

Asia-Pacific Regional Internet & Development Dialogue

THE INTERNET OF OPPORTUNITY: Building a sustainable future through an inclusive Internet in Asia-Pacific

Background

The Asia-Pacific is the largest and most diverse region of the globe; home to over 4 billion people. It is also arguably the most digitally divided region in the world; while ICT champions such as the Republic of Korea boasts of an 84.3% Internet penetration rate, countries such as Myanmar has only 2.1% (World Bank). While countries, such as China, India, Indonesia and Japan, account for 37% of the world's mobile subscriber base (GSMA¹), only 7% of people in the region have fixed broadband access (ESCAP²).

A significant shift to smartphones and tablets is expected to drive demand even further in the region with many countries transitioning to 4G/LTE rapidly. The use of cloud-based applications in the workplace, together with video streaming and social media, will place far greater demands on the existing infrastructure than before. This can widen the digital divide between countries even further. Access to broadband Internet remains even lower for women and girls, highlighting the cross-cutting issue of gender divide in the region. Affordability of services along with connecting those that are still unconnected poses a further challenge.

One of the major issues for both governments and industry in the short to medium term will be how to connect those that still remain unconnected. The coalescence of connectivity and socio-economic inclusiveness, particularly for the last two billion, underlines the need for transformative Internet access through integrative policies, user-driven tools and technical solutions that can be rapidly deployed and appropriated by various localities across the region. The demand for international transit and sub-regional transit is also expected to increase with various regional integration initiatives such as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and closer intra-regional trade.

ESCAP member countries have recognized the need for a concerted regional effort to promote information and communications technology (ICT) connectivity for sustainable development. As a result, the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS) initiative was developed to promote the regional ICT connectivity (terrestrial or submarine fibre cables), connecting countries into a cohesive regional information superhighway to enhance competition and open new opportunities for large-scale investment in broadband infrastructure. In addition, regional connectedness will lead to economies of scale and drive international bandwidth prices down, increase resilience by offering redundancy to submarine cables, and decrease latency across the region. Such initiatives will improve availability, reliability and affordability of broadband access among much wider segments of the populations and enable them to take full advantage of the burgeoning digital economy, digital government services and environment-conscious initiatives, such as smart cities, intelligent transport, trade facilitation, smart energy grids, ICT-enabled disaster risk reduction, just to name a few.

Initiatives such as the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS) supported by ESCAP will be even more critical to ensure continued socio-economic development and to contribute towards the effective implementation of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) action lines to support the Sustainable Development

¹ <https://www.gsmaintelligence.com/research/?file=fba9efc032061d5066b0eda769ad277f&download>

² <http://www.unescap.org/our-work/ict-disaster-risk-reduction/asia-pacific-information-superhighway/asia-pacific-information-superhighway-maps>

Goals (SDGs). In addition, disaster risk reduction, in particular the establishment of resilient telecommunications infrastructure, need to be mainstreamed into development policies, planning and implementation in order to achieve the SDGs, given that ICT infrastructure as well as social media are vital for pre-and-post-disaster response and recovery.

For the Asia-Pacific region, ICTs, in particular the Internet, will play an important role in development, and can be an important catalyst in improving the socio-economic status of communities, as well as play a transformative role in the transition towards a digital economy.

Conference Details

When: 03- 04 October

**Where: United Nations Conference Centre (UNCC)
Bangkok, Thailand**

The conference will consist of opening and closing sessions, plenary sessions as well as panel discussions. It will be a one and half day event that will cover a range of topical issues related to the Internet and Development in the Asia-Pacific region.

The event will be hosted by ESCAP (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) and will be held back-to-back with the ESCAP first Committee on Information and Communications Technology, Science, Technology and Innovation. This will add more value and ensure high-level participation and speakers from the region and beyond.

Objective

The purpose of this conference is to convene a multi-stakeholder regional dialogue on policy issues around 'Internet for Development' and address some of the opportunities and challenges in the Asia-Pacific region. Special attention will be given to the transformational potentials of ICT and Internet for SDGs, as well as mainstreaming gender within topical discussions. The conference will offer open high-level discussions that will address the following dimensions:

- Connecting the Next Billion
- ICTs and Sustainable Development
- Regional Opportunities and Challenges

Conference Cross-cutting Themes

Keeping in mind SDGs and considering the opportunities the Internet enables, the conference will explore best practices and lessons learned, as well as findings from the latest studies and quantitative and qualitative analysis on the following topics:

Rural Connectivity: A significant proportion of the population in Asia-Pacific live in rural and remote areas—the same areas that, in addition to being broadly vulnerable, are also more likely to be victims of market failure, with commercial viability often an issue for ICT service providers. To this end, the conference will discuss various alternatives to Internet access provision to such communities in order to encourage diversity and resilience. It will also look into policy options for infrastructure sharing, spectrum allocation, universal service funds and subsidy

models, community owned networks, as well as projects by commercial and non-commercial actors to roll out networks to underserved and unserved areas in the region.

Financial Inclusion: Financial services are crucial to encourage entrepreneurship and economic participation, especially for the informal sector--yet an estimated 1.2 billion people in Asia-Pacific do not have access to a bank account. The Internet, along with mobile technologies, are helping to fill in these gaps through mechanisms like mobile payments, micro-lending and micro-insurance, which allow the unbanked to save, transfer, transact, and borrow money at reasonable rates, and governments to deliver social benefits to the poor at much lower costs. Tailoring products to the particular needs of the unbanked is important, as well as the need for interoperability among different platforms and service providers, and harmonization of laws, standards and guidelines among jurisdictions in the region.

Disaster management and mitigation: The increasing intensity of disasters in Asia-Pacific calls for technologies to monitor environmental changes, power early warning systems, support crucial communication, and aid local and international coordination to help communities prepare and respond to disasters. With participants from the region's disaster-prone countries, the conference will look into how connected devices and platforms like solar-powered sensors, transponders, 3D mapping and delay-tolerant networks, are being applied to emergency situations to help minimize the damage and casualties from disasters, and will explore some of the policy considerations around these emerging topics.

Enabling e-services: Increased Internet connectivity is expected to pave the way for the development of and lead to more widespread and timely distribution of ICT tools, services and applications. This will support meaningful Internet access and empowerment for marginalized sectors of community, including women, indigenous communities, and those with special needs, such as the elderly and persons with disabilities. But findings from recent research shows that the link between Internet access and use is not straightforward. While many governments in the region have launched frameworks for e-health, e-government and e-education, implementation rates vary wildly, in part due to the lack of local capacity as well as due to issues around access. An enabling environment that allows the public and private sectors, as well as not-for-profit organizations, to innovate, create and facilitate is critical, and the open Internet plays a key role in this regard. Improving access and accessibility, building digital skills and literacy, enhancing trust online, and taking into account the user's capabilities and needs are some of the factors that will increase the value and utility of the Internet for existing and potential users.

Frugal Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Extending Internet connectivity to the last billions inevitably involves low-cost, and often low-power and open solutions that can be easily adopted or reproduced by low-income, rural and less skilled communities. The conference will seek to highlight some of the innovative equipment, platforms, software and systems that encourage future Internet users to not only become consumers, but also producers and creators of the Internet and the active and passive infrastructure, devices and services that go with it.

Tentative Program

Day 1 | October 03, 2016

09:00 – 12:00	Pre-Event Workshop : Gender Mainstreaming in Internet and Development in the Asia-Pacific Region
13:00 - 14:00	Registration
14:00 - 14:30	Inaugural Session

	Featuring welcome, opening and a keynote
14:30 - 16:00	<p>Plenary 1: Setting the scene - Connecting the unconnected</p> <p>Access and Affordability stand as two main challenges in bringing the next billion users online in the Asia-Pacific region. Governments are making efforts to facilitate access and affordability, industry is trying to remain competitive while the future users from rural and un-served parts are eager to become part of the digital society.</p> <p>The session will feature discussions on issues, challenges and future outlook of Internet access and affordability in the Asia-Pacific.</p>
16:00 - 16:30	Break [Videos from projects/initiatives in the region play in background]
16:30 - 17:30	<p>Forum: Disaster Risk Reduction</p> <p>This session will provide an insight on best practices and experiences and knowledge related to the development of ICT for disaster response and recovery, that ultimately seeks to realise robustness and reliability of critical ICT infrastructure throughout the Asia-Pacific region.</p>

Day 2 | October 04, 2016

09:00 - 10:30	<p>Plenary 2: Building Trust in the Age of the Digital Economy</p> <p>This session will look at how we can build a better online security and trust agenda for the Asia-Pacific region as we move towards a digital economy that cuts across all sectors. It will also look at the interplay of security and trust, and the policy choices they shape.</p>
10:30 - 11:00	Break [Videos from projects/initiatives in the region play in background]
11:00 - 12:00	<p>Forum: Frugal Innovation and Entrepreneurship</p> <p>This session will showcase stories of innovative devices, platforms, software and entrepreneurs. It will also focus on steps required to nurture innovative minds, providing them with opportunities to create and contribute to the digital ecosystem.</p>
12:00 - 13:15	Lunch
13:15 - 14:15	<p>ESCAP session: WSIS and Sustainable Development in the Asia-Pacific</p> <p>This session will provide a broad overview of WSIS and its linkages to the Sustainable Development Goals, and policy actions required to put the region on track to achieve sustainable development.</p>
14:15 - 15:30	<p>ESCAP Plenary 3: Asia Pacific Information Superhighway for the Sustainable Development Goals</p> <p>This session will examine how the ESCAP's AP-IS initiative towards regional ICT connectivity can enhance and empower human capacity, increase access to financial services, education, healthcare and foster sustainable development.</p>
15:30 - 16:00	Break [Videos from projects/initiatives in the region play in background]

16:00 - 17:00	ESCAP High-level Panel Forum: Harnessing the Internet of Opportunity for the Asia-Pacific
17:00 - 17:30	Closing Remarks and Wrap-up
18:00 - 19:30	Conference Reception

Participation

Invitations will be sent to high-level government officials representing developing countries, developed countries and emerging countries from the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, leading regional experts, industry representatives, civil society organizations, entrepreneurs and research institutes will also be invited to participate- a total of 200 participants are expected to attend.

Conference Documentation

Short issue papers on the themes of the conference will be prepared and distributed in advance. In addition, a conference outcomes report will be prepared noting key inputs and discussions captured during the conference; these will be synthesized and presented as a way-forward document after the conference. It is expected this document will be used by other fora in the region as an input and issues document.

Expected Outcomes

It is expected that this conference will lead to a number of possible outcomes, including:

- One or more working groups may emerge from the discussions, organized around issues e.g. Internet for sustainable development, connectivity, innovation and collaboration.
- Specific follow-up and engagement with national governments present at the conference.
- The Regional Internet development conference becomes a biannual event that serves as a pragmatic forum for broadening discussion about the Internet and socio-economic development. The outcome of this multi stakeholder event will feed into the ESCAP Committee on Information and Communications Technology, Science, Technology and Innovation and the WSIS regional review meetings.