The Role of Education in Democracy and Development

Remarks of Commissioner Kathleen Q. Abernathy
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Thank you very much, Dr. Jouhaina Al Issa. It is an honor to be invited to participate in the Fifth Doha Forum, and it is a particular privilege to be a participant on this panel with so many esteemed colleagues. Thanks to the vision of His Highness the Emir, we are here to discuss "critical issues to move the democratic process forward and ensure more equitable globalization and a better future." What better place to start than with an analysis of the role education will play.

As someone who has traveled extensively to meet with regulators from around the globe, I am particularly attuned to the importance of education in building democratic societies and promoting economic development. Because my expertise lies in the world of communications and media, I have focused on the power of internet and broadband communications networks as a tool to educate and empower all citizens. Wireless and broadband technologies improve education systems, the delivery of health care, and economic opportunities.

The technology of the internet is one critical part of the equation. As you are aware, the use of the Internet and other packet-switched communications networks has undergone explosive growth. Of the nearly 700 million Internet users recorded globally last year, 332 million were added in just the three years since the beginning of this decade, and two-thirds were in developing economies.

Broadband unquestionably represents the future of communications. Consumers are increasingly relying on broadband services to communicate, as well as for education, health care, job opportunities, and entertainment, and the applications will only keep multiplying. In the United States, President Bush has embraced this vision of the future with his call for universal and affordable broadband access in the U.S. by 2007.

Not surprisingly, broadband penetration is greatest in urban areas and among wealthier consumers, but the digital divide is closing pretty quickly. And broadband technologies have their greatest impact in rural and other remote places. My travels to isolated communities around the world have driven home the point that broadband has the power to make geographic isolation irrelevant. It brings a world of information to rural communities via the Internet, so school children have access to the same resources in the tiny village of Selawick, Alaska as in New York City. I am fortunate that my daughter lives in Washington, D.C., where there are libraries, museums, and other great resources. But as long as a community has a broadband Internet connection, even if it lacks funding for new books or is located in a remote place, it can use on-line tools to expose children to a vast quantity of material on any imaginable subject.

Broadband networks also give rural families access to improved heath care opportunities. Health clinics in tiny villages can send video images to larger population centers so that patients have access to medical specialists without having to travel long distances at great expense.

We are seeing broadband rollouts being pioneered all over the world. Governments from Bhutan to Brazil have in recent years experimented with broadband network solutions — many of them wireless — to overcome distance and isolation by linking villages and rural areas to national networks. There is increasing evidence that broadband applications, such as agricultural extension, tele-medicine and distance-education, may be instrumental in appealing to rural constituencies and providing a customer base for sustainable business operations.

I am especially encouraged by the advent of new, low-cost broadband technologies. Each day it appears that there are more and more options for linking communities and individuals to each other and to the wider global community. These technologies — and many others that are sure to follow — will revolutionize our societies and help to close the "broadband divide" that exists within and among our countries. But their effects will be threatened or stunted if regulators fail to update licensing and regulatory frameworks or if we impose artificial barriers and disincentives to investment.

So how do we get from here to there? I would like to share with you some ideas that were developed this past December, at the Global Symposium of Regulators in Geneva. For those of you who don't know, the Global Symposium of Regulators is an annual meeting convened by the ITU's Development Sector to discuss issues of concern. This year's conference, which I had the honor to Chair, included representatives from over 100 countries and focused on challenges in the era of convergence of communications services. As an output of the conference, we all worked on and agreed to Best Practice Guidelines for Achieving Low Cost Access to Broadband and Internet Connectivity. I thought it might be helpful to walk through some of the highlights of this document with you.

For example, we recommended that the promotion of access to low-cost broadband interconnectivity encompass a broad cross-section of interested parties — from identifying local, "grass-roots" needs in our communities to cultivating support at the highest levels of government. In this recommendation, we made clear that the broadband revolution is not an isolated project of each country's communications ministry or regulatory agency. It must be an integrated process, beginning with the authentic identification of community needs and ending with a full mobilization of government and non-governmental organizations.

We also recognized that, in the end, the objective of regulation — and of promoting the potential of broadband — is to improve the lives of our citizens. For that reason, we urged regulators to educate and inform consumers about the new services that will be available to them through broadband networks and digital services. We must empower our citizens with the skills they need to make full use of these new multimedia and computing applications. This will build communities of users and stimulate the kind of demand that will sustain broadband and IP-enabled services in all kinds of localities.

The challenges to providing access to high-quality, low-cost telecommunications services to all citizens are formidable, but the rewards are even greater. Technology has created new, low-cost opportunities for educating our children, providing health care to our citizens, and creating new jobs. We must seize this opportunity and deliver on the promise. The United States is committed to working with Qatar and other nations to help create enabling environments for the rapid growth of information and communication technologies. Thank you.