Strengthening IT capabilities of NPOs

With the increasing pace of globalization, all markets are becoming extremely competitive and this is expected to intensify further. At the same time, the advent of information technology (IT) is dramatically transforming work and business practices. IT has already emerged as an indispensable tool for organizations wishing to become and remain competitive. Globalization and IT are two present-day phenomena that everyone, from individuals to organizations, will have to come to terms with. In the promotion and development of a national IT program, it is generally felt that NPOs can play a pivotal role because they have extensive experience in human resources development and a vast network of productivity partners in government, industry, and other sectors. For this to be possible, the NPOs must first strengthen their own IT capabilities. Many have already made remarkable progress in this direction; however, for many others there is a lot of room for improvement.

This issue was foremost in mind when 18 participants from the NPOs of 14 APO member countries met in Kathmandu, Nepal, 29 November to 2 December, to review: 1) IT applications by NPOs in their day-to-day operations; 2) the in-house IT capabilities of NPOs; 3) current program to serve as IT advisers/consultants to government agencies and the private sector, especially SMEs; and 4) future roles and development needs.

The workshop participants were aware that the NPOs are at different stages of development and that a digital divide exists among them. Despite this, most share certain common concerns, with financial constraints that undermine in-house IT capability development and IT applications being the major one. The opportunity to learn from each other how various NPOs are utilizing IT as a productivity and promotional tool was greatly appreciated by the participants.

One of the interesting features of the workshop was a live e-learning session connecting Tokyo and Kathmandu. In the mid-1990s, the World Bank established a satellite-based distance-learning network called the Global Development Learning Network (GDLN). The GDLN already has partners in more than 80 countries world-

Eiko Wataya (L), program coordinator, TDLC, addressing the participants in Kathmandu (on screen) while Kohga looks on

wide. In 2004, the World Bank set up a partner organization in Tokyo called the Tokyo Development Learning Center (TDLC) with financial assistance from the Government of Japan. There is as yet no GDLN partner in Kathmandu, although the World Bank office in Kathmandu allowed the use of its facilities for the APO e-learning element of the workshop. Kenji Kohga, a well-known IT consultant, made a presentation from Tokyo and participants listened to and interacted with him while sitting in Kathmandu using the GDLN distance-learning/videoconferencing capabilities. Participants indicated their appreciation of this blending of an e-learning session into a face-to-face workshop and recognized that this new opportunity to use the TDLC/GDLN facilities made the sharing of knowledge and information more cost-effective.

At the end of the workshop, participants made a number of recommendations for NPOs and the APO to follow up on. One measure that participants agreed to initiate was to conduct a quick online survey on the e-readiness of all NPOs. Participants felt that this step would lead to a concrete framework for IT collaboration and establishment of a network to benchmark and share best practices among NPOs.