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The Digital Divide… Teach A Man To Fish!

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Recently Kim Hak-Su, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) that co-organized the regional conference together with the Japanese Government and other collaborators, acknowledged that more work is needed. "The Tokyo Declaration is directional", he said. "We need more meetings".

Hawaii Pacific Teleport

In his keynote address, Mr. Kim underscored that the benefits of the information society had been largely confined to the industrialized world. "The developing countries of the Asia-Pacific region, and especially the least developed, land locked and island developing countries, as well as the economies in transition, account for a small fraction of the global digital economy.

Concerns about such disparities need to be addressed urgently in order to overcome the "digital divide", he said. He continued: "A diversity of efforts is essential as there are no universal solutions to difficult regional, national and local conditions and needs."

With respect Mr. Kim, UNESCAP needs less meetings and more emphasis on the dissemination of information to APEC countries which will help people help themselves. However before they start "educating" the peoples of Asia UNESCAP needs to undergo some internal training of its own to make sure the information being disseminated is indeed accurate.

As the operator of a satellite teleport in Hawaii which provides Internet services to Asia by satellite I find that businesses in many Asian countries know they need good international voice communications and Internet Access to prosper. Our company spends much of its time informing and educating Internet Service Providers in many Asia-Pacific countries on how to procure the right satellite and Internet equipment then install it correctly and most importantly maintain it properly.

ISP's in many parts of Asia use satellite to bring the Internet to remote locations because there is simply no alternative. A typical ISP will install a two-way satellite VSAT terminal to connect to the USA Internet backbone in Hawaii and provide service to casual users through an Internet Café and regular subscribers through local dial-up lines and wireless local loops.

Bangladesh ISP installing VSAT antenna to access USA Internet backbone.

We have had to send technicians from the USA to assist ISP"s in simple tasks such as antenna installation and provide training on using test equipment. Many ISP personnel are using an Internet router for the first time and simply cannot afford the expensive CISCO training courses and equipment support contracts which would enable them to operate efficiently. So in turn they often cannot provide reliable Internet services to their customers.

"Give a man a fish and feed him for a day" seems to be the policy on many NGO"s like the World Bank operating in the region. After all it's easier to show on the annual accounts that this country or that country now has so many phones or Internet terminals whereas "Teach a man to fish and feed him for life" philosophy doesn"t fit neatly in to the accountants spread sheet line item. To say that money has been spent educating someone and that as a result that person will be able to help himself in the future may not satisfy an NGO accountant who wants to show where the money has been spent.

Education however starts at home. I was recently asked by a World Bank official to quote for a ku-band satellite Internet delivery service to Bangladesh. He was surprised to learn that our Hawaii teleport only provides c-band satellite services in to the tropical part of Asia and he seemed unaware of the rain fade problems which affects ku-band delivery platforms. Even after I sent him the rainfall maps for Bangladesh to illustrate why we had to use c-band he still insisted he needed ku-band something we can not and would not offer for a country with such heavy rainfall, so heavy in fact that it occasionally degrades c-band services. So if the NGO"s themselves do not have trained technical staff how on earth can they ever deliver solutions to the peoples of Asia/Pacific. Maybe if the "digital divide" no longer existed some of these NGO staff might not be required.

You only have to login to some of the chat lines used by ISP"s in Asia to see how these people are struggling to overcome the "digital divide". I have yet to see a UNESCAP or World Bank employee participating in any of these sessions to

provide assistance. This is where NGO front line people should be "on line" providing practical assistance to people who clearly need help.

The guest editor of Issue No. 5, Bruce Elbert, at the teleport.

I suggest simple to implement, low cost programs to overcome the digital knowledge divide between developed and developing countries. Firstly ensure that all international agencies with a mission to provide IT support have trained technical staff. Secondly create programs whereby manufacturers of communications and IT equipment used in the Asia-Pacific region provide a knowledge base which can be accessed by organizations such as UNESCAP, World Bank, Asian Development Bank etc., free of charge. Thirdly these same organizations should establish on-line Information Centers staffed by trained engineers who can provide assistance to the very people who need it in Asia-Pacific.

There is indeed a distinction between Information and Education. It has been my experience in the Asia-Pacific region that there are many people hungry to learn to better improve their lives however they are so busy trying to earn a living that formal technology training is simply not an option. The "education" they need is the practical information to help them in their business to, for example, buy the right equipment, know how to install and operate it and most importantly know where to get advice when they need it. Think of it as "On-the-Job" training, getting educated through practical experience. UNESCAP and their like can bridge the digital divide by being the Information Gateway between western technology companies and their potential customers in Asia-Pacific.

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