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## CONFERENCE REPORTS

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Editor

# **Digital Television in Developing Countries? Reflections from the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association's Asia-Pacific Conference in Tonga**

There can be few more exotic locations to gather for a broadcasting conference than the South Pacific Island Kingdom of Tonga, where the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association (CBA) held its Asia-Pacific regional conference in February 2009. Tonga lies north-east of New Zealand and east of Fiji, close to the International Date Line. It has a population of just over 100,000 but encompasses 171 separate islands (to which another one was recently added

by a volcanic eruption from the sea). Most of the people live on the main island, Tongatapu, and it was in the capital city here that the CBA organized its conference.

The conference delegates were drawn from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, India, Sri Lanka, Brunei, and Taiwan, as well as the Pacific Island nations of Fiji, Papua-New Guinea, the Cook Islands, the Solomon Islands, Samoa, Vanuatu and Kiribati. Digital television was a sub-set of the main agenda, with the focus on regulatory and technical planning. Australian and New Zealand broadcasters and regulators, in particular, had plenty of experience of the challenges of launching digital television within a strategy designed to lead to analogue switch off. However, the conference session aimed primarily to provide a forum in which to consider the relevance of digital television to less developed and – certainly in the case of the Pacific Islands – often very small countries.

A starting assumption, voiced by one of the Tongan representatives, was that this was a development which could wait for a decade or two, after all the large economically-advanced nations had completed their digital transitions, streamlined the process and brought the costs down. However, a Fijian government representative was a platform speaker, explaining how his country was already planning to embark on the transition, and South Africa has already started.



*Opening ceremony for the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association's Asia-Pacific conference in Tonga.*

The arguments for waiting are, in a sense, obvious, especially in countries where television ownership is limited, where consumer spending power is low, and where governments and public agencies have much more urgent development priorities. However, some other points are worth considering:

- Once the main advanced economies of the world have switched fully to digital television, analogue broadcasting equipment, from cameras to transmitters, will slowly become obsolescent (although, of course, this can also bring a temporary increase in second-hand discarded gear).
- In other spheres, from airplanes to audio equipment, modern technology often penetrates developing countries quite swiftly and sits, somewhat incongruously, within a relatively under-developed agricultural economy.
- There can be advantages in technological 'leapfrogging', as exemplified by the spread of the mobile phone in countries with limited landline networks: if you were going to start a new television system from scratch now, you would certainly think about an all-digital design.
- The substitution of digital terrestrial television for analogue, with a transition period of simulcasting, can take many years (just look at the UK, where planning started in the mid-1990s and analogue switch off will be complete at the end of 2012). Low consumer spending power and limited public funding can prolong the transition period. Therefore, even if a developing country sees analogue switch off as at least a decade away, there may still be a case for starting work in areas like spectrum planning.
- For small countries which belong to a wider economic group, there may be advantage to be gained, through economies of scale, in collaborating with like-minded neighbours, e.g. in the choice of technical standards and the specification of equipment.

Indeed, on this last point, Rick Ellis, Chief Executive of TVNZ, having described New Zealand's own plans for digital switchover, stated:

Whilst the transition to digital in the Pacific Islands is likely to be some years out, I believe it would be strategically beneficial for the Pacific Forum of Leaders to consider establishing a working group to agree a common pan-Pacific approach to digital transition and standards, so that the Pacific can reap the benefits of standardization and economies of scale.

Some sort of harmonization with Australia and New Zealand would also make sense, so that technical support, equipment supply etc. can continue to be provided in the same way that TVNZ has supported the analogue services in the Pacific over the past several years.



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