MOVING ASIA FROM GRASSROOTS TO CYBERSPACE

by Catherine Wheeler

Some of Asia's least developed nations are acquiring the means to tap into the abundant information resources residing on the Internet through an IDRC program that allows better access to electronic communications technology. More importantly, the program helps Asian countries share their information resources with each other and the world.

For 25 years, IDRC has supported hundreds of initiatives to collect a wide variety of valuable development information. The Centre is associated with a remarkable network of information resources on development subjects, housed in the databanks and databases of information centres and libraries in Asia. Recently, IDRC decided to systematically promote the dissemination of these Asian information resources over the Internet. Currently, about 30 million users hold an Internet account, although most of them are in Northern countries.

As a preliminary step, IDRC conducted a study of computer conditions in several Asian countries to determine the ability of developing countries to share their research and development information and to access the North's information resources via the Internet.

The survey found that many of the countries that most needed access to the Centre's accumulated research were least likely to have the equipment and technical abilities required to connect to the Internet. So IDRC established the Pan Asia Networking Program (PAN), enabling some Asian countries to communicate electronically for the first time.

For instance, in 1994, IDRC connected Mongolia to electronic mail, the first step toward Internet access. In Vietnam, where only electronic mail (e-mail) and local bulletin boards are currently available to users, IDRC will help secure a leased line for full Internet access.

With local and other partners, IDRC will help Sri Lanka develop an all Sri- Lanka R&D information website for the benefit of researchers and development workers in the country and the world. Plans to help other developing countries network over the Internet are under way.

"All systems will have business plans for generating revenues to sustain operations," says Maria Ng Lee Hoon, the PAN Team Leader who helped conceive and develop the program along with Asia Regional Director Randy Spence and other colleagues.

The PAN Program will carry several content-based subnetworks. Initially, these will address biodiversity, natural resource management, social and economic policy, environmental technology, human health, and information and communication technology.

The broad range of development-related information provided by PAN will benefit many types of users, including researchers, development workers, academics, teachers, students, decision and policy makers,

and individuals interested in Asian development.

Communities that may have previously lacked printed materials and other forms of access to development research information will now be able to use the Internet to access information and communicate with experts internationally, because of the networking infrastructure that PAN is developing. Employment opportunities will emerge as new skills are needed to run the new technology. A new service provider -- in a country such as Sri Lanka, for example -- has the potential to become a large enterprise. Continually growing and upgrading, it will need increasing numbers of trained workers.

The Pan Asia Networking program has started a web site located at http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-4509-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html. As PAN grows and matures, many more people in Asia's developing nations will have the opportunity to tap into the Internet's accumulated wisdom.

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