operators and civil society organizations.

During the opening ceremony, Mr. Marcelo López Arjona, ASETA's Secretary General, noted that operators must adopt new technologies to maintain their competitiveness. He added that mobile and broadband infrastructure allows operators to provide more advanced services, but at the same time, increases the divide between the population who has access to ICT services and those who don't. He invited the organizations participating in the seminar to focus their actions on the welfare of the citizens.

Mr. Sergio Scarabino, ITU representative for South America, mentioned the different areas in which ITU cooperates with other organizations to implement projects for bridging the digital divide. He described the advances made in reducing the divide through the adoption of wireless broadband and cellular mobile technologies and urged the participants to consider the important role that ICTs play in promoting development, inciting them to assign resources to the telecommunications sector.

Mr. Jorge Glas Espinel, Minister of Telecommunications and the Information Society of Ecuador (Mintel), noted that the digital divide refers not only to divergences in the level of ICT access, but also to obstacles for economic development and to difficulties to overcome poverty. He underscored the fundamental role of the State in facilitating inclusive societies and pointed out the positive cycle of economic

growth and social development that the introduction of ICTs and their applications create. Minister Glas stated that, with the creation of Mintel in August of 2009, Ecuador aims to reduce its lags in connectivity and regulation and advance in the creation of an inclusive information society.

As part of the opening ceremony, Mintel and the Ibero-American Association of Research Centres and Telecommunication Enterprises (AHCIEET) signed a cooperation agreement, joining ITU and ASETA in supporting the Telecommunication Ministry's activities in Ecuador and within the Andean region.

The opening ceremony was followed by keynote presentations from ITU and AHCIEET. During his presentation, Mr. Germán Pérez, ITU Consultant, discussed some of the factors that affect connectivity and the level of "digital richness/poverty" of the population, including education, age and income. He noted that despite having a higher number of low-income population and rural areas than other Latin-American countries, the Andean region has reached high levels of mobile cellular telephone penetration in the last few years. He added that all the countries in the region have already developed a national ICT plan or connectivity agenda, and are actively promoting the use of ICT applications.

Dr. Francisco Gómez, from AHCIEET, highlighted the importance of having a political and executive vision to guide the implementation of ICT strategies in the region. In his view, the commitment of top policymakers to support ICT strategies improves their potential for success by increasing internal coordination in the adoption of ICTs at all levels of government. He call on the participants to envision ICTs as "transversal" tools that should be applied in a coordinated manner across all economic sectors to create economies of scale and scope and take the most advantage of possible synergies.

THEME 1: ICT NORMS, POLICIES, PROGRAMMES AND DEVELOPMENTS

This session discussed the experiences of different Andean governments when implementing policies and programmes for closing the digital divide. The presenters underscored the persistence of the rural-urban digital divide in their countries and noted the importance of satellite and broadband technologies to serve rural communities. Mr. Francisco Cevallos (Mintel – Ecuador) noted that the effectiveness of ICT projects depends on several factors, including the establishment of appropriate regulation; the coordination of stakeholder activities; ensuring project sustainability through adequate financing; a sense of ownership from the social groups benefited by such projects; promoting public-private participation; and having adequate project supervision and implementation follow-up.

Similarly, Mr. Daniel Medina (Ministry of Information and Communications Technologies of Colombia) pointed out the importance of accountability and monitoring activities for the success of ICT projects. He noted that adequate resources and ICT policies support the rapid closing of the digital divide. To this end, Colombia passed in recent years a new ICT law and established a long-term spectrum policy, which included the creation of a national spectrum agency.

The representatives from Colombia, Bolivia (Mr. Fabián Tito, Authority for Fiscal and Social Control of Telecommunications and Transport) and Peru (Mr. Carlos Romero, Transport and Communications Ministry) underscored the value of using the most appropriate technology to improve connectivity. Colombia and Bolivia are planning to launch national satellites to reach rural and insulated populations. The universal service project of Bolivia also relies on telecentres, as well as broadband and mobile cellular infrastructure to improve digital inclusiveness. Finally, Peru has established a connectivity fund for public telephony and Internet (FITEL) and is looking into wireless broadband solutions to connect remote populations to the national fibre optic network.

At a later session, Dr. Lilia Perez, from ITU, introduced the strategies the Union is currently implementing to promote the use of ICT applications in developing countries. She noted that ITU is developing background studies, toolkits and software to help countries evaluate their readiness to implement e-strategies in the areas of e-government, e-environment and e-health. Dr. Perez also encouraged the participants to take advantage of upcoming ITU events for the Americas, including the Connect Americas Forum planned for 2010, to learn about existing resources, exchange experiences and facilitate coordination for potential regional projects.

Finally, Mr. Jairo Gomez, from ASETA, presented some of the findings of an ASETA study to measure the digital divide in the educational environment. The study evaluated economic, social, educational variables, as well as modalities of technological use.

THEME 2: POLICIES AND STRATEGIES FOR E-READINESS AND DIGITAL INCLUSION

This session discussed the social capacities needed to use ICTs as tools for solving problems and supporting development. Regarding digital inclusion, Rubén Gómez (Intel – Ecuador) indicated that the new Constitution of Ecuador has added digital literacy and ICT access as fundamental citizen rights. To fulfil those rights, the digital literacy plan of Ecuador aims to raise awareness among the population of the advantages and dangers of ICTs, improve ICT adoption by the public and private sectors, and promote the use of ICT applications in the areas of health and education.

Mr. Omar Montilla (Fundación Infocentros – Venezuela) shared the experience of community infocentres in Venezuela and highlighted the importance of community ownership in the successful use of such centres. To facilitate this sense of ownership, Fundación Infocentros promotes the selection of community representatives as facilitators and the generation of local content at the infocentres. Mr. Montilla equated reducing the digital divide to a reduction in the poverty levels of the population.

As part of its national development plan for the information society, launched in 2005, Peru established a multisectoral commission for the development of the information society (CODESI). According to Mr. Carlos Romero (College of Engineering of Peru), CODESI aims to develop ICT infrastructure, increase human

capacity to access the information society, and promote the adoption of ICT applications in productive and service activities, as well as for social programmes, including e-government. Meanwhile, in Ecuador, the development of e-services is still limited and requires investment, noted Mr. Fabián Jaramillo of the Telecommunications Superintendence of Ecuador. Mr. Jaramillo underscored the need to revise regulations and strengthen the national infrastructure to facilitate innovation and incorporate new services, such as the provision of telecommunication services through electricity networks.

Finally, Dr. Romel Jurado (Association for Communications Progress – Ecuador) explored the topic of social inclusion from the perspective of human rights, exhorting the participants to look at ICTs as tools to help achieve citizens' rights and basic needs.

THEME 3: PROGRAMMES AND EXPERIENCES RELATING TO ICT CONTENT, SERVICES, AND APPLICATIONS

This session addressed the programmes and initiatives of telecommunications operators in the region to develop relevant content and the necessary applications to close the digital divide. Mr. César Regalado (National Telecommunications Corporation – CNT – Ecuador) described different social responsibility projects implemented by CNT to support the achievement of the National Connectivity Plan of Ecuador. He noted that broadband technology is a driving force for closing the digital divide and indicated that its deployment can be accelerated through strategies such as the liberalization of spectrum for new services and technologies; transparent investment policies that favour market dynamics and foster social responsibility; public-private investment in basic services and advanced technologies, and pro-competitive practices to lower service rates.

Mr. Augusto Espín (Mobile Telecommunications of Ecuador - ALEGRO) mentioned that the low level of Internet usage in Ecuador is due to three key factors: Digital illiteracy, lack of access and high rates. Mobile networks, he noted, provide a good alternative for accessing broadband services and the Internet at a lower cost. To increase mobile cellular penetration and the use of mobile electronic applications, ALEGRO is implementing social development projects directed to low-income populations, including a mobile e-banking project that allows mobile payments and money transfers via cellular phones. This project is destined to the 70 percent of the population that does not have a banking account in Ecuador.

Mr. Juan Córdova (ETAPA TELECOM – Ecuador) introduced the example of a local connectivity project for the municipality of Cuenca, Ecuador. The project aims to increase telephone and computer density and provide broadband access at affordable rates, educating the population on ICT technologies to enable them as “digital citizens”.

Similarly, in Colombia, the Telecommunications Enterprise of Bogota (ETB) is implementing a social responsibility strategy to increase ICT access in the City of Bogota, using broadband infrastructure and telecentres. The initiative includes, among other projects, the provision of distance education programmes to improve

digital literacy and a programme directed to the development of community-appropriate content, services and ICT applications, in collaboration with a local university. Dr. Diana Celis, from ETB, noted that the strategy aims to achieve technological development that responds to the basic needs of the community, through the collaborative efforts of public and private partners.

Finally, Mr. Alfredo Pagano (Deloitte & Touche) examined the trends and advantages of adopting green IT and green enterprise practices. He mentioned that the introduction of green IT reduces costs, improves services and brings environmental benefits. In this sense, he added, ICTs can drive the sustainability plans of an organization.

THEME 4: PROGRAMMES AND EXPERIENCES RELATING TO UNIVERSAL ACCESS AND INFRASTRUCTURE FOR ACCESS

This session examined public and private projects to achieve universal access. Mr. Waldo Pantoja (ENTEL Bolivia) presented the policies and strategies of the National Development Plan of Bolivia (2006-2010), noting that any effort to close the digital divide should take into consideration issues of accessibility, affordability, sustainability and availability. Bolivia, he stated, is deploying a mix of technologies and strategies to achieve universal access, including community telecentres, mobile cellular technology and DTH satellite services. He mentioned that the Bolivian government is considering a draft law on electronic commerce and personal data protection to provide an enabling regulatory environment for the provision of advanced services in a secure and trusting manner.

Mr. Ramón Villa, from Group ISA-INTERNEXA, a Colombian electricity company providing services in the Andean region, underscored the value of using the existing fibre optic network, deployed by electricity companies, to provide telecommunication services. INTERNEXA provides Internet access services to small and medium size enterprises in Colombia and Peru. Mr. Villa noted that the electricity and telecommunication sectors should exploit the synergies of their fibre optic networks to provide access to small and medium size populations.

Finally, Ms. Hortensia Rozas, from Telefónica Peru, highlighted the importance of public-private collaboration to provide basic and advanced telecommunication services to rural communities, where private investment is limited due to low profitability. She mentioned that access to public funds, such as those provided through FITEL, facilitate the execution of rural connectivity projects, which are expected to become self-sustainable in the future. She noted that the regulatory framework should guarantee the flow of private investment, promote the deployment of fixed telephony and reduce obligations that tend to increase operation expenses of service providers.

CONCLUSIONS

After a Q&A session from the seminar participants, Mr. Jorge Glas, Minister of Telecommunications of Ecuador, closed the seminar with the following summary of key points discussed during the event:

- The presentations from all the participant countries underscored the importance of information and communication technologies, not only as an infrastructural issue, but as a means to reach all the socio-economic sectors of society, connecting previously unserved or underserved populations, where the digital divide still continues.
- To close the digital divide it is necessary to build capacity among all members of society to facilitate the efficient use of ICTs and harness their potential for development and growth.
- Regional or geographic characteristics, as well as the particular needs of the population, define the type of technology that is more appropriate for closing the digital divide.
- Given the present condition of the countries in the Region and aiming to promote development, the Andean region must take advantage of the capabilities of information and communication technologies to provide essential services in the areas of education, health and electronic government, among others.
- ICTs, as strategic tools, have cross-sectional applications that help other strategic sectors achieve competitiveness and foster innovation.
- ICT content must reflect the social, cultural and political reality of each locality; that is, the content must be pertinent to diverse sectors. Only in this manner would we be able to take advantage of the capabilities of ICTs to preserve our ancestral values.
- Closing the digital divide requires taking into consideration the principles of accessibility, availability, affordability and sustainability. This can be carried out through the development of projects that emphasize social responsibility and make use of public and private resources and capabilities.
- We agree that ICTs must be considered tools to create opportunities, improve our quality of life, maintain our values, as well as, to exercise our fundamental rights. In sum, the objective does not have to be closing the digital divide, but overcoming poverty and inequity; in other words, closing the income divide.

As part of the closing ceremony, Minister Glas signed a cooperation agreement between the Ministry of Telecommunications of Ecuador and AHCIEET to establish a general framework of action to facilitate the development of the Information Society in Ecuador. The agreement also intends to fortify the cooperation and the transfer of technology and knowledge between economic sectors, sectional governments and other public institutions in Ecuador, as well as with other countries of the Andean region.