



Is the **ASEAN**  
environment for  
information technology (IT)  
conducive to **creating**  
**wealth** for people  
in the **region**?

by Raijeli Nicole  
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### **Telecommunications and Information Technology Ministers (TelMin)**

With the rapid development of the communications and the information and communication technology (ICT) sector worldwide, the Telecommunications and Information Technology Ministers (TelMin) were established to respond to the task of shaping a new kind of economy within ASEAN where knowledge and information become key factors in productivity and economic performance. The first TelMin meeting was held in Kuala Lumpur in 2001.

TelMin, along with ASEAN Telecommunications Senior Officials Meeting (TELSOM) is charged with the technical work that relates to telecommunications and information communication of the e-ASEAN. Also with TELSOM, TelMin serves as a platform to respond to the ASEAN 2020 Vision that states: “ASEAN would be a concert of Southeast Asian Nations, outward looking, living in peace, stability and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in dynamic development and in a community of

caring societies.”<sup>1</sup> Toward this end, ASEAN member countries resolved to accelerate the development of science and technology (including IT), through the establishment of a regional information technology network and centers of excellence for the dissemination of and easy access to data and information.<sup>2</sup> The ASEAN 2020 Vision is also the rationale for the e-ASEAN initiative.

TelMin is committed to initiatives that promote universal access to ICT infrastructure and services, and those that develop ICT competencies. During the 3rd ASEAN TelMin, Ministers expressed their desire to continue ties with relevant constituents including the youth and women. They claim that feedback and input from these sectors would contribute to more innovative implementation of the ASEAN ICT work agenda.<sup>3</sup> Since then, the yearly TelMin program has included a session that investigates how ICT affects the lives of the younger generation and how young people see the future of ICT in the ASEAN.

TelMin also engages with the telecommunications and IT industry players in ASEAN through the eASEAN Business Council which is comprised of representatives of the private sector.

### **e-ASEAN**

The e-ASEAN was endorsed on 28 November 1999 during ASEAN’s Annual Summit Meeting held in Manila. It aimed to establish “a region-wide approach to making comprehensive use of information and communication technology in business, society and government.”

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*The Working Group on e-society is putting emphasis on the development of local content*

Critical to the issue of women/gender and ICT are some main elements of the e-ASEAN framework, namely: the **e-society** and the **e-government**.

The **e-society** involves fostering the development of a knowledge-based society, narrowing the digital divide, enhancing workforce competitiveness, facilitating the flow of knowledge, and using technology to enhance the spirit of the ASEAN community. The **e-government** focuses on enhancing the delivery of services, facilitating the free flow of goods, data and people within ASEAN, facilitating linkages within private and public sectors, promoting transparency, and enhancing intergovernmental cooperation.

### **Telecommunications Senior Officials Meeting (TELSOM)**

TELSOM was conceptualised during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Ministers of Communication and Information Technology Meeting (2000). As a management body, it supervises and carries out policies, programs and collaborative activities in the area of telecommunications and

information technology within the ASEAN region. TELSOM assists TelMin by acting as TelMin's coordinating arm. Within TELSOM are a number of working groups including one on e-society and ICT capacity building

### **Working Group on e-society and ICT capacity building**

The intent of the working group is to develop an e-society within ASEAN and "enhance capacity building by promoting awareness, general knowledge and appreciation of ICT, particularly the Internet."<sup>4</sup> This working group meets twice a year and is composed of ASEAN government officials who handle e-society and capacity building in their respective countries.

The objectives of the working group are:

1. To develop the ASEAN Information Society where citizens are able to work in the knowledge-based economy and enhance productivity.
2. To undertake activities aimed at promoting the positive use of the internet (PUI) among the public, private, non-government and people sectors through seminars and workshops. This includes the formulation of common ASEAN guidelines and the development of websites.
3. To recommend incentives and policies, hand in hand with the private sector, for the development of local and ASEAN content and other applications to maximise existing and planned infrastructures, as well as to generate opportunities for business, livelihood and employment.<sup>5</sup>

As part of the promotion of an e-society, a workshop was held to raise awareness

and knowledge of how women can optimise the use of ICT. This was under the auspices of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).<sup>6</sup>

### **ASEANconnect**

The ASEANconnect was conceptualised during the ASEAN Telecommunications Senior Officials Meeting (TELSOM, 2002) to address the issue of digital divide.<sup>7</sup> It has developed a digital divide database which contains ASEAN telecommunications and the IT industry information: key data, statistics and measurement indicators, analysis of initiatives and other information to help bridge the digital divide and facilitate trade within ASEAN.

The desire to reduce the digital divide is felt not only among ASEAN country members but also within individual member States. Already, initiatives have been made to improve the provision and delivery of services through the use of ICT.

### **Impact on Women, Rural Communities, and Other Marginalised Groups**

A major thrust of TelMin's policy is to enhance productivity and economic growth. TelMin was established to respond to the global expansion of ICT and to shape a new kind of economy where knowledge and information become prime movers of productivity. Realising the role that women, rural communities, youth, and other marginalised groups could play in furthering economic growth, TelMin aims at inclusive participation and continuing ties with constituents including marginalised groups.

ASEAN goals, including TelMin's policy direction and the e-ASEAN framework, are admirable. However, unless this direction is sincerely and effectively pursued, ASEAN's aggressive efforts to keep pace with the global expansion of ICT will only increase the digital divide, the marginalisation of women and other underprivileged groups, and the inequality that already exists in many Asian countries.

ASEAN and TelMin's policy direction ideally would enhance people centered development particularly in the areas relating to improving government services, health services and education and addressing issues of inequality. Yet, while concrete mechanisms exist to ensure connection and participation with the business and private sectors through the eASEAN Business Council there is no established structure to ensure and give priority to the participation of civil society groups who would otherwise pursue social justice issues.

### **Major Actors in the Telecommunication Sector**

While venues within are in place for the participation of civil society groups, such as through the ASEAN Civil Society Conference, specified within the mechanisms created to address ICT issues there is very limited space for players among members of civil society or justice movements. At most, major actors in this arena are government officials and the business or private sectors. These include:

- **Governments of the ASEAN member countries as well as those who play a major role in the telecommunication sector and IT industry. These players are considered**

part of the business sector and TelMin interacts with them through the eASEAN Business Council (eABC).

- eABC are representatives from the private sector from all the ASEAN member countries.
- TELSOM is composed of senior telecommunications officials from the 10 member countries of ASEAN.
- Among civil society, only youth representatives have exhibited concrete participation through the ASEAN Youth Forum.
- Beyond the sole efforts of ASEAN, partnerships with other organisations like the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), APEC and the Australian Agency for International Development (AUSAID) also contribute to further the goals of e-ASEAN.<sup>8</sup>

### Issues/Challenges Relating to Access, Control and Ownership

- 1) *Cyber threats and viruses:* There have been concerted efforts to address widespread cyber threats and viruses. One possible solution is the enhancement of regional cooperation in cyber security.
- 2) *Creating an ASEAN economic community:* Initiatives towards realising an integrated ASEAN economic community include the promotion of universal access to ICT infrastructures and services, and the development of ICT skills and competencies.

3) *Narrowing of the digital divide:* The creation of the ASEANconnect in which publicly accessible key data statistics and measurement indicators and analysis of initiatives relevant in addressing the digital divide are stored. This mechanism is primarily aimed at assisting decision makers effectively plan and implement projects to bridge the digital divide within ASEAN.

4) *Building ICT capacity and capabilities:* To maximise the role that highly skilled and well-trained professional human capital plays in the growth of ASEAN's information economy, the need for cross-certification in ICT courses and programs among member countries was identified.

5) *Participation of the business sector:* The formation of the eASEAN Business Council has enhanced business input into the TelMin process.

6) *Participation of youth and women sector:* Feedback and input from the youth and women have been acknowledged as vital contributions for more innovative implementation of the ASEAN ICT work agenda.

### Relevance of Involvement by Social Justice Movements

The use of the internet and broadband has shown high economic and social benefits such as increased productivity and commerce, and access to education and health including medical services.<sup>9</sup>

In particular, ASEAN's telecommunication mechanisms present opportunities for social movement groups to participate toward

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meeting human development goals while keeping to ASEAN policy direction. ASEAN and TelMin have declared policies such as universal access, bridging the digital divide, developing an e-society within the region, and involving marginalised sectors. Elements of the ASEAN framework encourage initiatives to improve the delivery of services by ASEAN governments. Thus, the impact of global expansion of ICT can bring about tremendous benefits to people but the lack of real participation by underprivileged and marginalised groups widen existing social inequalities. Among the many issues and concerns:

**1) Access:** In many Asian countries, access to ICT is mainly confined within the urban areas, among profitable markets and mainly to the well-

educated and upper income males. Participation by the social movements is necessary to ensure global and national access of ICT for all.

**2) Right to information and freedom of expression:** The right to information and freedom of expression are basic human rights. However, people in many Asian countries are still denied such rights. Media censorship remains a major issue. At the same time, the ongoing privatisation of media restricts diversity of opinion as well as the accountability of media.<sup>10</sup> As social justice movements assert, people's basic rights must be protected.

**3) Gender justice:** Deeply rooted in the existing gender power structures in many Asian countries, women's access and participation in ICT are hindered by economic, political and social issues.<sup>11</sup> Yet, ASEAN and TelMin meetings as well as other international bodies such as APEC and summits on ICT, have acknowledged women's vital role in ICT. It is the task of civil society and social justice movements to press for a more democratic and inclusive information society that can help women and use ICT to respond to their needs.

### Potential of Community and Independent Media

The gaps in ICT access and participation by marginalised communities make the creation of community and independent media imperative. It has been said that the next generation of information and communication technology will involve community radio stations and in community internet access points. If so, it may speak the local language of

communities and be participatory. This would encourage greater participation since it overcomes barriers of illiteracy, while creating a forum for dialogue, cultural expression and knowledge sharing.

In many Asian countries, local radio programs and community internet access points known as cyber or internet cafés are in place. Given their potential within the ASEAN framework, there is a need to support these community-based media and to link them with traditional ones.

The potential to solicit access and participation by groups that cannot easily access commercial or privatised media fulfills TelMin's objective of providing universal access to ICT and narrowing the digital divide. It is also consistent with TelMin's expressed desire to continue ties with relevant constituencies. Such initiatives would truly contribute to the information society that ASEAN intends

to accomplish. More importantly, greater access and participation of women and communities in ICT would contribute immensely in ASEAN initiatives to improve the provision and delivery of government services.

Active participation in TelMin discussions is necessary to promote community or independent media and internet access points particularly in the rural areas. Beyond doubt, engagement with the working group on e-society and ICT capacity building will expand the use of ICT within and across significant sectors of ASEAN society. ■

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#### *Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> Rodolfo Noel S. Quimbo, *The e-ASEAN Legal Framework and its Challenges*

<sup>2</sup> Rodolfo Noel S. Quimbo, *The e-ASEAN Legal Framework and its Challenges*

<sup>3</sup> "ICT Ministers Advance Efforts to Build a Secure Cyberspace and Promote Trade in Telecommunications Equipment," *Joint Media Statement, 3<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN TelMin Ministers Meeting*

<sup>4</sup> <[www.aseanconnect.gov.my](http://www.aseanconnect.gov.my)>

<sup>5</sup> <[www.aseanconnect.gov.my](http://www.aseanconnect.gov.my)>

<sup>6</sup> *Association of Southeast Asian Nations – Joint statement at the World Summit on Information Society, 10 December 2003*

<sup>7</sup> <[www.aseanconnect.gov.my](http://www.aseanconnect.gov.my)>

<sup>8</sup> Rodolfo Noel S. Quimbo, *The e-ASEAN Legal Framework and its Challenges*

<sup>9</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> APEC TelMin

<sup>10</sup> *Collective contribution from several Asian NGOs, The World Summit on the Information Society: An Asian Response, Geneva, 2003*

<sup>11</sup> *Collective contribution from several Asian NGOs, The World Summit on the Information Society: An Asian Response, Geneva, 2003*