

YOUTH AND ICT FOR DEVELOPMENT

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today and contributing to this auspicious event. This is especially so because I believe Melaka is a great convergence of two great things: youth and ICT.

The Rt. Honourable chief minister of Melaka, Datuk Seri Hj. Mohd Ali bin Mohd Rustam, declared Melaka a Youth State in Year 2002, and he declared that same year as the Youth Year. As a result, the headquarters of the World Assembly of Youth, the world's largest youth organisation, is based here in Melaka. The World Assembly of Youth is the international coordinating body of national youth councils in more than 110 countries worldwide. It deals in a diverse range of activities involving youth. We are also privileged to have the Rt. Hon. Chief Minister as our president.

The Chief Minister then declared Year 2003 as the Melaka Year of Information and Communication Technologies. As young people we were actively involved in various activities in this respect, and we came to realise the importance of information and communication technologies to youth development.

Melaka is therefore a meeting point for youth and ICT. There are existing synergies in place, but there is also great room for more programmes and initiatives to enhance the interaction between youth and ICT.

In this paper I shall be addressing the links between ICT and development, with some specific reference to youth, although the general thrust will apply to most development applications and settings.

As we have discovered already, information and communication technology (ICT) is the convergence of microelectronics, computing and telecommunications. It has become a global phenomenon of great importance and concern in all spheres of human endeavour, spanning

across education, governance, business, market share, labour, productivity, agriculture, trade, commerce and others. It thus poses an automatic challenge to everyone, particularly the youths.

Now the more difficult definition is that of "youth." There is no universally-accepted definition for youth, and each nation has its own definition. However, the President of WAY, Datuk Seri Hj. Mohd Ali bin Mohd Rustam, in his book on "Youth and Globalism" offered the definition that youth is anyone who is young at heart, dynamic and yet unsettled in life. So irrespective of age, this can be the standard that we can use to define youth.

Diverse development opportunities have opened up due to the influence of ICT and developing nations now have the opportunity of leapfrogging into the information age by employing the powers of Information and Communication Technology. Areas such as Software development and Satellite Communications can provide opportunities for youths of developing nations. Nigeria, for example, has reacted to the global challenge by indicating its interest in the mass production of ICT experts in the tune of almost a million young people.

Job creation is also an opportunity provided by ICT. Presently, the whole global village is experiencing a shortage of ICT skills and tackling the challenge would obviously promote development. The United Kingdom's interest in being the best place to do eCommerce by 2002 changed the face of their education, industrial applications and research opportunities. Wealth creation and economic growth opportunities are also offshoots of the impact of ICT on developing nations, among others. Forester Research says that B2C and B2B eCommerce generated US\$ 108 billion and US\$ 1.3 trillion respectively by 2002. The view2.com website also revealed that ICT-related sales captured have rose from \$3.5 billion to \$25 billion between 1997 and 2000.

ICT also poses a challenge to the creative abilities of individuals, people groups and governments. The Malaysian Vision 2020, the Japanese technological advancement and India's IT revolution are examples of ICT's challenge to innovation and creativity.

The continuity of any technological innovation is dependent on its sustenance by the upcoming generation and this automatically puts the youth under the spotlight when it comes to maximizing the development opportunities opened up by ICT, particularly for developing nations. The looming digital divide and a widening of the

economic gap between developed and developing nations will definitely evolve if the opportunities created by ICT are not maximized by the developing nations and it is obvious that the youth have a role to play in this venture.

The future of the world lies in the hands of its young people. It is in the youth that we have confidence for a brighter future. The energies of youth, supplemented with their ability to adapt, their creativity and their spirit of enterprise, make young people critical players in development work. Investing in the youth is a sure way of reaping manifold returns in the future.

Information and Communication Technologies present us with a vehicle for leapfrogging the development process. ICTs enable people to do things better and faster than has been possible before. Through technology, the developing world can achieve rapid industrialization, economic development and progress. When properly harnessed, ICTs can result in greater efficiency and optimum utilization of time and resources.

It is important that we harness and utilize ICTs to the benefit of all peoples of the developing world. All nations must be a part of the digital revolution. None can afford to sit back when the rest of the world is advancing.

At the same time, we need to be wary of the dangers posed by ICTs. Issues such as pornography, security, malicious information, cybercrimes and fraud are among the challenges that accompany any ICT progress. However, we must not be held back by these challenges, as the issue is more that the challenges be addressed, than to avoid progress.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are not only a significant factor in the performance and growth of economies - the importance of which is continuously growing -, but they also represent a novel and effective tool to help advance sustainable human development (SHD).

It is important to capture the potential of these technologies for SHD and the fight against poverty. ICTs allow faster delivery and a more adapted content of technical assistance in a variety of sectors - ranging from long-distance education, telemedicine, environmental management to strengthening of participatory approaches and the creation of new livelihoods. ICTs can involve more people, hitherto

unreached or underserved, and accomplish a deeper geographic penetration, especially to rural areas, than is the case with traditional means and modalities. ICTs allow access to information sources worldwide, promote networking transcending borders, languages and cultures, foster empowerment of communities, women, youth and socially disadvantaged groups, and help spread knowledge about "best practises" and experience. ICTs are indispensable to realise the global information society and the global knowledge society.

The following are critical objectives in any attempt to utilise ICTs for Development:

- It is important to raise awareness, build vision and advise on policies to capture information and knowledge for development;
- Governments should promote and build connectivity and necessary infrastructure for access to information and development;
- A collective effort is needed to build required human and social capacities and institutions and provide training and education to impart requisite skills
- Communities and disadvantaged groups should be empowered by reinforce participatory approaches and good governance and fostering networking;
- ICTs should be used to help create new livelihood and employment opportunities;
- Pilot projects may be conducted to demonstrate the feasibility, suitability and impact of ICTs for SHD through electronic community centres;
- Partnerships between the public sector, the private sector and civil society should also be promoted.

To make ICT work for poverty reduction and development, it needs both affordable, market-driven infrastructure and multi-stakeholder efforts at all levels to help poor, disadvantaged and marginalised people use the whole range of ICT according to their priorities and demands.

With regard to innovative approaches and concrete vision in using ICT for development and poverty reduction, many developing countries are far ahead of typical northern industrialised countries. India, Malaysia and Costa Rica are good examples among many. The strong presence and involvement of developing countries in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva in December 2003

demonstrated the overall importance which the developing world attaches to ICT.

For several decades, information, knowledge and communication have been core elements of sustainable development efforts. So what has really changed over the last few years due to the dramatic development and spread of information and communication technologies?

The following is a list of the major changes with regard to information flows and communication effected by ICT:

Interactivity: ICT facilitates dialogue. It is much easier and faster to put information for feedback on the Internet, compared to printing a book or writing a letter and asking for written reactions from the reader. Owing to ICT, local radios can be made much more interactive and run more economically than a decade ago.

Speed: Simultaneous information in writing, sound and picture can be exchanged within fractions of seconds around the clock. Moreover, the Internet allows real time 'many-to-many' interactions.

Lower costs: Although the cost factor is still a challenge in general, the relative cost of ICT has greatly fallen over the past years and it continues to fall. As a result, innovative uses of ICT can facilitate information flows and communication much more cheaply compared to traditional means such as books or newspapers.

Integration: ICT allow for the integration of different types of media. For instance, the combination of a local radio with the Internet allows access not only to a much wider range of information sources but also the efficient exchange of broadcasting modules, making e.g. censorship more difficult.

These new technological possibilities have had a large impact. They are at the core of the so-called ICT revolution from a development perspective. Interactivity not only concerns the Internet, but also the radio that has become much more of a two-way communication tool over the past decade, especially at the community level. The fact that the Internet allows interactive, fast and low-cost many-to-many interactions between people has given rise to powerful networks at all levels. In addition, these technological innovations have emerged in parallel with multifaceted globalisation and increased participation of citizens, of civil society organisations and of the private sector in policy

debates, planning and action. Today, there is a clear trend towards a global 'network society'.

Taking this into account, there is a strong relationship between information and communication technologies on the one hand, and development and poverty reduction on the other. This emanates especially through three dimensions: (i) access to information and knowledge, (ii) stronger voice of the people in democratic processes and decisions affecting their lives, and (iii) networking and communication among people and organisations.

Strengthening the Voice of Youth in Decision Making and Culture

A major constraint for young people is the lack of an effective voice in public life, and particularly in regard to decisions on policies and laws which directly affect their livelihood. Information and communication technologies can be powerful tools in promoting social inclusion. Again, it is the smart combination of different ICTs that lead to empowerment and more effective participation of the youth in decision making processes.

Both radio and the Internet are useful to amplify voices of young people to defend their interests. This helps decision makers to be more responsive to a specific situation and demand at the local level. The provision of relevant information can drastically increase transparency and accountability of government and organisations. If people have more pertinent information, they ask specific questions about where the money has been spent.

On the other hand, information can also be channelled to young people to enable them to play their role in national and international development processes.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, ICT for development is not just an additional theme or fashionable tool. ICT have drastically changed access to information and knowledge and transformed the way people communicate and network.

Young people should be at the forefront of the ICT revolution, and utilise it to enhance global development.

To make youth and ICT work for poverty reduction and development, it needs both

- an adequate ICT infrastructure at affordable costs, building on an enabling regulatory environment, innovations, domestic and international investment, and
- comprehensive multi-stakeholder efforts to support the youth, to use the whole range of ICT to achieve development in various sectors of society.

The private sector has a massive role in terms of investment, innovation and partnership for multi-stakeholder solutions. Government is instrumental in shaping the enabling environment, attracting investment as well as balancing the ICT policies with other national policies and strategies. Civil society has a special competence and capacity in linking communities to the benefits of ICT.

Relevant content is essential to make ICT effective for development. This emphasis concerns content produced or demanded at the local level. The availability or building of adequate human and institutional capacities is an equally important requirement.

ENDS.