What‘s the big deal about broadband?

by Ivo Ivanovski, Minister of Information Society, Republic of Macedonia

The Government of Macedonia provided IT free training to anyone that applied. Around 22,000 citizens applied and many went on to obtain Internet services at home, buy their first PC or take private, advanced computer courses. There is a need and a will to develop an information society in developing regions, but where do you start? The United Nations and the Broadband Commission for Digital Development work with national leaders worldwide to help less developed countries find the answers.

Ivo Ivanovski, since 2008, has been the Minister of Information Society, Republic of Macedonia. Mr Ivanovski was appointed by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Macedonia, and elected by the Parliament as a Minister without portfolio (2006-2008); he is responsible for the development of the information society in Macedonia. Previously, Mr Ivanovski was an IT Manager for Plaskolite Incorporated in Columbus, Ohio, one of the world's largest private Plexiglas producers in the world. Mr Ivanovski is on the board of directors of UNGAID and a commissioner of the Broadband Commission for the ITU and UNESCO.

Ivo Ivanovski received his bachelor degree in Computer Science and Engineering from Ohio State University in the USA. He earned his master's degree in computer sciences from Franklin University.

For millions of people around the world, broadband Internet access is a big part of their modern lifestyle. They start their day checking emails, then log-on to a social networking site, upload a few photos, write on friends' walls and view some of their friends' summer vacation pictures. Then they log on to Twitter and add a short line to tell everyone how they feel that day. After they finish these daily responsibilities, they go online again to check if the media stores have the latest and greatest musical album for download. Next, they pay a few bills online and check their bank account balances. They might log-in to their brokerage account online and check the portfolio for possible trades. They might also check the news online and then go to a government site to check their Social Security, Medicare or pension fund status. At the end of the day they get online to play a round of 'Texas hold'em' poker with friends or total strangers, while exchanging chats on how terrible the dealer is and how the odds were in their favour, but the 'river' card (the last card dealt) always plays against them. Unfortunately, this is not the case for two-thirds of the world's population.

"For millions of people around the world, broadband Internet access is big part of their modern lifestyle. They start their day checking emails, then log-on to a social networking site, upload a few photos, write on friends' walls and view some of their friends' summer vacation pictures."

"The Government of Macedonia had an initiative that provided IT training free of charge for anyone that applied during 2007 and 2008. Around 22,000 citizens applied for basic training in use of the computer, the Internet, basic office applications and email."

According to the latest report of Measuring the Information Society by ITU-D, in 2009 an estimated 26 per cent of the world's population was using the Internet. There are more than 1 billion broadband users around the world, the majority being concentrated in North America and the European Union.

In my country, Macedonia, the latest report by the Agency for Electronic Communication showed that in the first quarter of 2010 41 per cent of the households used broadband Internet - a 28 per cent increase compared to the same period the year before.

Broadband connectivity is becoming a priority for developed and less developed countries alike; all countries understand that broadband can help build their economies, foster the social inclusion of their citizens and minimize the digital divide. However the digital divide is not just among counties; the divide is also found within each country, region, city, and neighbourhood. Undoubtedly, areas connected by broadband have greater opportunities for economic growth, job creation, social inclusion and access to bigger markets.

Information is a priceless commodity, and giving the entire world's people access to information is one of the Broadband Commission for Digital Development's highest priorities. Rapidly changing wired and wireless technologies are opening new opportunities to affordably connect those who are still not connected to the virtual world. The challenge is to stimulate the private sector to invest in rural areas where the market is too small and or costly to provide a sufficient return on the investment.

A World Bank report shows that increasing broadband infrastructure by ten per cent adds 1.3 per cent to the gross domestic product of even highly developed countries.

The existence of infrastructure is a catalyst for the modern information society, but many more parameters must be measured when comparing developed to less-developed countries; these include market environment, political and regulatory environment, individual, business and government readiness as well as the individual, business and government usage.

Part of the role of the commissioners of the Broadband Commission for Digital Development is to provide information to the country leaders, NGOs and the private sector regarding the best practices, policies and strategies for the development of the broadband network that have helped countries throughout the world meet the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

Creating policy to stimulate the private sector to expand their networks is a good start, but not always enough. Once the infrastructure is there, I believe that educational programmes are necessary to show the population how to obtain endless benefits that the Internet can bring. Even with established educational programmes, the challenge is finding content in the local language. Most of the content on the Internet is in English, which only a fraction of the world's citizens speak. Providing sufficient content for less developed countries will always be a challenge, even after they build the infrastructure.

The Government of Macedonia had an initiative that provided IT training free of charge for anyone that applied during 2007 and 2008. Around 22,000 citizens applied for basic training in use of the computer, the Internet, basic office applications and email. The program was very successful; some citizens, after completing the course, purchased Internet packages for their homes, others purchased their first personal computer, and some continued to take private, more advanced, computer courses. Most of the students were from urban areas where broadband was already present; they just needed to learn about what is out there in the virtual world.

Governments are also investing in online electronic services for their citizens; this eliminates many trips to the local government office and creates an administration that is more transparent, efficient and responsive to citizen needs. Usually, these are investments that less developed countries - which often lack basic infrastructure, electricity and water - find difficult to budget and pay for. eLearning, eHealth, eDemocracy, and eTaxes are just a few of the many projects that can foster the growth of local and national economies. The question - Where do you start? - is what the commissioners of the Broadband Commission help leaders answer in countries which are trying to develop their information society.

The developed countries already have infrastructure, have educational programmes, have plenty of local content, have almost all the eGovernment services that they need and they will continue to develop their information society faster than the less developed countries. This only intensifies the digital divide. If The United Nations and the Broadband Commission for Digital Development are seriously interested in achieving the Millennium Development Goals through ICT, they need to prioritize their investment to help less developed countries leapfrog over a decade of technology and catch up with the others. ●

Connect-World

***Connect-World* is celebrating its 13th anniversary**

Through the years, *Connect-World*'s authors told of the rise of mobile, of fibre, of wireless and of broadband; they told of the dot.com meltdown, of digital inclusion and convergence, of standards and breakthroughs, the rise of IP and the fall of switching and of the regulatory turnaround.

In every issue of *Connect-World* heads of state, ministers and regulators, heads of international institutions and leaders of industry speak of what the ICT revolution, as it happens, means to the people in their regions of the world.

www.connect-world.com