NOKIA – BEI discussion session
Leading Bangladesh towards an Information Society

In this age of information, Bangladesh, a nation of more than 160 million people, is still lagging behind. According to a recently published telecom report, internet penetration remains low (0.4% user penetration by end-2008) and internet subscription rates are considerably lower in the country. Although starting from a very low base, mobile telephone penetration was approaching the 30% milestone in early 2009. The country lacks an information society.

Creating an information society while propelling Bangladesh into the digital frontier is something much discussed. What many people don't realize is that the power and access to information is already in the hands of the nation, the mobile phone.

Nokia and Bangladesh Enterprise Institute organized a discussion session on (date) titled "Progressing Bangladesh towards an Information Society" to bring together stakeholders

Progressing Bangladesh towards an Information Society

from government, civil society, telecom and IT industry to inspire the discussion on how to fuel the digital revolution in Bangladesh.

Abul Kalam Azad, Honorable Minister, Ministry of Information, Professor Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, Vice Chancellor, BRAC University, Prem Chand, General Manager, Nokia Emerging Asia and Farooq Sobhan, President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute discussed how to take the internet to grassroots in Bangladesh.

The discussion panel also included Habibullah N Karim, President, Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS), Zakiul Islam, President, Association of Mobile Telecom Operators of Bangladesh, Mahfuzur Rahman, Executive Director of Bangladesh Computer Council, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Science and ICT and Munir Hasan, Former Consultant, Access to Information Program, Prime Minister's Office. We include extracts from speeches and presentations made at the session.

Farooq Sobhan, President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute

It is essential that the government commits to the goal of developing a truly inclusive and equitable national and global infrastructure. Global infrastructure must reach rural people as well as urban, poor as well as wealthy, and those in developing and developed nations. Industry leaders and the government must work together to ensure equitable growth.

We believe that affordable access will be possible only through competition and a regulatory environment that supports users and consumers. In the telecommunications sector, we have already seen the fruits of this approach have been able to attract foreign investors and promote domestic investment. Competition among these private entities should continue to improve services and lower prices for Bangladesh.

The government should and must play a role in realizing the visions for new information economies. Among these key roles, governments should ensure equitable access to new technologies; provide a framework for investment, growth, and competition; open markets to international competition; and create an educated workforce that is able to meet the job demands of a digital economy.

On October 6, 2009, the Bangladesh Central Bank gave permission to a private limited company, allowing the transfer of funds through mobile phones from one individual to another via a mobile phone or through the internet.

While the applications of such technologies has been very successful in Kenya and the Philippines, the government should make the processes for obtaining such important licenses more transparent and give everyone a level playing field instead of choosing an arbitrary private company in order to reduce transaction for the common man.

Prem Chand, General Manager, Nokia EA

Information equals opportunity. Research have shown that a 1% increase in Internet penetration generates 4.3% increases in exports and also an increase of 10 mobile phones per 100 people boosts GDP growth by 0.6%. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are fundamentally changing how companies do business and how countries compete in the new 'information economy'. This shift, and the rapid evolution of these technologies, led to concerns among economists and the international community that developing countries are being left behind in the emerging Information Society – not just in basic infrastructure, but in their abilities to compete in service industries, experience, and skilled labor. This phenomenon has been called the Digital Divide and can be measured through the Digital Opportunity Index (DOI).

The DOI is an e-index based on internationally-agreed 11 ICT indicators grouped in 3 clusters: opportunity, infrastructure and utilization. This makes it a valuable tool for benchmarking the most important indicators to measure the digital divide and compare ICT performance within and across countries. Currently Bangladesh is ranked 134th in the Digital opportunity index and has one of the lowest Internet penetration rates in Asia with very low PC penetration.

Connecting Bangladesh to the immense opportunity of World Wide Web is instrumental to progress Bangladesh towards a digital future. The power of the internet is undeniable. Worldwide we've seen mobile internet having an immediate and lasting impact on people's lives. Mobile phones and mobile internet offer powerful solutions that can be the gateway to knowledge, entertainment and people, without the need for a PC. According to extensive Nokia consumer research, nearly half of the emerging market customers state that they would rather connect to the Internet over a mobile phone than a PC. The access to Internet through mobile phones is the most feasible and affordable option. While many people are still primarily using voice and text, the Internet does offer a whole new range of opportunities. The mobile phone and the Internet are a powerful combination in connecting people with each other, accessing information, news, entertainment and sharing. By introducing products and services that are affordable, relevant and easy-to-use, we believe Nokia can fuel the growth of the Internet in emerging markets through mobility.

Nokia wholeheartedly support Bangladesh Government's vision of utilizing ICT for development. We are committed to partner with the Government for rapid growth and expansion of ICT and internet in Bangladesh. First and foremost, we are focusing on making access to internet affordable through internet enabled handsets starting as low as BDT 3800. In June 2009, we have lunched Ovi Mail, free digital or email identity in Bangla available directly from mobile. Ovi mail is easy to set up in three simple steps and available in Bangla. We have received phenomenal response from consumers with more than 176000 active Ovi Mail users in just a couple of months. From 18 October 2009, we have launched 'Ovijaan', two "cyber buses" aimed at empowering Bangladeshi youth through greater access to information technology. The state-of-the-art, environment friendly buses are equipped with solar panels and internet set-up for 5 Nokia handsets and 5 computer stations. The 'Ovijaan' buses will cover 40 major district towns reaching approximately 40,000 students in 120 schools and colleges around the country between November to January. At major district towns, seminars and local advocacy meetings are also being organized to get local leaders, celebrities and people involved in creating awareness about information technology usage and its advantages.

We are also committed to promote local content and solutions by engaging the developer community in Bangladesh. The mobile application market holds tremendous potential and is estimated to increase from $4.66 billion this year to $16.60 billion in 2013. We carried out a competition titled "Widget Pro" to connect Bangladeshi mobile application developers to local and export market and to encourage Bangla content. 30 developer teams attended a widget development workshop in Dhaka in September and the top two teams will attend an international workshop in Singapore in November. Moreover, the champion team will have the opportunity to showcase their widget in Nokia's Ovi Store, exposing them to millions of consumers world wide.

Looking ahead, we need to focus on offering affordable solutions, bringing down the total cost of ownership of Internet enabled devices and lowering data cost. Consumer education and awareness is going to be crucial. Availability of Bangla content and stricter enforcement of Intellectual property rights are needed to create the right environment. We also need a consorted effort from public, private and non government sector and multi-stakeholder partnership to materialize the vision of digitizing Bangladesh and moving the country ahead with Internet.

Jamillur Reza Chowdhury, Vice Chancellor, BRAC University

There is a lot of confusion about information society, so I'll start with the definition. There are many definitions of information society but I will mention the definition used in Wikipedia: Information Society means a society in which the creation, distribution, diffusion, use, integration and manipulation of information is a significant economic, political and cultural activity. Related to this is the knowledge economy, another term which is also very commonly used. The economic counterpart of information society is knowledge economy, in which wealth is created through the economic exploitation of understanding.

We all know that in the last nine months that this government has been in power, Digital Bangladesh has become a buzz-word, even by all the policy makers. Now is the time to define in objective terms what we are trying to achieve in Digital Bangladesh. The vision which was stated in the ICT policy states that, by 2021, we want to liberate the use of ICTs to enable every Bangladeshi to become a full participant of the economic, civic and educational life of the country.

It was in 1964 when we had the first second generation computer installed about 1 km to the south of this hotel. That was the first second generation computer in the whole region, South Asia and South-east Asia at that time, IBM 1620. And in the subsequent years, quite a lot of progress was made but unfortunately after the War of Independence, there was some slowdown due to financial crisis. When it comes to internet use, we started relatively later than other countries, June 1996, the first time Bangladesh was directly connected to the internet. And by 2009 we have 77 nationwide ISPs which, though there is some dispute with the numbers, roughly have 5 million subscribers. Recently there has been a growth of use of email, access to internet using mobile devices.

A major barrier holding back the expansion of internet is lack of localized content. If you look at the top ten languages in the internet - as expected English is leading but the gap to Chinese is gradually narrowing down. Chinese has emerged as the second most used language in the internet, followed by Spanish, Japanese and French. There is no data for Bangladesh but it could be less than .001 percent. There are very few websites which use Bangla. ICT infrastructure to cover the whole country needs to be developed very rapidly (telecentres, wireless + using hand-held devices). Open source software and Bangla contents need to be encouraged. Experience of local IT professionals will help in promoting export of software and IT-enabled services. The action items in the ICT Policy, 2009, need to be prioritized immediately and steps for rapid implementation taken. In conclusion it can be said that a coordinated effort with adequate financing is a prerequisite for achieving the vision of Digital Bangladesh by 2021

Abul Kalam Azad, Honorable Minister, Ministry of Information, Government of Bangladesh

I would like to thank Nokia for coming forward to support the Bangladesh Government's vision of utilizing ICT for development through their various activities. Over the last one decade, we have seen a spectacular growth of telecom industry in Bangladesh. Particularly in the mobile telecommunication, the growth is magnificent. Present government has taken a strong initiative to expand the horizon of this sector further.

Bangladesh has already emerged as an important telecommunication market and is now emerging as an ICT market with a great potential that can significantly reduce the poverty level in Bangladesh. The growth of the ICT market is very fascinating. A study has projected that the country will have a 38.93 mobile subscriber along with 1.18 million total PSTN subscribers by the end of the year. It is indeed one of the largest private sectors in Bangladesh with (approx) BDT 24,000 crore investments. This is a very impressive scenario. Telecommunication and ICT sector is, therefore, a catalyst for accelerated development. In many of our neighboring countries, highly developed ICT and mobile communication services has played a crucial role in the creation of wealth and rise in quality of life. As a result, facilitation of growth of these sectors are now considered as a priority sector for the government.

Indeed there are several issues which are required to be addressed for facilitating sustained competition in the industry to ensure tangible market benefits. It can be argued here that presently, our greatest challenge is not only the lack of ICT and Telecommunication infrastructure that could significantly reduce cost of doing business, rather, effective implementation of various policies, lack of strategies to ensure access of the mass people, high price of connectivity, lack of highly skilled and professionally trained professionals both in the public and private sectors, and efficient action-plans to enhance utilization of the technologies.

The current government has already prioritized several issues that should be addressed within short time to strengthen the growth of the mobile market. The government is actively reviewing the National ICT Policy and provides necessary incentives to establish ICT infrastructure targeting the rural Bangladesh in this endeavor, actors like the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute and stakeholders like Nokia can play important role.

Without a strong telecommunication market and infrastructure, it is difficult to see how Bangladeshi people can acquire sufficient information to make meaningful political choices or hold government representatives accountable for their decisions. I agree that there is a need for coordinated efforts by the private sector and the government to further increase tele-density and internet access in Bangladesh. The government will continue to push the growth of information industry. Let me conclude that this seminar has provided a framework to enable stakeholders to deliver the frontline measures, which would ensure an effective growth of the telecommunication and ICT sector.

Habibullah Karim, President of BASIS

Bangladesh is already on the map when it comes to software export. The fiscal year concluding on June 2009 we have done 33 million dollars in export. I think a lot of people who see us today; they believe that Bangladesh is fully at the take-off point when it comes to IT enabled service industry. The World Bank last year did a study on the software and IT enabled services of Bangladesh and they concluded that the export performance of around 30 million dollars a year can reach 500 million dollars, that's right, half a billion dollars by 2014, that's only 4 to 5 years away.

Four months ago, the global head of IT of Standard Chartered Bank came to Bangladesh and met with me and my colleagues in BASIS. One of the things he said is, you know really lit up my eye, and he said 15 years ago, when he went to Bangalore for the first time to do software outsourcing for Standard Chartered in India. The kind of enthusiasm, the kind of vibrancy that he saw in the Indian software industry, he said that he saw the same thing in Bangladesh when he came here four months ago. And he said that he is very seriously looking into opening up an offshore development center in Bangladesh. And end of this month, the global head of GE is coming to Bangladesh. These things are happening because we have been working on it.

We need to absorb people in, going into action. These are changes that are already happening in this country. These are changes that are not just from outside, that have been imposed on us, these are changes that can be homegrown, not just adaptation of overseas technology and knowhow. All we need to do is spread this out so that 150 million people can benefit from this. And that is where it's nice to see that Nokia is getting involved in this.

Mahfuzur Rahman, Executive Director of Bangladesh Computer Council and Additional Secretary, Ministry of Science and ICT

The ICT policy needs to be prioritized immediately for rapid implementation. The ministry of science and ICT released the ICT booklet and made a request to all the secretaries of different divisions and ministries to prioritize their activities for the ICT policy of 2009 with 306 action plans. Now our request is that, it is not only upto the ministry of science and ICT to implement all the activities. It requires cooperation from all the stakeholders and all the common people as well. So on behalf of the ministry I would like to request you all to come forward and work together for a successful implementation of the ICT policy for the betterment of the common people.

For availability of Bangla content ministry of science and ICT has also taken some initiatives and we hope within 2 or 3 months we will make progress about this.

Zakiul Islam, President, Association of Mobile Telecom Operators of Babngladesh

There are certain barriers which we need to address to progress Bangladesh towards an information society. For example, ensuring access to information in rural areas. How do we do it? When we talk about internet connection in the rural areas, we have certain issues like infrastructure, broadband access, then the power issues and also low literacy level.

The way people have learned to use mobile phones for internet access is definitely appreciable. The increase in teledensity specially spread of mobile phone and mobile internet will eventually help this government to materialize their vision for digital Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Bank has recently approved m-commerce which will initiate m-banking, m-wallet, m-agriculture and a host of other services. We expect from the policy makers, the civil society, the government that they should facilitate and give us certain assurance about continuity of government policy. There should be stable regulatory regime which would help this industry as a whole for the betterment of the people. We have seen from a recent Bangladesh Bank report that 59% of foreign direct investment is contributed by the telecom sector. We definitely expect that the government to encourage more FDI to boost the mobile telecom industry which eventually will help internet penetration In Bangladesh.

Munir Hasan, Former IT Consultant, Prime Minister's Office

Bangla content is extremely important for the usage of internet to pick up in Bangladesh. We have to actively support the open content movement so that people can use their knowledge to build localized content customized to the wants and needs of Bangladeshis. You see we have 6 million internet users but only 700 thousand email users. That is because people don't know how to write email in Bangla. So this is the gap we have to eliminate. This can be done by sharing the knowledge and by building an open society with open source and open content. We have to embrace the usage of open source software, which will motivate our students and our programmers to join the social movement of generating local content and progressing Bangladesh towards an information society.

Speakers and analysts agreed that the information technology potential of Bangladesh was mostly untapped. Great strides can be made in all sectors in Bangladesh if internet and information can be more evenly distributed to the masses through the help of mobile devices rather than computers.