

Opening statement by Divakar Goswami

Building Digital Communities Session, December 7, 2006, ITU World 2006, Hong Kong

Welcome your Excellencies and distinguished guests who have come here for the Building Digital Communities Session. We have an impressive lineup of speakers and panelists who will be introduced shortly. I am Divakar Goswami from LIRNEasia, an ICT regulation and policy research organization based in Colombo, Sri Lanka but working in the Asia Pacific region.

Community is often defined as a collection of people with some shared element, whether they are values, interests, ethnicity that bind them together. Traditionally, communities were embedded in the same geographical space. But the process of globalization along with the widespread deployment of ICTs have allowed communities to exist-- stretched across geographies—between regions, countries and continents. The “glue” that holds them together is the ability to communicate shared values and interests over large distances whether it be via a telephone call, Skype, video conferencing, Instant messaging, Web-based transactions, e-mail, etc.

Although, ICTs can be used to foster virtual communities like Ebay or Blogs, they can also be deployed within neighborhoods and towns to create “Smart communities”: Communities that significantly enrich the life of its inhabitants and improve their productivity.

It has been argued that nothing has contributed as much to transnational communities than the falling price of international calls. It is now common for a single family to be stretched across vast distances and between nation-states, yet still retain its sense of collectivity. Migrant workers from Mexico, Indonesia, Philippines or China, wherever they may be, can call back home to renew their sense of community.

A recent study by LIRNEasia, found that more than 92% of the people at the “bottom of the pyramid,” (financially constrained) in five South and Southeast Asian countries used a phone in the last three months. The majority in S Asia did not own their phones but used a public calling office or a neighbor or friend’s phone to make a call; in the case of Southeast Asia, still 20-30% did not own the phones they used. So clearly, access to a phone is not a problem as it used to be in the recent past. However, is access to a phone sufficient to participate in a digital community?

How can the barriers imposed by poverty, illiteracy, poor regulation, inadequate ICT infrastructure, language, and lack of trust be overcome to create inclusive and open digital communities? This session will touch on some of these issues.
