After Mongolia’s peaceful transition from a centrally planned to a market oriented economy in the early 1990’s, ICT was the second development to bring Mongolia out of its isolation. Information and computing technology is on the rise in Mongolia because it is the fast track to the outside world, socially as well as economically (206 out of 10,000 went online in 2002 against 126 in 2000). Through ICT, more precisely through access to the internet, the availability of the Mongolian font and mobile telecommunications, a host of new opportunities for social and economic development has been created.

Rural Mongolia online?

Dalanzadgad is a small provincial capital of five thousand people in the vast, empty Gobi. The town provides services to nomadic herders, and enjoys some seasonal tourism. A survey in Dalanzadgad revealed that its residents use the internet to communicate and to access information on local news, health, markets, and the weather. The ability to write and send emails in one’s own language to relatives and friends in Ulaanbaatar has had an incredible impact on Mongolia’s rural communities. To be able to consult a doctor in the capital via email saves time and money. To be able to access information on market prices of cashmere gives rural herders a better negotiating position vis-a-vis middlemen. Rural schools accessing the internet through Very Small Aperture Terminals (VSAT) can tap into new resources to enhance learning. Today the ICT industry is a potential engine for growth in an isolated economy. The local market, however, is small and more or less saturated. Many entrepreneurs therefore seek export opportunities and a few companies have managed to find partners in Japan and Korea. Wanting in English and business experience but possessing great technical skill, creativity and versatility, Mongolian ICT companies are seeking every possible opportunity to increase their market share and profits.

ICT and governance

The government recognizes the opportunity ICT represents, and sees itself as the patron of its development. The government’s capacity to promote ICT in the country is, however, limited. This is mainly due to the lack of human and financial resources, and, perhaps, the remnants of Mongolia’s political history. With a tendency to centralize rather than decentralize, to regulate rather than facilitate, and with a mild distrust of the private sector, the government is reluctant to accept policy advice from stakeholders, particularly those in the private sector. The government, however, recognizes the value of ICT for Mongolia to overcome its isolation; with economic growth in mind, it has not hampered access to ICT or the internet.

In the year 2000, the Mongolian parliament ratified Vision 2010, a policy statement developed together with the private sector, civil society, academia, and the donor community. To implement Vision 2010, a national ICT committee was established, chaired by the prime minister and including representatives from national and international NGOs, academia, and the private sector. In January 2002 the government and the World Bank jointly organized an international donor meeting to mobilize resources for ICT. Recognizing its economic potential, the government established a ‘National ICT Park’, a technologically intelligent building providing housing and services to small IT companies. As Mongolia’s economy is small, even a modest (export) sector will have considerable economic and social impact. Last but not least, the government hopes that a viable IT sector will provide jobs for young graduates.

In spite of Vision 2010, progress is slow. This is in part due to the changing of the guard in 2000. Vision 2010 was developed by the previous government, and many of its civil servants departed with their expertise. Furthermore, stakeholders played a large part in drafting the document, but have been less involved in its implementation. So far Vision 2010 has led to the creation of a policy framework for the IT industry, and changes in education to include ICT awareness training and professional IT courses. National priorities, however, are set within financial and human resource constraints; much of what the government can do is determined by the donor community, which does not see ICT as a priority. Last but not least, the government has a tendency to focus on the T in ICT and gives priority to infrastructure. There is a belief that once the infrastructure is there, the rest will follow. As a result, ICT tends to get lost among the issues that clamour for attention. Nonetheless, ICT and the internet have broadened the horizons of Mongolian society.

Notes

1. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.

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Author’s note

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Mongolia: Who Bridges the Digital Divide?

To appreciate the impact of information and computing technology (ICT) on Mongolia one must understand the extent of the country’s remoteness. Landing at Buunt Uhaa airport near Ulaanbaatar, one will have flown hundreds of miles over an empty mountainous landscape and seemingly endless space. The lifelines to the outside world are the mobile phone and the internet connection, other modes of transport being either slow or expensive.

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