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| **Council Working Group on International Internet-related Public Policy Issues Fifteenth meeting – Virtual meeting, 27-28 January 2021** |  |
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|  | **Document CWG-Internet-15/4-E** |
|  | **7 January 2021** |
|  | **English only** |

**Contribution by the United Kingdom**

Response to the consultation on expanding Internet connectivity

1. The United Kingdom is pleased to submit this response to the Council Working Group’s consultation on expanding Internet connectivity. This topic is critically important given that half of the world’s population is still unconnected. The ITU plays an important role in bringing together the international community to raise awareness of the issues involved and promote multi-stakeholder cooperation to tackle them. We welcome the many valuable responses to the open consultation from all stakeholders.
2. Our response is attached at Annex A. It notes that the Internet is a critical enabler of economic and social development. However, in order to expand connectivity to all citizens, there are significant challenges that must be overcome. We need to 1) build an open, competitive market environment for broadband providers 2) develop policies to support infrastructure deployment 3) ensure effective spectrum management. The broader environment is also important in terms of skills, local content and languages and the business and legal environment. In addition, harnessing the potential of community networks and introducing measures to support landlocked countries will be key for reaching underserved regions.
3. All stakeholders need to work together to expand Internet connectivity across the globe and in this context we regret the fact that non-government stakeholders continue to be excluded from participation in Council Working Group meetings. We have contributed our response to both the open consultation meeting and the government-only meeting to try to overcome this division. We hope that both meetings will provide a useful platform to share experience, strengthen partnerships and highlight a range of effective approaches to expanding Internet connectivity.

**ANNEX A**

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| **Council Working Group (Internet)  Open Consultation meeting and fifteenth meeting** |  |
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|  | **11 December 2020** |
|  | **English only** |
| Contribution submitted by the  United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland | |
| **International internet-related public policy issues on expanding internet connectivity** | |

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| **Summary** The internet is a critical enabler of economic and social development. However, in order to expand connectivity to all citizens, there are significant challenges that must be overcome. We need to 1) build an open, competitive market environment for broadband providers 2) develop policies to support infrastructure deployment 3) ensure effective spectrum management. The broader environment is also important in terms of skills, local content and languages and the business and legal environment. In addition, harnessing the potential of community networks and introducing measures to support landlocked countries will be key for reaching underserved regions. |

1. The United Kingdom government is grateful for the opportunity to comment on the topic of expanding internet connectivity. We look forward to the discussions in both the open meeting with stakeholders and the closed, government-only meeting. The internet is a critical enabler of economic and social development, offering benefits for health, education, business and more. However, with only half of the world’s population connected to the internet, there are still significant challenges that must be overcome in order to expand access to all citizens. Expanding connectivity for all in a sustainable way should be the highest priority for the International Telecommunication Union and other stakeholders working in this field. Without connectivity, individuals and communities will be left behind and we will not be able to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.
2. Connectivity issues disproportionately affect specific groups of people including women, people in developing countries and low-income communities in emerging markets, as well as people living in remote and rural areas. These communities face significant barriers such as poor local infrastructure and unaffordable broadband costs. Other barriers to digital access include gaps in digital literacy and skills and lack of relevant digital content and services. Without concerted efforts to overcome these barriers, there is a risk that the growth of new and emerging technologies could exacerbate existing inequalities by making it harder for chronically excluded groups of people to access services and development opportunities.
3. First, we need to build an open, competitive market environment for broadband providers, including those which offer sustainable and scalable last-mile solutions. Healthy competition is vital in order to reduce costs for citizens and stimulate demand. Governments should develop competitive market structures, establish independent regulators, streamline licensing processes and lower barriers to market entry. They should implement clear, comprehensive national broadband strategies that set ambitious digital inclusion targets and that stimulate investment, involve public-private partnerships and bolster demand among citizens.
4. Secondly, we need to develop policies to support infrastructure deployment. Operators struggle to build and maintain broadband infrastructure in regions where the cost of deployment is high and logistics are complex, such as rural and remote areas. Governments should focus on streamlining infrastructure deployment processes and reducing costs. Methods for doing so include encouraging infrastructure sharing, driving private investment in infrastructure expansion, putting in place effective local planning processes and avoiding excessive taxation or tariffs on telecom goods and services, which could make connectivity unaffordable. Universal Service Funds (USF) can play an important role, although it is critical to ensure a transparent and independent structure for them, to have a clear understanding of the scope, levels and kinds of support necessary, and to build USF agencies’ capacity to adopt effective roll-out models and to attract additional investment.
5. Thirdly, we need to ensure effective spectrum management, supporting telecom regulators to make well-informed choices amongst possible models. Inflated prices and ineffective spectrum allocations prevent operators from providing good-coverage, high-speed services. Governments should develop spectrum policies that ensure adequate spectrum allocations are made available and affordable across regions. Governments should adopt a transparent and fair approach to allocation and streamline licensing mechanisms to allow operators to expand and innovate, and to enable new entrants to contribute to last-mile connectivity. Spectrum sharing and the use of unlicensed spectrum, under appropriate conditions, can also play a helpful role. Dynamic spectrum approaches offer the opportunity to enable the cohabitation of incumbents with new entrants focused on inclusive connectivity (for example deploying emerging ICTs like TV Whitespaces, suitable for last-mile affordable connectivity).
6. Alongside these priorities, it is also important to consider broader issues. Promoting digital skills is a critical element, for example, to ensure that people are able to use the Internet and benefit from online applications. This is particularly important for tackling the gender divide. It is also necessary to promote locally relevant digital content and services in local languages and to give people a reason to go online which is relevant to their needs and circumstances. The broader business environment is also important, particularly in terms of promoting the digital economy and ensuring there is an appropriate legal framework for online transactions and that contracts are enforceable.
7. Small operators and community networks have a crucial role to play in achieving universal internet connectivity. According to a [2019 UN report](https://www.broadbandcommission.org/Documents/working-groups/DigitalMoonshotforAfrica_Report.pdf), approximately ten percent of the world’s population cannot be reached by traditional operators. Community networks often provide connectivity to remote and underserved regions which traditional operators are less likely to cover due to lower profit margins. Their bottom-up nature (often cooperative-based) enables them to directly address the individual needs of the communities they serve, and they ensure sustainability through local ownership. However, community networks rely on governments ensuring affordable spectrum prices, manageable licensing processes, access to affordable backhaul networks and reasonable taxes. Governments need to consider how they can support community networks in order to maximise their potential to connect people who otherwise would not have access to the internet, without impairing or discouraging the deployment of larger-scale commercial network operations. Community networks also need access to appropriate finance from the local financial sector to cover the initial capital investment of small-scale low-cost technology and infrastructure, and to ensure their self-sustainability.
8. Landlocked countries face unique challenges in securing affordable and reliable internet access. For many landlocked countries, these challenges are exacerbated by socio-economic factors (32 of the 44 landlocked countries in the world are classified as middle- or low-income [by the UN](https://unctad.org/topic/vulnerable-economies/landlocked-developing-countries/map-of-LLDCs)). However, regional agreements with operators in neighbouring countries can help ensure fair interconnection and termination rates, while infrastructure sharing systems contribute to lowering costs.
9. In order to deliver on these priorities, multi-stakeholder collaboration between governments, the private sector, civil society, the technical community and other stakeholders is vital. There are many examples from countries around the world which demonstrate that bringing together different stakeholders to share information and perspectives, build common goals and foster partnerships can deliver huge benefits for expanding internet access. The UK is supporting a holistic approach to the promotion of digital inclusion through the UK Prosperity Fund Digital Access Programme, operating in a number of developing countries and emerging markets, and collaborating with multiple international and local partners. The programme provides technical assistance and capacity building to telecom regulators and other key stakeholders in the public and private sectors to catalyse inclusive and scalable technology and business models for last-mile connectivity. It works with local organisations to ensure underserved communities and excluded groups can build their digital skills and access relevant content and services to participate in the online world.
10. The UK looks forward to the contributions and discussion in this open consultation exercise and to learning about the experience of other stakeholders around the world.

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