



# Commonwealth Secretariat

## Briefing Note – Digital Divide

### **The challenge**

The Commonwealth Secretariat's aim is to narrow the gap between those with access to information and communication technology (ICT) and those without. Promotion of ICT is a priority to the Secretary-General as it bridges the digital gap and facilitates opportunities to achieve socio-economic development of member countries, particularly small and developing states.

### **The Commonwealth strategy**

- The development of national ICT linked to a country's national development plans and aimed at attaining the Millennium Development Goals.
- The implementation of projects to support selected countries' development priorities and national e-governance strategies.
- To enable access to ICTs, online education and training for disadvantaged communities.
- The consolidation of technology to avoid use of different ICT systems and software leading to difficulty in co-ordination due to lack of compatibility.
- To provide ICT access for young people to reduce poverty in member countries.

### **Key principles**

While working in collaboration and partnership with governments, the private sector and civil society, our main focus is to bridge the gap among countries and communities to enable access to local, regional and international networks through access to ICT.

### **The practical response**

- Technology Empowerment Centres (CYPTECs) were established at the CYP Africa and CYP Asia regional centres to provide young people with new ICT skills to access markets and improve operations of their businesses.
- More than 3,000 young entrepreneurs have benefited from 'CYPTEC on Wheels', a mobile ICT training initiative in rural India.
- The Commonwealth Connects programme's focus is on building policy and regulatory capacity, improving regional networking, local content and knowledge, promoting local access and connectivity, modernising education and skills development, and enhancing entrepreneurship to reduce poverty.

- ‘Rebuilding after the Tsunami: Using ICT for Change’ – a project supported by the Commonwealth Connects programme. The project used modern internet technology to improve the capacity of civil society in Sri Lanka and India to co-ordinate their post-2004 tsunami recovery efforts.
- The second project is the ‘Small business training for women’ in Cameroon using radio programmes. It involves the development of a multimedia Resource Kit for the programmes that will provide useful information and tips to help strengthen women’s entrepreneurial capacity in targeted communities.
- A third project, ‘Computers for communities’, was launched in September 2008. Its aim is to provide refurbished computers for schools and disadvantaged communities throughout the Caribbean. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago will execute the programme and set up the refurbishment centre. Microsoft and UNIDO are now involved with its implementation.
- The inaugural International e-Partnership Summit was held in New Delhi, India, in March 2007. It offered networking opportunities for all players in the ICT industry to work in mutually beneficial ways to enhance the use of modern technology for development in the Commonwealth.
- A Special Fund has been established by the Commonwealth Secretariat for ongoing ICT programmes. A number of projects are funded by voluntary contributions from member countries sitting on the Commonwealth Connects Steering Committee, and the fund is managed by the Committee.
- Five hundred people have been trained on a variety of ICT programmes and 200 young people in Lesotho and Uganda have been connected through online education programmes.
- The Hole in the Wall Computer Learning Station was opened in Uganda in November 2007. The project – costing US\$100,000 – was launched by Commonwealth Connects in collaboration with the Government of India. Four computer terminals have been installed at a solar-powered learning station in Kiswa, 3km east of Kampala.
- Some 20 participants around the Caribbean participated in an ICT programme held in Jamaica in 2008 to help women farmers develop organic farming through information sharing and networking. Training on growing techniques, building a farmers’ network among delegates and using websites to promote products internationally was provided.
- Commonwealth Connects has launched the Commonwealth African Rural Connectivity Initiative programme to develop ICT for rural communities across Sub-Saharan Africa, where more than 60 per cent of the population live in unconnected rural areas.
- Workshops for capacity-building in development of national ICT strategies have been held in Swaziland, for the Africa region, and Barbados for the Caribbean region, aimed at the implementation of the e-government initiatives of member governments.
- The Governments of Tonga, The Gambia, Seychelles and Belize have been assisted to develop national ICT policies and strategies, creating benchmarking studies and e-readiness assessments.

### **Ministerial meetings or other highlights**

- The African Connecting Rural Communities conference was held in Livingstone, Zambia, from 25 to 27 August 2009. It looked at ways of improving rural connectivity through tools such as Universal Service Funds (USFs) and sought to redress the digital isolation of rural communities in Africa. Nearly 200 policy-makers, IT companies, donor organisations and regulatory heads attended.
- The inaugural international conference of Commonwealth Connects following its establishment in August 2006 was held in New Delhi on 23-24 March 2007. The e-Partnership Summit offered networking opportunities for all players in the ICT industry to work together in mutually beneficial ways to enhance the use of modern technology for development in the Commonwealth. It was attended by the then Commonwealth Secretary-General, Don McKinnon, and the Chairperson of Commonwealth Connects, Dr Michael Frendo.
- Commonwealth Heads of Government, at their summit in Valletta, Malta, in November 2005, focused on the digital divide, co-operation, development and democracy. The theme of that summit was 'Networking the Commonwealth for Development'. Leaders discussed the importance of bridging the digital divide and identifying ways of using Commonwealth networks to enhance co-operation for prosperity, development and democracy.

### **Other Commonwealth players and their work**

We work in collaboration with the Commonwealth Network of Information Technology for Development; the Commonwealth Business Council; the Commonwealth of Learning; Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management Ltd; and the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation.

### **Relations with other bodies involved in the sector**

The Secretariat works with national governments, the private sector and civil society. We also work with Microsoft and UN agencies such as the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).