Asia-Pacific and the Next Billion: Challenges in Digital Inclusion

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Introduction

- The Asia-Pacific is a large and diverse region. It is:

    - Home to over 60% of humanity

    - Characterized by significant geographic, cultural and linguistic diversity

    - Highly variable in terms of parameters such as Internet penetration, from some of the highest (Qatar at 92%) to the lowest (Myanmar at 2%); speed (S. Korea, 29mbps); and costs (India, from US$ 0.15 per GB)

The Potential

- There appears to be abundant opportunities for scaling up Internet access in the region

- Sub-regions such as South Asia & Mekong Delta have considerable potential

- In India, (about 15% penetration at present), there may be rapid scaling up because of competition between vendors

Factors impacting penetration

- Factors affecting Internet Penetration in AP can be classified as:

  – Infrastructure and cost issues

  – Social issues

  – Technology issues

  – Policy issues

- Impediments across the region are gradually being removed and penetration generally increasing

Infrastructure and costs

- Many countries in the region have core infrastructural issues, including external connectivity (eg., Armenia), internal backbones, mobile networks, and the last-mile

- Costs, both one-time and recurring, are an important factor in most developing countries in the region

- On the positive side, increasing penetration of mobile networks provide a vector for the Internet

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Social Factors

- Given its ancient history and traditions, social factors are significant and are specific to Asia-Pacific

- Factors include:

    - Gender

    - Education

    - Disability

    - Social backwardness

Technology issues

- The region sees the coexistence of several generations of communications and connectivity technologies

- Another significant issue is the support required for local language and scripts

- Internationalized Domain Names, Universal Acceptance and local-language content are enabling factors

- Payment gateways and systems set to become very important as economies move to less-cash or cashless

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Policy issues

- Governments across the region are recognizing the importance of Internet infrastructure

- However, the existence of much older Telegraph/Telephone legislation impedes the emergence of coherent laws in some regions

- Often, enabling policy is both an essential pre-requisite as well as a starting point for enhanced Internet penetration

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In summary...

- The great diversity in Asia-Pacific poses special challenges, and a single solution will not be universal. Localized approaches need to be developed

- The traditional digital divide is making way for technology-based divide (ie., bandwidth, language, type of access device etc)

- Social factors (such as gender, education & disability) still remain a very significant constraint impeding universal access

- A strong, enabling policy framework is a good starting point for ensuring "Internet for Everyone"

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