

DRAFT SPEAKING NOTES
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(These views are not necessarily those of the Broadcasting Commission)

“What scope for cooperation between developing countries in building their communications capability?”

It is first of all critical that communications capability be understood as a condition precedent to transitioning from an industrial model of economic and social organisation, and operating in a physical economy, to a model that is compatible with and adaptive to a virtual, global, knowledge-based, digital economy. There is the real risk of developing countries being mutated by Globalisation and the Internet, unless they can quickly bring about fundamental societal, economical and political shifts, in a non-incremental manner.

In other words, the only effective response to globalisation and the Internet is for us to see it as necessary for development, that a transformational approach be taken to the building of communications capability in developing countries.

Secondly, we must avoid the temptation to apply experiences and approaches, without taking account of fundamental differences between developing countries. There is too much of a tendency to attempt a “one size fits all mode” to developing country contexts.

Therefore, before we can embark on South-South co-operation, account must be taken of country-context gaps.

An explanation must be found for the anomalous communications capability of developing countries, most of which share similar socio-economic contexts. For example, the small island economy of Jamaica has outperformed many powerful Latin American and Caribbean economies in The Networked Readiness Index 2006-2007. The results show Jamaica ranked at 45, ahead of Mexico (49), Brazil (53), Columbia (64), Panama (65), Trinidad and Tobago (68) and oil rich Venezuela (83).

JJ Wilson III argues that such disparities cannot be explained simply by examining the broad structural features of national economies. There must also be careful analysis of the evolution of institutions, politics, and policies within a country. As he puts it “the brave new world of information and communication technologies is more complicated, messy, opaque, and uncertain than leading policy models suggest”.

That caution aside, it appears that the single most significant challenge to communications capacity building is the broad-based question of access. Babb has developed a basic six-layered model which is a good framework for understanding the multi-dimensional nature of the issue. Only three of the layers will be discussed in this presentation.

The first layer is physical access, involving connectivity issues and access to computers etc. From all indications, this is where some developing countries are most advanced, particularly in relation to regulatory frameworks and policy. The challenge is how to create a physical, legal and technical framework in a transformational and sustainable manner. This is of particular concern when it is considered that up to 85% of government ICT projects fail (Heeks 2003, p.1).

There is a great deal of experience which can be shared as case studies. The main lesson to be learnt is that the enormous costs associated with physical access projects, and the limited resources available to developing countries, require that great care be exercised when undertaking grand communications schemes.

This leads me to the second access layer, which is where co-operation among developing countries is needed most. The second layer is financial access which, broadly speaking, is predicated on a country's level of economic development. The concern is not only about communications infrastructure but also a level of per capita income which will enable people and businesses to maintain access.

It must also be considered that multilateral development and Aid agencies have been exerting pressure on developing countries to implement ICT projects as a "process of continued modernization". However, when such projects fail there is the problem of opportunity cost, and if funding were obtained from an international financial institution, there is the added cost of diminished reputation for good governance and the risk of a bad credit rating

It is therefore at the level of financial access that South-South co-operation should be greatest in communications capacity building. The approach need not only be through the exertion of harmonised positions multi-laterally but also through bi-lateral arrangements.

Developing countries such as oil rich Venezuela, Saudi Arabia and China should put greater emphasis on communications capacity building in the development loan facilities that are offered to sister countries of the South.

Another layer of access where there is opportunity for co-operation between developing capacity, is that of enlightened access – meaning that developing countries must get to a stage at which there is innovation and creation of digital products and services (Babb, 2003, p.3). The focus should be on indigenous content or better yet 'local content for a global audience'. This is of particular significance to poor countries because what will ultimately empower and enrich the poor are investments in "content and applications, not technology" (ADB, 2001, p.9). Currently most developing countries are net consumers of content. It is also not practicable for many developing countries to become leaders in technology research and development.

The theory is that ICTs will be a tool for sustainable development when ICT access is at a level where the focus is more about creation of content. There is a reservoir of talent and rich culture across developing countries which could be developed through joint ventures in the arts, and production and distribution facilities.

“Policy access” is another critical area in which developing countries need to co-operate to build their communications capability. By Policy access, I mean full participation in governance and the shaping of the networks of the global information society”. This calls for heightened local and regional participation and influence on international communications instruments and frameworks. This is critical for two reasons. Firstly, it is futile for any developing country to attempt an ICT policy in isolation of the global environment. Secondly, “national or regional initiatives can make a substantial difference to outcomes depending on whether there is a proactive or reactive strategic response to ICT development, acquisition, and use”.

In other words, to truly “leap-frog”, developing states must enhance the co-ordination of policies and practices, with the ultimate aim of promoting the uniform development of their technological infrastructure and e-capacity.

The underlying argument is that the transition to an information economy should be undertaken within a framework of South-South regional and bi-lateral co-operation and proactive international engagement.

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