

**Comments by
Helani Galpaya, CEO, LIRNEasia
at
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consultation**

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1. Thank you, Madam Moderator.
2. Today, I make these responses on behalf of over 450 million people living under 2 dollars a day in South Asia and South East Asia. It is their access to ICTs, and the impact of ICTs in their lives that has been the primary focus LIRNEasia, a regional think tank working in the emerging Asia Pacific countries since 2004.
3. Mobile phones have been a success story in emerging Asia, with over 90% of even the poorest making or receiving phone calls, through their own phone or a shared phone.
4. With access to computers woefully low, mobile phones are the most ubiquitous form of ICT available to the poor. Smart phone penetration is around 20%, but Myanmar, the country with the most recently deregulated telecom industry hints at what happens when prices fall thanks to innovation and competition in manufacturing - around 60% of phone owners in Myanmar have a smart phone
5. But, these phones are being used to call and SMS, not to use the Internet. Less than 20% of the total population in most emerging Asian countries have accessed the Internet. That means among the poor in each of these countries, Internet access is much much lower than 20%. Why?
6. In representative sample surveys when we ask people why they aren't they using ICTs, country after country, we hear two common responses: "I can't afford it" and "I don't see the value of it"
7. **The first response, lack of affordability:** is an obvious concern for the poor. It is still a challenge because some regulators have not enabled sufficient competition, or not removed bottlenecks in critical Internet resources. But many countries, such as India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Bhutan, Thailand and Pakistan HAVE met the Broadband Commission's target of broadband access costing less than 5% of income, at least for many entry-level packages. Yet these countries continue to have only 20% of their total populations online. The focus on affordability is necessary, but not sufficient.
8. **Quality** is the flip side of affordability. Our research shows that broadband users in emerging Asia consistently get low value for money or get much lower speeds than promised on their Internet connections. A primary reason is the high cost of domestic and international leased line prices. While nation states such as India and Indonesia have responded with large-scale public investments in National Broadband Networks,

their ability to implement these remains an open question. As does the question of whether state investment would have been needed in the first place, had the regulators taken appropriate steps to encourage private sector investment and enable markets to function better.

9. Even if we solve the price/quality challenge of Internet access, we need to worry about the percentage of the poor saying **“I don’t see the need it”** or **“I don’t see the value of it”** when asked about Internet/ICT use. That response is in part an indication of the lack of content– be it content in the user’s own language, content that is locally relevant, of economic value, or social value. If people are only using social media applications when they get online, we may need to be OK with it, and start asking other questions, such as: Why aren’t other mobile apps being developed and adopted widely? Is the app ecosystem in my country not enabling the creation of a thousand apps, allowing many to fail fast and in order to find the few that stick? Where does the real world content for such apps come from unless governments open up their data.
10. But to even ask these questions, we need regulators and policy makers who can that look beyond the telecom sector, look across time and even across borders. For example, how should they respond to Zero Rated content? At one extreme it could be biggest positive boost needed to get our people online, or, at the other extreme, turn out to be negative, worsening the digital participation gap faced by the poorest in our countries by creating content walled gardens. The details of implementation may have positive or negative impacts on mobile app developers, entrepreneurs and innovators in our countries. Acting too fast or too slow may completely lock out or completely enable future innovation. But when the impacts of such phenomena are as yet unknown, what we need are policy makers who can watch and monitor the effects, in anticipation of possible and imminent action. Instead we are in danger of having regulators in our region automatically importing regulatory models from developed countries, which have a totally different context.
11. Price, quality, content are pieces of the puzzle. Lack of capabilities among users is one more. Lack of awareness is another big piece, something that results from a failing of the ICT4D stakeholder community to make the Internet relevant to people’s lives in the same way as water, energy or roads- all equally important, enabling infrastructures. This in turn hints at the need for systematic and rigorous evidence on how the Internet/ICTs improve people’s lives – in other words, how do ICTs contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals.
12. Thank you.