3 People Driven Innovation – How to create the Demand for ICT Solutions in Underserved Areas

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Thank you for the nice introduction and I am really happy and honoured to be standing right in front of you. I come from a place, and I live among the people, and I hope to be there in the future, among the population and the challenges that all of you are here to talk about.

The question I want to pose to you is: Do you see an issue as a challenge or you can turn that around and build an opportunity out of it? Let us talk about some of the issues and then you can ask yourselves if you see them as a challenge or if you can see them as an opportunity. I will give you some examples from Bangladesh. But mind you that these are very common across most of the developing countries.

Education
In Bangladesh, for example, between 6th grades to the 10th grade student dropout rate is about 83%. There are many reasons for it. Lack of schools, the schools being expensive, parents depending on their young kids to provide support for the families and many other reasons. If you think about the female population disappearing from the education system that is also very alarming. In Bangladesh every single year there are about 100,000 female students that drop out of the education system. If you can imagine that there are about ten years worth of education, the investment, time and the effort that goes into it. You just multiply that by 100,000 that is how much investment into the education that countries like Bangladesh loose out from the disappearing female population from the education system.

Healthcare
In the healthcare, the numbers are also very common when you look across various developing countries. Infant mortality rate is about 5.4% in Bangladesh. The number of physicians for 100,000 population is 26. You can see these again as challenges. But at the same time creating more hospitals or having more doctors, are those your immediate solutions? I think you will agree that it is not. Could there be opportunities for you to leverage technology, ICT innovation to address some of this. I will show you later what we are doing in creating opportunities.
Agriculture
I think we had a very interesting presentation from the previous speaker. In Bangladesh 60% of our population depend on the agriculture. Again, this is very common among developing countries. I think one of the interesting numbers that we saw is that in Bangladesh for every single dollar the consumer pays for a produce only 15% cents goes to the producer and 85% is consumed by the middleman and the inefficient systems. Could there be a system that was exampled in the previous speech where producers portion go up and the consumer’s cost goes down. And, if we can do that, the people and the market will be better off. I think there are plenty of technology ideas that we can imagine.

Governance
Again, this is one of the subjects that are brought to light today. Government is so detouched from population that people – in Bangladesh if you walk around and if you ask somebody what is your proof that you are a Bangladeshi citizen? Most of them do not have any Govt. ID. If you don’t have a way of communicating to your people how are you going to distribute the benefits or distribute the urgent messages? This is a tremendous challenge. I think we have seen some examples and will be getting to even more examples how we can bring government closer to the people.

Now the questions are: Do you think there is lack of innovation? Do you think there is a lack of innovative companies or lack of innovative people? Or the poor people in developing countries who dominate the global population in the world are not innovative? My answer is: No.

Let us talk about innovations. Let’s think about companies like Boeing or a drug company like Eli Lilly. They are fantastic innovative companies. But think about how long it takes for a brand new Boeing to come to a country like Bangladesh. The average is about 25 years. We can argue that these are expensive planes. Countries like Bangladesh cannot afford a brand new plane. But fact remains that a new innovation from Boeing takes 25 years to come to the developing world. Similarly think about drug companies like Eli Lilly or Merk. In an average it takes about ten years for their new product to come to the developing world. Again you can argue that there are regulations and that there is a generic drug issue and all those things. But fact is that it takes ten years. A new innovation does not get to the developing world the very next day it reaches a developed country.

Those companies, the Boeing, the Eli Lilly, and other fantastic large innovative companies – if you look at their innovation process or the development process you will see a good check list. Like the product has to be at the highest quality. It has to serve in this or that geographic region. But one particular line item you may never see in an innovation process or a development process in most of the technology companies. It is the line item that says that this particular product or innovation has to be applicable and affordable in the developing countries from the day 1. So, my