An Interview with Dr. Franz de Leon, Director of DOST/ASTI and AORA Interim Chair
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I initially became aware of open RAN after receiving an invitation from the US Embassy here in the Philippines to attend the 2021 Beyond 5G Conference. Following this I was introduced to Maria Beebe on the AORA Team by one of my regional directors. Everything moved quickly from there.

One thing I appreciate the most about open RAN is how this idea is getting people from many different sectors together to tackle this challenge of connectivity. This is the first time I have been involved in an initiative with players from so many different industries and countries. I'm talking the Academia, telco players, content creators and more from Japan, the US, the Philippines, Indonesia and more. Our partners like TIP and Rakuten Symphony who are competitors but agree to work together to support AORA and open RAN deployment are a perfect example.

Looking ahead though, one challenge for us in the Philippines, however, will be the required policy shifts to support an enabling environment for new players in our telco industry. Currently only big players with deep pockets can get licenses for their legislative franchise, as they are able to commit a certain number of metrics and users teamed with their geographic footprint. But as the system opens, we will have to address policies to ensure they are evolving alongside the business-driven market as more players and vendors get involved in the open RAN value chain. Being an R&D institution, I'm referring to my department DOST-ASTI, it is our job to develop technology demonstrators, meaning we deploy different technologies which challenges the current norm or policies with hopes to influence or to encourage policy makers to see and understand alternatives to the status quo – this will be key in supporting a policy shift.

Open RAN initiatives will certainly benefit the local scene when it really gets going – we need use cases to showcase this to government. AORA will help us build a quality and skilled workforce able to support research and development as they enter the job market, and as vendors increase this will eventually lead to a reduction of monopolies and more open competition to support connectivity in the Philippines.

As I learn more about USAID programs here in the Philippines in this area (connectivity), I see a lot of intersection between what USAID is doing and what we are doing at DOST-ASTI. I would like to see us improve our strategic relationship and use of resources to better compliment and support each other – particularly in the areas of research and development. That would be very exciting for us. But one thing I certainly hope for is that the employment sector here locally will

be ready for these next-generation engineers, and they won't be tempted to go overseas for employment but instead stay and support development in the country.