Bridging gaps for greater collaboration

Asia is one of the fastest growing regions in the world when it comes to the number of people with Internet access, thanks in large part to a boom in low-cost smartphone handsets, which have made the hardware cost of getting online a fraction of what it once was. That said, the increase in access isn’t happening universally. Throughout Asia, people in rural areas are much less likely to be able to get online than their urban counterparts.

The Internet Society Asia-Pacific Bureau has been working to change that through the Wireless for Communities (W4C) programme, in partnership with the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), an Indian NGO working on digital opportunities at the grassroots level across India. The goal is to build the networks in a sustainable way that will allow them to be integrated into day-to-day life, and be operated and maintained by the local community.

“We don’t want to just give people a bunch of towers and routers and say, ‘This is your network, we built it for you to use the Internet,’” said Noelle de Guzman, ISOC’s Asia-Pacific Regional Programmes Coordinator. “It’s a common problem in international development and aid, to supply something to the community, and then five years down the line it’s not being used anymore.”

To do things differently, the W4C programme trains people to build and maintain their own wireless networks and at the same time equip the community with skills to use the Internet. The programme also provides training in everything from network operations to digital literacy. ISOC and the DEF are careful not to duplicate work already done by other NGOs, but complement it instead.

In 2014, the latest phase of the W4C project called Wireless Women for Entrepreneurship and Empowerment (W2E2) was launched to help make the Internet more accessible for women. In the communities where W4C works, Internet access is still very dependent on the use of communal computers in what are called Community Information Resource Centres (CIRCs). Because of the social restrictions placed on women in some of these places, accessing these computers can sometimes be intimidating. W2E2 works to combat this by teaching women computer skills ranging from spreadsheet applications to network operation. The project has borne fruit in several ways. Women are now running Internet cafés and managing CIRCs in their local communities, helping fight the idea that women shouldn’t be using computers or running micro-enterprises.

In addition to supporting these and other programmes that promote Internet access and development in the region, Asia-Pacific Bureau Regional Director Rajnesh Singh and the team work in close collaboration with Chapters and regional partners to strengthen the Internet Society’s mission.

One critical topic in 2014 was bridging the gap between technical initiatives and policy development. To reach
concrete outcomes while navigating specific countries’ challenges, the Bureau established the Asia-Pacific Internet Dialogue (APID). Held in June in Papua New Guinea, the APID invited regulators, local ISPs and policymakers to participate in a focused discussion about specific issues and concerns identified by local hosts.

Issues discussed included:

- Building an open Internet exchange and promoting a healthy local Internet ecosystem;
- Internet infrastructure and policies for open Internet traffic exchange;
- Understanding principles and practices of interconnection and traffic exchange operation; and
- Understanding policy and regulatory implications of establishing a sustainable Internet-friendly ecosystem.

The inaugural APID was highly successful and became a catalyst for the implementation of critical changes.

Another significant achievement in 2014 was the Internet Society Survey on Policy Issues in Asia-Pacific. Created to gain a greater understanding of region-wide attitudes on existing and emerging challenges on Internet policy issues, the survey compiled responses from 1800 Internet Society members in countries throughout the Asia-Pacific region. In fact, close to half (48%) of respondents identified themselves as residents of South Asia; 28% were from or in Southeast Asia, and the remaining 24% came from East Asia and the Pacific region.

The survey highlighted cybersecurity as an area of growing interest to stakeholders throughout Asia. The survey also revealed that Internet users in Asia-Pacific are very concerned about access, despite the rapid growth of Internet uptake throughout the region. Specifically, users identified a need for focused attention on the lack of Internet connectivity in remote and rural areas, as well as relatively high costs of broadband subscriptions.