The Pristine View

Information Technology—Export Earner And Engine For Economic Growth

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IF Information Technology (IT) is the main engine of growth for the coming decades as many claim, how Bangladesh, with its limited supply of computers and fewer still InterNet connections, can take advantage of it is not clear. The only thing that is clear is this disparate distribution of the tolls of the new technology could cause the income gap between rich and the poor and rich and poor nations, to increase. This concern was discussed at the Copenhagen-5 Summit, but surprisingly only a handful of people viewed it as a threat to the poor developing countries despite the fact that only 0.3 per cent of all InterNet users live in these countries. Most did agree however, that they saw no reason why IT cannot boosted growth in the poor economies in much the same way as it has done for the rich ones. But as such a view rests on some assumptions that may not be true for Bangladesh it is better to tread lightly before jumping in feet first into a situation we may not be equipped to handle.

Bangladesh has not yet been able to put the right infrastructure in place despite the fact that communications technologies are playing an increasingly important role in the economic development. Not long ago UNDP had announced a financing and technical aid programme to broaden InterNet access by developing nations, but whether this option was taken up by the government is not known. If not, it should have been as this facility was put in place in the belief that poor countries also have a right to access the wonders of the IT age. The United Nations also created an informa-

tion and communication technology task force, and set up a trust fund to be funded by voluntary contributions in an attempt to bridge the digital divide between rich and poor states. Certainly the exclusion of the poor and illiterate from this global information network will do nothing to help in closing the digital divide.

According to the Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, the private sector must become the "principal driving force" in the development of IT and some now say this can only be achieved by setting up of Telecentres in remote areas to replace radio with the InterNet. The Grameen Bank has already introduced something on these lines, and its web site now helps Bangladeshi villagers get up-to-date market information. The site was launched last year in the Modhupur area in central Tangail district where people are being taught computer and InterNet skills free of charge. If nothing more, this marks a beginning of a change in attitudes but when we consider a computer in Bangladesh costs the equivalent of eight years' average pay, it does seem that to own one is an impossible dream for most people. But as access to a telephone is virtually nil for most people in Bangladesh, they are likely to stay excluded from the mainstream for some time to come. This in itself is likely to widen the existing gap between rich and poor nations especially as producers in Bangladesh appear to be at the bottom of the supply chain.

Although computers, modern telecommunications and the InterNet reduce communications costs and overcome geographical borders, there is little sign of

it becoming widespread inside Bangladesh. Yet the InterNet does offer virtually free access to vast amounts of information and expert advice on almost every subject under the sun, that it is a pity we cannot make a better use of it. And as a single InterNet connection can be shared by a number of people, there is no real reason why the poor or rural inhabitants should remain outside especially as a lack of access to the InterNet will prejudice the nation's prospects for growth. It would seem therefore, that the most important thing is to first ensure the healthy growth of the communications network so that the economy can benefit from the spin-off.

As the link between poverty reduction, gender equality and access to information technology cannot be underestimated. And as Information Technology has a great potential for forging greater gender equality. If new methods can be introduced that overcome all the barriers, apart from commerce, access to the technology can improve greatly the living standards of the people but at the same time it must be remembered that this technology also bewilders people and creates in them a sense of powerlessness. To this end the UN Secretary-General is right. a great deal will depend on the private sector's ability to expand the country's Information Technology sector.

However, the government also has a role to play, as steps need to be taken to facilitate computer education at all levels of education. If properly exploited, the InterNet will have a positive impact on education and thereby on the economy of Bangladesh. Unfortunately

maintaining a network for the provision of new digital telecommunications facilities to assist in promoting dial-up connections is not a top priority of government, but if the InterNet is to be the service-oriented industry it should be, otherwise integration with international network may not be fully possible. Skill training and the transfer of technology are after all, the most powerful forces in the struggle for economic emancipation and "on-line" education will help us to keep up to date. Therefore if the technology can be harnessed in a proper way, it is possible to utilise it for business and economic expansion.

As more and more people begin to take advantage of the window the InterNet provides to the world, the government should take action to improve universal access. Already the technology has opened up the world to many men and women who were hitherto isolated from the mainstream, so why should not our people also benefit? If national policies include innovations like community informations centre that ensure access to lower income people such as placing communications technology in public institutions, schools, hospitals, libraries, and government departments, and educating women on using the InterNet is important now that Bangladesh has fallen in the midst of the information age. Those countries that have gone ahead are the ones that recognised early the potential of the new technology and never looked back. As this sector is also the potential export earner for the future, it is not too late to "hitch our star" to the IT wagon and make it work to Bangladesh' advantage.