Seventh Annual Forum on Asian Perspectives
“Technology and Poverty Reduction in Asia and the Pacific”
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SUMMARY

Contact: David O’Connor, Principal Administrator, DEV/RECH,
tel: (33-1) 45 24 82 87; fax: (33-1) 45 24 79 43; e-mail: David.OConnor@oecd.org
1. The topic of the 2001 joint ADB/OECD Development Centre Forum, “Technology and Poverty Reduction in Asia and the Pacific”, coincided with international DOT Force deliberations on how to bridge the “digital divide” in preparation for the Genoa G8 Summit, as well as the controversy surrounding intellectual property rights enforcement sparked by international pharmaceutical firms’ threats of legal action against the South African government for failure to protect their patents on HIV drugs.

2. The first day’s Experts’ Meeting brought together a diverse group of academics, policy analysts and practitioners with the objective of assessing technology’s role in poverty reduction. Among the participants were Michael Lipton of Sussex University (UK), Peter Ballantyne of the International Institute for Communication and Development (Netherlands), and Stéphane Ducable of Alcatel (France). The meeting was divided into four sub-sessions: (i) a conceptual framework for mapping the connections between technology and poverty; (ii) the potential benefits of agricultural biotechnology and the impact of the intellectual property regime on technology diffusion from richer to poorer countries; (iii) information and communication technologies’ (ICT) role in productivity growth and poverty reduction in Asia; and (iv) technology financing questions.

3. The second day assembled a panel of high-level decision makers at a Public Conference, hosted by the French Ministry of Finance, which was attended by some 150 participants from the public and private sectors. Panellists included Suwit Khunkitti (Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand), Desmond O’Malley (Personal Representative of the Deputy Prime Minister of Ireland, Mary Harney), Yoginder Alagh (former Technology and Industry Minister of India), José Braz (former Treasury Secretary of Portugal), François Huwart (French State Secretary for International Trade), and John Kay (invited columnist for the Financial Times of London). Debate focused on policies for domestic technology development and diffusion and the implications for developing countries of current international rules protecting “trade-related intellectual property”.

4. The key conclusion resulting from the Forum was that technological advances have historically been —and have the potential to continue to be — a strong contributor to poverty reduction in both the developed and the developing world. However, realising this potential depends on ensuring that innovation does not neglect the food security, health and livelihood needs of the poor and that potentially beneficial technologies are made affordable to them.

5. Poor people confront, and can benefit from, a whole range of technologies, from the simple to the advanced, in their daily lives. Yet, of the many that may be valuable, only a few are likely to be important in the sense of having major quantifiable effects on productivity and poverty. The Green Revolution technologies (GRTs) pass the “importance” test. Still, as important as the Green Revolution was to food security and improved basic nutrition in some large, poor countries, not all poor people have shared in the benefits. In addition, yield improvements have been increasingly difficult to sustain.

6. Agricultural biotechnology has the potential to provide benefits to some of those left aside by GRTs, viz., farmers in marginal environments where water and heat stress are high and soil quality is low. It may also prove an effective means of reducing micronutrient deficiency among the poor, if crop varieties with the desired properties are developed.

7. The productivity effects of ICTs are just beginning to show up in the statistics of a few OECD countries, so it will be some time before they become measurable in poor countries. Moreover, the link between technology and poverty is inherently more difficult to measure for ICTs than for GRTs, where individual farmers’ decisions whether or not to plant hybrid seeds are a simple measure of technology adoption. In the case of ICTs, many of the adopters will be large organisations (government agencies, firms) rather than individuals, and any effects on poverty are likely to be far more diffuse and indirect.

8. One expert urged governments not to be seduced too easily by the allure of unproven ICTs at the risk of starving agricultural research programmes of funds. It may take time before research into ICT’s potential for the poor can help shape policy and resource allocation in developing countries.