

'Universal design' concept would help access for disabled, seminar told

THE SUNDAY NATION

PARTICIPANTS AT a recent seminar proposed the concept of "universal design" in a move to narrow the disparities suffered by the disabled, the elderly and the underprivileged.

Torpong Selanon, president of the Thai Association for the Blind, said this concept should reduce obstacles and create new opportunities for the disabled, the aged and the underprivileged, so everybody could be equal. He said the five basic obstacles that need to be addressed are:

- 1 Spatial problems;
- 2 The definition of disability, which should go beyond just physical disabilities to include the inability to interact with one's surroundings;
- 3 Economic factors;
- 4 Lack of basic knowledge; and
- 5 Stereotyping and social discrimination.

Explaining how the design of general facilities affects people with disabilities, Torpong said this disparity also stems from the use of economic factors as the main indicator - hence services that cater to the majority are given more attention.

Since Thailand is fast becoming an ageing society, the authorities should start considering all groups in society, he said.

"Why don't Skytrain stations have an escalator that is safe for those with disabilities?" he asked.

National Electronics and Computer Technology Centre director Pansak Siriruchatapong, meanwhile, said everybody, especially the

disabled, should develop technology skills to widen their benefits.

Somchai Charoen-amnuay, director of the Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development, suggested that public services should be designed in such a way that people with disabilities can access them with ease and dignity.

Amornwit Nakonthap, an academic adviser for Quality Learning Foundation, said he wants the authorities to also consider people with learning disabilities, such as autistic children. He said ways should be found to give the million or so youngsters with learning disabilities easy access to information technology, which will help boost their education. He also said studies showed that children with learning disabilities develop quickly when using computers.

These comments were made at a seminar held in Nonthaburi a week ago to discuss ideas about setting out technology and infrastructure guidelines that cater to the disabled, the elderly and the underprivileged. The National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) and Thammasat University's Research and Consultancy Institute (TU-RAC) hosted the forum.

According to a National Statistics Office report, of the 63.3 million Thai people, 22.2 million (35 per cent) are computer "savvy"; 18.3 million (29 per cent) surf the Internet; and 46 million (73 per cent) used smartphones. There had been clear growth compared to the last report that listed just 17.9 million computer users, 12.3 million

Internet users and 34.8 million mobile phone users.

However, the gap in people having easy access to the Internet is still quite wide, as most users come from the high-income or educated class and mostly live in cities, the seminar was told.

Despite public projects to provide low-cost tools to promote access to technology for the underprivileged, like the previous government's "One Tablet Per Child" scheme, the policy to implement schemes "in the same manner in all areas" has led to a lack of participation. Also, Internet providers focus more on serving middle-income and high-income groups, avoiding low-income groups as they are deemed unprofitable, the seminar was told.