

Building Knowledge Societies: ASEAN in the Information Age

Keynote Address by
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There are, at this time, few things more urgent or more important for ASEAN - or for any nation or region — than building “knowledge societies.”

ASEAN’s leaders have recognized this. In the plan of action that they adopted in Hanoi in December 1998, the leaders called for the establishment of the ASEAN Information Infrastructure, or AII. For a start, they called for agreements among ASEAN members “on the design, standardization, inter-connection and inter-operability of Information Technology systems by 2001.” In the same plan of action, they resolved to “(d)velop the information content of the AII by 2004.”

In compliance with these orders, ASEAN formed a working group on the AII, which put together a number of recommendations and submitted them to the ASEAN Economic Ministers in October last year. The core recommendation was the concept of e-ASEAN. According to this concept, e-ASEAN would pull together and integrate ASEAN members’ efforts in information and communications technology while maintaining links with the Global Information Infrastructure. It would involve inter-connectivity, with its own high-speed backbone. It would seek to harmonize policies, regulations and standards in information and communications technology within ASEAN. It would place priority on the use of that technology for tourism, trade, education and employment. It would pay particular attention to cooperation in the development of human resources for information and communications technology. It would be government-led but private sector-driven.

The ASEAN Economic Ministers adopted the working group’s recommendations and agreed to organize a combined public-private sector Task Force to carry out the recommendations and bring e-ASEAN

to reality. The task force is to be headed by Mr. Roberto Romulo, former Foreign Minister of the Philippines, who once headed IBM's regional operations in Southeast Asia.

At their summit in Manila last November, the ASEAN heads of state and government welcomed the launching of e-ASEAN and carried out a dialogue with Mr. Romulo and global and regional leaders of the information-technology industry. They also agreed on "the establishment of a free trade area for goods, services, and investments for the info-com industries under a new e-ASEAN agreement." They noted the particular usefulness of information and communications technology for education and the development of human skills.

Of course, ASEAN's outlook on the information age, information and communications technology, and knowledge industries goes beyond technology and its applications. It is entirely consistent with the comprehensive and integrated approach of this workshop and of the conference to which it is leading. This project's title refers to "knowledge societies" rather than to knowledge industries or knowledge economies. The term sends the message that the impact of the information age is not just on industry and the economy but on society as a whole and on people's very lives.

We in ASEAN regard information and communications technology as an amazingly powerful tool. It gives us and our children easier, quicker and broader access to facts and, hopefully, the wisdom of the ages. It immensely helps in education and training and in the acquisition and development of science and technology. It makes production more efficient and trade quicker and less expensive in ways that continue to multiply. It makes travel easier and cheaper. It enables us to render social services more effectively.

Information and communications technology offers ASEAN and other developing countries a vital opportunity and means to leapfrog the historical stages of development and bypass the type of industrial revolution that the developed countries had to go through. Through this technology, we could telescope the development process. Already, we have seen how technology has greatly increased the productivity of many workers and of whole societies. At the same time, even in its infancy, the presence of the new technology is so pervasive and its impact so deep that whoever masters it comes out ahead in the increasingly competitive environment of a globalized economy.

In this light, the sweep of the information age through Southeast Asia presents us also with severe challenges, even threats. The new technology demands new skills, new mindsets, changes in economic and social policies, and shifts in cultural norms. The information revolution poses the danger that those who are already well advanced in these essential conditions — in science and technology, in education, in economic reforms, in modern organization and ways of thinking — will go faster and even further ahead.

This means that, if we do not deliberately do something about it, the surge of the information revolution could widen the gap between developed and developing countries, including ASEAN, between the more advanced and less advanced members of ASEAN, and, within each nation, between those groups who can afford access to the new technology and those who cannot.

We must ensure, then, that, as we strive to catch up with the more advanced economies, the gap narrows between those who have access to the benefits of technology and those who are in danger of being left out of the information age.

All this would require a veritable forced march to acquire and develop technology. This means not merely the ability to use it but the determination to join the great global adventure of expanding the frontiers of technology if we are to be truly part of the information and communications revolution.

This would, in turn, necessitate a crash program to raise the level of skills of the population as a whole. This is necessary because the creation of a knowledge society depends on achieving a critical mass of people plugged into such a society. We also need to ensure that one group or class does not hog the mastery of and access to technology and thus leave the rest of the people behind. The alternative would

be to divide the nation in a potentially dangerous way. The broad upgrading of skills, of course, would need, from the public and private sectors, massive investments in education at all levels, especially for the poor, and, in many cases, the overhaul of the educational sector.

At the same time, the political decision must be made to create a policy environment that would foster the development of information and communications technology. This would include the further opening of society to new ideas, wherever it comes from, and the provision of economic and social incentives to encourage the development and use of technology.

As ASEAN's leaders have directed, we are resolved to undertake much of this enormous task together. As in more and more areas of endeavor, we find that, in many aspects of information and communications technology, it is more efficient and effective to work together than as individual countries, making this area a vital one for ASEAN cooperation.

The e-ASEAN initiative represents a collective endeavor, bringing together member countries' efforts in information and communications technology. This is a strategic decision arising from ASEAN's understanding of the immensity of the challenge and of how the challenge can be met only if ASEAN acts regionally. The Internet represents the new industrial revolution; but while the first industrial revolution took more than a hundred years to unfold, from the invention of the rotary steam engine by James Watt to its use in steamships and trains, the new technological revolution would be telescoped into decades or even years. It may well be impossible for a single developing country to cope with the challenge of this new revolution. Thus, e-ASEAN seeks to ensure that developing countries are not left behind by this industrial revolution.

In cooperating through e-ASEAN, we will be harmonizing policies, regulations and standards. We will be cooperating in the development of human resources, learning from one another's experiences and strengths. We will be ensuring the inter-connectivity of our communications systems. Here are some specific projects that the Working Group on the ASEAN Information Infrastructure has put forward: a regional backbone, an ASEAN Tourism portal, an ASEAN Trade Link, an electronic network of institutions of learning and libraries, a job bank for the information and communications industry. The Task Force on e-ASEAN will be recommending actions that would bring these and other projects to reality. Cooperation in information and communications technology would not only enable ASEAN to harness that technology more effectively. It would serve the ultimate goal of tying Southeast Asia closer together culturally, socially, economically and politically.

In economic terms, like the ASEAN road, power-grid and gas-pipeline networks, the ASEAN Information Infrastructure and e-ASEAN will be a physical bond to tie more tightly together an economy of half a billion people where barriers to trade are already fast being dismantled. Investments would be more strongly attracted to such an integrated economy. Capital would also be drawn by the convenience and efficiency that an inter-connected ASEAN would provide. The very creation of the ASEAN Information Infrastructure and of e-ASEAN would offer rich opportunities for investment.

The promise of ASEAN cooperation in information and communications technology is clear to ASEAN, the promise of economic dynamism and of an immensely enriched life for its people. So is the challenge. The challenge of upgrading the skills of our people, re-allocating our resources, and adapting our cultures according to the demands of the information age. The challenge of ensuring that all the nations in ASEAN and all the people in them contribute to and benefit from the technological revolution. To achieve the promise and meet the challenge is the sum of ASEAN's vision and mission for the information age.

SOURCE: ASEAN Secretariat <<http://www.aseansec.org>>