Keynote Address 1

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Telecommunications: The Great Leveler?

Telecommunications have brought about changes in the world we live in, in ways that were not imagined at the time the first telegraph message was sent, or the telephone was invented. The changes brought about are not only in the way we communicate and share information with each other, but are also in the way we live our lives, earn our livelihoods and spend our free time.

The telecom sector, particularly in the developing countries of Asia, has played a pivotal role on two counts: *growth and inclusion*. Today, according to statistics, everybody in Asia has a cell-phone. They do not just use it to chat with their friends. The productivity of individuals and enterprises has increased several-fold because of telecommunications. Reaching the *bottom of the pyramid*, telecommunications have had remarkable impact on rural life in developing countries in education, health and income generation. In more affluent and urban segments of society, financial transactions, entertainment etc. have reached new dimensions supported by fast, secure and ubiquitous telecommunications services. Telecommunications have also made innumerous contributions towards improving our quality of life in aspects such as access to public services and safety.

Telecommunications has thus become the great socio-economic leveler of modern times. The divide between rich-poor, male-female, and young-old have been blurred by the growth of technology, the increasing reach and the reducing costs of telecommunications. The world is moving towards a true global village and a knowledge society. The story of telecommunications however will not stop with the 7 billion humans on earth. Today over 50 billion machines are awaiting the next chapter – *machine to machine* (M2M) communications.

Despite the definition of Telecommunications as a great leveler, it is important for us to be aware of another phenomenon – *the digital divide.* What is it? How has it been created? What size is it? How can we overcome it?