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Closing the digital divide

Bottom: (From left) Packet One Networks Business Development & Special Projects associate director Elain Lockman, Economic Planning Unit K-Economy Section adviser Sumali Amat, Mazlan, Packet One Networks CEO Michael Lai, Nordhausen and Norizan at the P1Expert Net forum yesterday.

by **Eva Yeong**
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PETALING JAYA: In order to achieve the country's target of 50% broadband penetration by next year, several digital divide gaps need to be closed namely access gap, value gap, content and sustainability of broadband penetration efforts.

While mobile penetration in Malaysia stands at an impressive 100.1% which means many citizens own more than one mobile phone, penetration broadband in households is only 22.9%.

"To reach our target of 50% by next year, we need to improve service delivery, provide easy-to-use devices and relevant content," said Mimos

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Berhad head of wireless communications cluster Dr Mazlan Abbas.

Mazlan was speaking at P1Expert Net, a forum organised by Packet One Networks (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd for academicians, private and public sectors to share knowledge and exchange ideas on how to fast-track the growth of connected communities throughout Malaysia.

According to him, there has been a lot of focus on access and adoption gaps, with many initiatives to provide connectivity to rural areas and to teach them how to use computers and the internet. However, there is poor value realisation, he said.

Apart from providing rural and marginalised areas with access to the internet, it is also important to socially and economically empower rural and marginalised communities.

"We need to create good programmes to teach them that ICT can empower them. It is not enough to just provide computers and the internet. Let them see the value of ICT," said Centre of Excellence Bridging Digital Divide head of E-Community Research Centre Assoc Prof Datin Dr Norizan Abdul Razak.

To date, there are 2,130 telecentres in Malaysia with another 230 in the making, said Norizan.

"The aim of these telecentres is to upgrade the ICT literacy level of communities and to provide access to the internet," she said.

However, there is a lack of content especially content in local dialects, and telecentre operators are not committed as most of them work on contract basis with no attractive salary schemes and good training. There is also a need to encourage rural communities to participate, she said.

To get rural communities involved, Mazlan said telecentre operators could look at the possibility of revenue sharing which would also create sustainability and encourage commitment among operators.

"For example, operators could create a portal for people who make good handicraft to do transactions online," he said. This would create an income stream for the telecentres as well as the community.

Intel World Ahead Program senior solutions architect Dr Bernd Nordhausen said affordability of computers is not an issue, with many rural communities having televisions, some of which are flat-screen televisions.

"PCs now are very, very affordable even for rural areas with the availability of computer loan schemes," said Nordhausen. What needs to be addressed, he said, is the lack of awareness among rural communities about the power of the internet.

"We should expand the notion of telecentres. Besides being a physical hub of connectivity, there should also be connectivity around it," he said.

An example would be to provide Wi-Fi at the telecentres in order to engage more residents in ICT activities.