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**A PIONEERING REGIONAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT ON
*PROMOTING ICT FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA 2004: REALISING THE MILLENNIUM
DEVELOPMENT GOALS***

ICT for Enhancing Human Development: Potential and Promise

The current debate on the potential of using ICT for human development goals ranges between those who identify that opportunities provided will help developing countries 'leapfrog' several stages of their development and those who argue that a positive relationship between human development is either weak or absent. Even the protagonists of ICT for development, however, argue that growth of ICT should not become a 'techno-quick-fix' for solving development problems as there may be unacceptable tradeoffs with MDGs in less developed countries.

The research findings towards the Regional HDR on *Promoting ICT for Human Development 2004: Realising the Millennium Development Goals*, however, show that if wisely deployed, technological applications and innovations in the ICT sector can affect human development in several ways.

ICT as a sector of economic activity: An obvious impact of ICT is its contribution as an industry for the overall economic growth of a nation. The ICT sector and industry have witnessed unprecedented growth in the past decade. Global spending on information and communications technology was expected to grow from US\$2.1 trillion in 1999 to US\$3 trillion in by 2003.

ICT as an enabler for enhancing human productivity: The pervasive potential impact of ICT emerges from its being used as control technology, leading to innovations in products and processes in the manufacturing sectors and resource extraction industries. ICTs have become indispensable ingredients in all forms and processes of economic activity ranging from stock inventories, product and service information, marketing, manufacturing and design. Quantitative assessment of the impact of ICT becomes difficult as it is so embedded and integrated in all industrial and services sectors.

ICT directly influences human development through access to information, knowledge and enlarging choices: The long-term impact of ICT lies in its ability to directly expand human choices through increased access to information and knowledge. ICT breaks barriers to human development in at least three ways not possible before or with other forms of technology:

Breaking barriers to human knowledge: The internet and other ICT tools are increasingly becoming key delivery mechanisms for sections of the population which did not have access to educational infrastructure and content. ICTs are also being actively used in promoting life-long learning and continued education, reintegrating unemployed people into the workforce through re-education and retooling of skills.

Breaking barriers to participation: Internet and ICT based news and information groups have contributed to the creation of a far more vibrant public sphere. In many parts of Asia, where the mass media have been and continue to be strictly controlled by governments, the internet has offered a new medium of political mobilisation and participation

Breaking barriers to economic opportunity: Since the ICT sector requires less initial investment than the more traditional sectors of industrial activity, it lowers the barriers to entry into the economy for people who could never break into the industrial sector; for example, compare the cost of setting up a steel plant with setting up desk top publishing. ICT provides new and unprecedented opportunities to people who have proficiency in handling ICT tools and have an idea or service to sell. This was undoubtedly one of the underlying forces of the dot.com boom.

The research findings of the Report concludes that in spite of the limitations of ICT, digital divide and the experimental nature of many of the applications for human development, the way forward is to support the growth and spread of ICT, steering it in the direction of human development applications. Towards this end the state, the NGOs, and the private sector have complementary roles. The Asian region is particularly well placed to harness and strategically deploy ICT for human development as it not only constitutes one of the fastest growing ICT markets, but also a region of burgeoning ICT industry.

