Press Release

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GLOBAL FORUM ON ACCESS, CONNECTIVITY DISCUSSES PROSPECTS

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KUALA LUMPUR, 20 May (Department of Economic and Social Affairs) -- In spite of constraints, many small island developing States in Asia and the Pacific had managed to increase the penetration of mobile telephony to between 10 and 20 per cent of their populations, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Sha Zukang said yesterday at the opening of the United Nations Global Forum on Access and Connectivity in Kuala Lumpur.

Such growth, he said, was the result of policies that favoured infrastructure deployment and competition in the telecommunications market. However, “a lot of work” remained to be done to improve policies and regulations that would speed up the development of wireless communications in the region.

With very limited funds at their disposal, Mr. Sha said, small island developing countries in Asia and the Pacific were using mechanisms such as universal service funds and an audiovisual tax to subsidize the deployment of infrastructure in rural and remote areas. "There are many opportunities for innovative funding and partnership arrangements that can help cover risks and expand the markets for ICT [information and communications technology]," he said.

For their part, "Governments have an important role to play in mobilizing domestic resources for applications and services," he said. "By adopting open and accessible standards and procuring e-Government services from local companies, Governments can kick-start local markets that would develop locally relevant solutions in local languages and also generate employment and wealth."

International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Secretary-General Hamadoun Touré warned that, while the digital divide in mobile phones had been largely bridged, with more than half of the world's population having becoming mobile telephone subscribers, there remained a widening risk of an "Internet broadband divide". A "complicity" between the private sector and the Government was essential to increase the availability of information and communications technology.

The private sector needed to believe in the Governments' intention, he said, and Governments needed to set up fair rules. The other essential element was the presence of strong information and communications technology capacity-building programmes.

The Global Forum, organized by the United Nations Global Alliance for Information and Communications Technology and Development, seeks ways to expand affordable connectivity, application and services in the Asia-Pacific region.

Addressing the segment on access and connectivity, Ali Abassov, Azerbaijan's Minister for information and communications technology, said those were indeed the biggest problems for Central Asian countries. Insufficient infrastructure limited access; connectivity was very expensive; and lack of tariff agreements among countries was driving costs up. The region had a very developed fibre optic infrastructure, but no high-speed Internet access.

Amir Zai Sangeen, Afghanistan's Minister for Communication, said the country had had no basic physical infrastructure and no Internet when the Taliban were ousted in 2001. Yet Afghanistan had seen connectivity expand by 200 per cent a year, albeit from a very low base. The country had benefited by not having to switch from analogue to digital, but had gone straight into digital technology. In just five years, more than 70 per cent of the country was covered by the Global System for Mobile communications (GSM), and mobile phone users were 21.5 per cent of the population, or 5.4 million people.

Ulf Pehrsson, Ericsson's Vice-President for Government and Industry Relations, said there had been an "explosion in connectivity" in Central Asia, with growth ranging from 60 to 200 per cent a year. But lack of spectrum had prevented a similar development in third-generation mobile phone standards and technology (3G), since various Governments had not allocated licences for frequencies. Another obstacle was lack of competition, since at least three or four companies were needed in a market to drive costs down.

Addressing the segment on access and connectivity in island States, Peter Hellmonds, Nokia Siemens Network Head of Corporate Affairs, said the main obstacles were long distances and small populations. Bringing small, remote island populations into connectivity was costly. Governments often remedied that by establishing a universal service obligation and providing some compensation to companies.

ITU Deputy Director Yuri Grin said satellites were the solution in the case of small island countries. Infrastructure sharing was another emerging solution -- it was carried out by companies to cut costs, and was imposed by national regulators, which were increasingly requesting companies to share infrastructures.

In today's session on least developed countries, Tunisia Telecom President Ahmed Mahjoub said mobile phones were not the solution to the problems of those countries. "You cannot improve the well-being of citizens with just telephony." Least developed countries needed low-cost computers as well. WiMAX, a technology that provided wireless data over long distances, was a good solution -- it was cheaper than copper wire, quicker to deploy and provided broad bandwidth for Internet access.

Mauritania was a good example of a successful policy, he said. Five years ago, the country had only 17,000 fixed-line telephone subscribers. Mauritania had privatized its public telephone company and allowed two private companies to come in. Not only the number of mobile subscribers had greatly increased, but state-of-the-art technologies and new investment had poured into the country.

"There is no digital divide -- it is an economic divide pure and simple," said Cliff Missen, Director of the Iowa-based eGranary Digital Library. "To improve access and connectivity, we have to improve the economy."

"We are Internet-centred and broadband-obsessed", he said, noting that universities in Ghana paid $20,000 a month for 5 megabits -- the annual salary of a professor. Compact disks were equally effective for education, and "we have to look at low-cost, effective training". He added: "It is an Internet-centric proposition that you have to be on the Internet to get information, that you must be able to connect at any time. It is a proposition not applicable in the developing world, and an

unnecessary one when it comes to a doctor's or to a nurse's training."

While the world was waiting for the convergence between computers and television, said Richard Fuchs of Canada's International Development Research Centre, a divergence was increasing

that brought down overall costs.

The idea that "telephony is the poor man's information society" should be challenged, said Parminder Jeet Singh of the Indian non-governmental organization IT for Change. It was doubtful that the private sector would extend the Internet as it had done for mobile phones. What was needed was a rights-based approach that did not exclude markets. But if the markets did not ensure access, everyone's right to access should be ensured, as it was a public interest issue.

Mobile phones would connect the least developed countries, said Isabelle Mauro of GSM Association, the trade organization representing 740 mobile operators in some 200 countries. A priority was to provide voice services to small communities, focusing on data transmission. Each additional 10 per cent of mobile phone penetration resulted in a 1.2 per cent increase in a country's gross domestic product. In the past 12 months, Africa had connected 70 million people via wireless phone, yet handsets in many developing countries were still taxed as luxury goods.

Kamran Elahiah, Chairman of the Silicon Valley venture capital firm Global Catalyst Partners, cited a project his company had done for refugee camps of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees at the Rwandan-Tanzanian border. At a very small cost, the project had established an Internet telecentre powered by biofuel –- the result of animal waste brought by local farmers. As a result, refugees were now using the telecentre 24 hours a day, lining up for its services.

Jim Lynch of TechSoup said the San Francisco-based non-profit organization collected discarded personal computers around the world, fixed them, installed new software and distributed them to schools, non-profits and low-income families around the world. "It is a big job," he said, adding that there were some 150-200 million discarded computers in the world. One problem was that no major organization was creating human capacity.

Calling on the various networks of the Global Alliance to help carry out the work plan, the Alliance's Executive Director, Sarbuland Khan, said "not only are we open for business, but we are determined to obtain results".

Forty-three panellists –- including four information and communications technology ministers –-

addressed the two-day Global Forum, which concluded today. The results of the event will be fed into the ICT 2008 Conference, to be held in Lyon on 25 to 27 November, and the second Conference on Financing for Development, to be held in Doha from 29 November to 2 December.

The Global Forum brought together some 150 participants from Government, industry, civil society and academia.

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