

# A COMMON TERRESTRIAL STB SPEC FOR SE ASIA?

Ken McCann, ZetaCast



Southeast Asian broadcasters have begun to investigate the possibility of creating a common set-top box (STB) specification based on DVB-T that could be used in all 10 ASEAN countries: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was first established in August 1967. By April 1999, membership had grown from the original five to the current ten member countries. The ASEAN region has a total population of about 500 million and a combined gross domestic product of about US\$737 billion.

One of the aims of the ASEAN Declaration is to accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through cooperative endeavours. It has been recognised that digital terrestrial TV is a potential area where such a joint approach could be beneficial. The

combined ASEAN region clearly represents a large enough market to produce healthy competition between multiple STB suppliers and hence drive down prices. The individual ASEAN countries acting alone may lack sufficient size to produce the required economies of scale.

Following an initiative from Radio Television Brunei of Brunei Darussalam and MediaCorp of Singapore, the first ASEAN Digital Broadcasting Meeting was held in Brunei Darussalam on the 15th and 16th March 2004. There were over 80 participants in the meeting, comprising broadcasters, regulators and industry players from the ASEAN countries and beyond. This is the first of a series of meetings to bridge the knowledge gap by sharing the latest information and experiences and then formulate common approaches.

After hearing about practical experience with DVB-T in Europe and elsewhere in the world, the critical success factors were identified as:

- Availability of STBs at a price that the customer is willing to pay
- Creation of content that offers something more than analogue terrestrial broadcasts (primarily additional channels, but other factors could be widescreen displays, mobile reception, interactive services or HDTV)
- Formulation and endorsement of a coordinated action plan involving broadcasters, industry and governments to market digital TV
- Clear communication of the action plan to the end customer to promote the benefits of digital TV.

The main challenge is to produce a common STB specification that meets the needs of all of the ASEAN countries without being over-burdened by excessive complexity. Some complexity issues are unavoidable, such as the need to support the various language characters used in the region. Other complexity issues may be best dealt with by defining different variants of the basic STB specification. For example, the variants could be:

- Low cost 'basic zapper' that will decode multichannel TV services, but not interactive services
- Interactive STB based on MHP to support interactive services
- Personal Digital Recorder including hard disk to provide greater flexibility

There remain many key specification issues to be resolved. For example, should the possibility of adding Pay TV services be supported by providing a Common Interface slot in all STBs, or is the cost of this prohibitive?

All these issues will be explored further at the second ASEAN Digital Broadcasting Meeting, which is planned to be held on the 14th of June 2004 in Singapore, just before Broadcast Asia 2004.

