



PH must address digital infra gaps to cope with the pandemic, other risks

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QUEZON CITY, Oct. 2 -- The Philippine government has to build its digital infrastructure to cope with the pandemic and other similar threats in the future.

National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Assistant Secretary Carlos Bernardo Abad Santos made this point during the kickoff forum of the Development Policy Research Month celebration (DPRM) organized by state think tank Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS).

Santos, a panelist in the forum, said the country has to address various challenges in its digital infrastructure to “facilitate innovation across information technologies and smart systems”.

One of the major constraints he mentioned is the country's slow broadband speed, which he pointed out as “one of the lowest” in the ASEAN region. “In 2019, we ranked 97th out of 200 countries and we are below Indonesia, Viet Nam, Thailand, and Malaysia,” he said.

He also noted that the Philippines is “one of most expensive in terms of broadband pricing compared to [its] peers in the region” and that it “ranked 80th out of 206 countries and below Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Viet Nam” in 2019.

Based on last year’s National ICT Household Survey, Santos said that “more than 60 percent of barangays interviewed do not have telecommunication towers in their areas, 70.2 percent do not have fiber optic cables installed in their communities, and 87.8 percent do not have free Wi-Fi.”

The NEDA official presented some ways forward to address these gaps.

One is to make the internet affordable and available for all Filipinos. To achieve this, he stressed the need to “streamline permits for infrastructure provision and rationalize fees imposed by national and local government agencies as well as private sector associations.”

Another is to “digitalize government processes to promote social distancing and administrative efficiency”. He said it is necessary for “government agencies to go digital by offering e-permits and e-payments”.

He also emphasized the importance of making “e-commerce transactions safer and trustworthy to establish strong consumer protection”.

“While we are doing a lot of things about these systems, it is important that there is reach and scope. Constraints in infrastructure would make the impact of innovations suboptimal,” he explained.

Meanwhile, Department of Budget and Management Assistant Secretary Rolando Toledo, a panelist in the same forum, said the government has allotted PHP 21.4 billion in its 2021 budget to improve ICT infrastructures in the country.

He said this plan would be carried out under the Medium-Term Information and Communications Technology Harmonization Initiative or MITHI to enhance the country's Wi-Fi, broadband infrastructure, and develop an e-platform and online system to support the e-governance initiatives of the different agencies of government.

Toledo also discussed DBM's Project DIME (Digital Imaging for Monitoring and Evaluation), which "uses existing technologies such as satellites, drones, and geotagging to monitor the status, program, and activities of big-ticket government projects".

He also talked about the agency's Budget and Treasury Management System (BTMS), a centralized database that records real-time information on financial transactions across government agencies.

"The DBM fully supports the role of technology-driven initiatives in addressing current challenges and future risks. We hope that through Project DIME and BTMS, we can promote an effective, transparent, and open governance," he said.

Led by PIDS, the DPRM is celebrated every September to promote nationwide awareness of policy research's importance in crafting evidence-based policies, plans, and programs, pursuant to Malacañang Proclamation 247 signed in 2002. This year's DPRM theme is "Bouncing Back Together: Innovating Governance for the New Normal". (PIDS)