

Keynote Address
“Weaving the Region with Education”
By
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At the
Seminar on Asia-Europe Cooperation on Applications of Information
Technology to Human Resources Development in the Mekong
Sub-Region: Challenges and Opportunities
Date 9 October, 2001

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor for me to be invited to present the keynote address to this distinguished assembly of information technology experts and educators from Europe and Asia gathered here for a seminar on the “Applications of Information Technology to Human Resources Development in the Mekong Sub-Region: Challenges and Opportunities”.

Highly developed human resources means greater political, social and environmental awareness in society. To this end I am hopeful that this ASEM initiative signals the start of a worthy international collaboration aimed at addressing the region’s most vital resource for sustainable development; namely that of human resources.

This seminar brings together two prominent components for ensuring sustainable growth: education and information technology. We are all aware that education is the key for social and economic development for any society or country; education is a means for the sustainable development of the entire region.

Today, it is widely acknowledged that Information and Communications Technology has brought about changes in the global economy and society as a whole. We have seen the great benefits of information technology in reducing poverty and improvement in the livelihood of people throughout the world. Health care personnel in Cambodia can send their patients’ records to seek medical advice from experts in the US. Exchanges of valuable and previously untapped indigenous knowledge flourishes through the widespread use of information technology. With e-commerce, merchants in Laos’ Vientiane’s morning market can sell their crafts over the Internet. Karen children from refugee camps are able to exchange e-mails with Australian children of the same age. The entire globe is now covered with tightly but unevenly knitted information threads enhancing the speed and the sphere of influences of these global changes. Changes that are taking place in one place of the world can trigger effects in the entire global community at a much faster pace than mankind has ever experienced before. Infectious information can spread to the far ends of the globe at an alarming speed, thus information technology can also put a society at risk as well. As we move into the era of information, we are confronted with rapid changes; we must continuously and actively respond to both positive and negative changes taking place around us with well-prepared and adaptive human resources. Strong emphasis on the moral component of education must be adhered to, more so than ever before, to develop socially

responsible citizens. We must proactively review and renew our educational system; education is now without national or regional barriers or boundaries. Nevertheless, by opening up or expanding our horizon, valuable assets of traditional methods of education must be carefully identified, preserved and definitely not overlooked.

Along with any technological development, information technology cannot escape from the vicious circle where the already existing income disparity means that some are more digitally connected while the majority of the world population are not, and this in turn widens the income gap. However, information technology, being lightweight and easily deployed has a comparative advantage over the other past technological developments. With appropriate investments and innovative ideas, information technology can help economies to leapfrog. For example, by embracing the concept of an information technology society, Singapore has made rapid progress over the past decade and became one of the economic leaders of the world. Information technology innovation and development is a fast track process.

Tapping into this positive aspect of information technology, I am happy to note that this seminar will closely examine the use of information technology as an educational tool to help speed up human resources development with a focus on the Greater Mekong Subregion. Over these past few years, we have witnessed a large number of projects and initiatives addressing this promising field of IT application from various organizations whether they be government or private sector. Many new international initiatives, the so-called 'virtual' institutions, are taking place and new forms of education providers with new business concepts are taking shape. Education is not just going through a reform, but in fact, a revolution where the entire process of learning, achievements and values will take on new forms.

The Greater Mekong Subregion comprises six countries which, on the average, are on the low end of any information technology indices. To weave through the region with education means to adopt information and communications technology. I am aware that this is a challenging task where

(1) One has to face the challenges to overcome the technological barrier to provide education anywhere anytime for those who barely have any access to information and communications technology. This is due to the lack of infrastructure and low user readiness.

(2) Another challenge is to overcome social, cultural, economic, administrative and political barriers. It is, by far, a bigger challenge to foster trust and understanding and form strong partnerships to make the best use of information technology.

An international effort, facilitated by an international body like ASEM, would be fundamental to overcome these challenges; it is no longer a task which can be undertaken single-handedly in this Internet era or the Information Age. Any proposed change or reform imposed from the outside with no counterpart within the local community is bound to fail. A strong network or partnership with active local change agents is the key to the success of such endeavors.

Networking of institutions and organizations will become increasingly important to sustain the rapid development and subsequent changes brought about by this new age. A significant outcome of this seminar would be to cooperate towards addressing the issues faced by the Mekong Sub-region to subsequently help spread the woven information thread more evenly.

I am aware that these are not small challenges, and that this meeting marks the beginning of your deliberations, not the end. I would in particular like to request my institute, the Asian Institute of

Technology, to bring forward its linkages and international networking capabilities to ensure the success of all follow up activities of this initiative. I would like to express the wish that this deliberation will lead to concrete and feasible proposals of actions appropriate to the needs of the Mekong Sub-region.

I look forward to observing your successes and to the resulting progress in social and economic development of the region amid improved trust and understanding amongst our peoples.

I wish you all good luck as you tackle these intriguing and rewarding challenges.