



CWG-Internet: Online Open Consultation

The role of the Internet & international Internet-related public policy in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 & possible future pandemics

20 August 2021

Introduction

Access Now welcomes this opportunity to address the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Council Working Group on International Internet-related Public Policy Issues' (CWG-Internet) on the role of the internet and international internet-related public policy in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and possible future pandemics.¹ In this submission, we aim to provide a human rights perspective to the topic posed.

Access Now provides thought leadership and policy recommendations to the public and private sectors to ensure the continued openness of the internet and protection of fundamental rights.² We are a United Nations (U.N.) ECOSOC accredited non-governmental organization that works to defend and extend the digital rights of users at risk around the world through policy, advocacy, and technology support, grants, legal interventions, and global convenings like RightsCon.

Summary

This submission raises three main points to address the role of the internet and international Internet-related public policy in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and possible future pandemics. First, the ITU must prioritize expanding meaningful access to the internet because — as amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic — meaningful access is essential for participation in daily life and exercising human rights. During the COVID-19 pandemic and other potential crises, people need access to the internet to find out how to protect themselves and others, access telehealth services, communicate with their loved ones, and work and learn remotely, among many other things that contribute to social, political, cultural, and economic development and the realisation of human rights, including access to health and education. It is therefore imperative that Member States' response to the COVID-19 pandemic and possible future pandemics immediately removes, and does not impose, barriers to internet connectivity. Second, emergency measures recommended by the ITU, and implemented by Member States, must take other internet service providers (ISPs), including community networks (CNS), into consideration, or digital divides will increase worldwide. Third, while the issue of cybersecurity has amplified amid the COVID-19 pandemic, expanding ITU discussions and its mandate into other aspects of telecommunications and information and communication

¹ United Nations, *CWG-Internet: Online Open Consultation (September 2021)*, ITU, 2021, available online: <https://www.itu.int/en/council/cwg-internet/Pages/consultation-feb2021.aspx>. We have contributed submissions to the CWG-Internet in the past. See e.g. Access Now, *Response to ITU CWG-Internet Online Open Consultation: Public Policy considerations for OTTs*, 19 August 2017, available online: <https://www.itu.int/en/Lists/consultationJune2017/Attachments/45/ITU%20CWG%20OTT%20consultation%20-%20Access%20Now%20sub%20mission%20August%202017.pdf>.

² Access Now, *About*, 2020, available online: <https://www.accessnow.org/>.

technologies (ICTs), such as cybersecurity, is not appropriate. The ITU has a clear and narrow mission and objective: to facilitate the interoperability of telecommunications infrastructure. The ITU should therefore not seek to duplicate work at a time when more is needed of the ITU in its core mandate. The scope of the ITU's work should therefore remain restricted to its highly particularized capacity and expertise.

I. The ITU should prioritize expanding meaningful access to the internet particularly amid the current and possible future pandemics

a. COVID-19 and possible future pandemics

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the recognition of the internet as an essential tool for daily life. Those who are disconnected from the internet — deliberately or otherwise — are cut off from exercising a broad range of human rights, including the right to access information, peacefully assemble to defend their human rights, and express their opinions.³ Importantly, the U.N. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), 17 acknowledges that “innovative technological development” and “reliable data” are crucial to reach all the goals, and that special, cooperative efforts will best serve the people in developing countries who need it most.

Universal access to the internet is more than a question about connectivity and coverage areas. Public policies regarding access to the internet must also consider the type and quality of internet accessible, and by whom. Specifically, governments and non-government actors, such as the private sector, must foster a rights-respecting internet underpinned by the principles of universality, openness, security, and affordability, in addition to legislation, policies, and infrastructure, aimed to maintain a resilient and inclusive internet ecosystem.

Access Now has published a report, *Expanding connectivity to fight COVID-19: recommendations for governments and telcos* (Access Now connectivity to fight COVID-19 report *annexed below) that offers a set of recommended practices to foster connectivity.⁴ Recognizing the importance of access to the internet to control the spread of the virus, save lives, and allow for the exercise of several rights, we provide a list of recommendations to governments and telecommunication companies for fostering meaningful access to the internet. This follows our work in 2016 to publicize the Human Rights Principles for Connectivity and Development, which has human rights-based guidance for the design and implementation of development projects to build infrastructure, enhance connectivity, and achieve the SDGs.⁵ We continue to encourage leaders of governments, development banks, and

³ Access Now, *Defending peaceful assembly and association in the digital age: takedowns, shutdowns and surveillance*, July 2020, available online: <https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2020/07/Defending-Peaceful-Assembly-Association-Digital-Age.pdf>.

⁴ Access Now, *Expanding Connectivity to Fight COVID-19: Recommendations for Governments and Telcos*, April 2020, available online: <https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2020/04/Expanding-connectivity-to-fight-COVID19-Recommendations-for-govs-and-telcos.pdf>.

⁵ Access Now, *The Human Rights Principles for Connectivity and Development*, October 2016, available online: <https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2016/10/The-Human-Rights-Principles-for-Connectivity-and-Development.pdf>.

private-sector companies to ground their efforts to promote connectivity on this set of principles, ensuring a human rights-based approach to development, without which the SDGs cannot be reached.

b. Internet shutdowns and lack of investment in internet infrastructure hinder progress

Access to the internet can save lives, particularly during public health crises. Limiting or shutting off access to the internet has obvious problems.⁶ When governments shut down or slow access to the internet, or block or restrict access to social media platforms, websites, and other sources, it harms people and interferes with their human rights. This has led the U.N. to condemn internet shutdowns, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷

Governments have nonetheless extended or ordered new internet shutdowns, and have cited the COVID-19 pandemic as a rationale to censor online content, prosecute dissenting voices, and put in place regulatory measures that impede access to the internet. Data collected by Access Now and the #KeepItOn Coalition shows that, in 2020, there were at least 155 internet shutdowns in 29 countries.⁸

With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, access to the internet and to information is absolutely essential for public safety. Yet, while some governments and telecommunication companies are seeking ways to improve and expand access to a high-quality and high-speed internet, others are moving in the opposite direction.⁹ Some countries are also lagging in investment in the infrastructure that would increase access to the internet and ICTs, leading to degraded service. Governments must provide the infrastructure necessary to ensure secure, high-quality, and high-speed connectivity, and that includes promoting digital literacy, affordable and stable services. The lack of appropriate legal, economic, and social infrastructure may render mobile coverage meaningless. When governments do not invest in internet infrastructure in certain areas — whether inadvertently or deliberately — they prevent people from getting connected. Unless the infrastructure is built and maintained, we will not be able to bring everyone online, by 2030 or ever.

⁶ Internet shutdowns interfere with the exercise of a broad spectrum of human rights, both online and off. Governments have ordered them in the context of protests and civil and political unrest, using them as a blatant tool to silence dissent, hide rights violations, stop activists, journalists, and human rights defenders from speaking freely, and prevent people from sharing information and organizing political actions. Governments do not appear to understand that internet shutdowns not only have a severe negative impact on people's human rights, they also have a corrosive effect on the economy, hobbling development.

⁷ Michelle Bachelet, COVID Is “a Colossal Test of Leadership” Requiring Coordinated Action, High Commissioner Tells Human Rights Council, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, April 9, 2020, available online: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25785&LangID=E> (“I also urge an end to any blanket Internet and telecommunication shutdowns and denials of service.”).

⁸ Access Now, #KeepItOn Coalition, 2020, available online: <https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton/>.

⁹ *Supra* note 4.

Do not shut down the internet under any circumstances: Internet shutdowns are especially harmful at a time when access to the internet is imperative to survive the COVID-19 pandemic. There should be no deliberate internet shutdowns anywhere, and all such shutdowns and restrictions should immediately be lifted. Governments should take extra measures to ensure that people in at-risk groups (such as people in low-income communities, refugees, and others) are not disconnected from the internet. Where they have been disconnected, access should be swiftly restored so they can reconnect.

Ensure access to an open internet: People should be free to access information from a variety of sources without interference, and neither governments nor telcos should manipulate network traffic to silence or favour particular voices or content, for profit, political advantage, or other reasons. To protect a free and open internet, governments should pass and enforce strong Net Neutrality rules, prohibiting blocking, throttling, paid priority, and zero-rating content, and disallowing the circumvention of those rules through manipulation of interconnection points. Any network management that is necessary and directly caused by quarantine-related network congestion should be application-neutral and temporary, lasting only through the end of the congestion period. In addition, governments should permanently lift bans and blocks of lawful websites and applications, particularly communications platforms, as stay-at-home and similar quarantine orders make these services essential for people to remain connected.

II. Emergency measures recommended by the ITU, and implemented by member-States, must take other ISPs, including CNs into consideration, or digital divides will increase worldwide

a. Failure to serve those already at the margins

The COVID-19 pandemic has only made the need for high-quality internet access more clear and urgent. The effort to stop the spread of the disease and “flatten the curve” requires that people stay home and access information and vital services online, in what the U.N. Secretary General calls a move to “mass digitalization.”¹⁰ In this movement, existing inequalities are becoming more evident. People who have an internet connection and can work remotely are less likely to suffer economic hardship than those who do not.¹¹ It is also easier for them to follow public health guidelines for stay-at-home orders and self-quarantine. Yet we must all act collectively to fight the spread of this disease. At a time when both physical distancing, and access to information is necessary to save lives, it is not acceptable for anyone to navigate the situation isolated and without a high-quality internet connection.

¹⁰ Mario Villar, *UN Chief: Post-Coronavirus World Will Be Even More Digital*, EURACTIV, April 3, 2020,

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/un-chief-post-coronavirus-world-will-be-even-more-dig> it al.

¹¹ See Lesley Chiou & Catherine Tucker, *Social Distancing, Internet Access and Inequality*, National Bureau of Economic Research, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w26982.pdf> (“the combination of having both high income and high-speed Internet appears to be the biggest driver of propensity to stay at home. Our results suggest that the digital divide — or the fact that income and home Internet access are correlated — appears to explain much inequality we observe in people’s ability to self-isolate.”).

As half of the world's population remains offline, we are failing not only to meet the ultimate goal of closing digital divides among countries, but also within countries. The lack of internet access disproportionately affects people in under-served and at-risk communities, such as women and girls, people in racial and ethnic minority groups, rural and indigenous populations, and people with disabilities. People in these groups have traditionally been left at the margins of political power, public policies, and investments. That is also the case when it comes to internet infrastructure and connectivity.

According to EQUALS, only 40% of women globally are connected to the internet.¹² Such disparities represent a significant challenge, particularly in some regions of the world. For example, in Africa, “women are less likely than men [...] to have phones with access to the internet, to own computers, to access the internet regularly, or to get news from the internet or by social media.”¹³ However, geography is not the only indicator that determines whether individuals have tools to participate in the digital age. Scientific researchers found that there is “a strong and persistent political bias in the allocation of [i]nternet coverage across ethnic groups worldwide.”¹⁴ Other indicators impacting an individual's access to the internet, including race, must also be considered. For instance, according to the PEW Research Center Internet and Technology, “92% of Whites nationally used the internet in 2019, compared to 85% of Blacks and 86% of Hispanics.”¹⁵ Examining women and girls' experiences with intersecting digital divides, such as race and ethnicity, therefore challenges “the frequent assumption that the uneven global distribution of digital technology can be mitigated by economic forces and incentives,” like competition and smart regulations – or deregulation – of telecommunication companies.¹⁶ Such analyses are particularly imperative when discussing women and girls' access to the internet, and the social, economic, and health consequences arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

In a progress report on the SDGs, the U.N. Secretary-General noted “in least developed countries, owing to the high cost and lack of infrastructure, there were nearly no fixed broadband connections. From a health, economic and social perspective, this digital divide is costing developing countries and their peoples dearly during the pandemic.”¹⁷ Keeping people disconnected means that we are denying them the ability to access essential services and exercise a wide range of rights, and therefore preventing them from thriving in the digital age. This cycle of repeated exclusion with discriminatory

¹² EQUALS, *EQUALS Homepage*, 2020, available online: <https://www.equals.org/>.

¹³ Carmen Alpin Lardies, Dominique Dryding and Carolyn Logan, *African women have less access to the Internet than African men do. That's a problem*, The Washington Post, 8 March 2020, available online:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/03/06/african-women-have-less-access-internet-than-men-do-thats-problem/>.

¹⁴ Access Now, *We can't reach the U.N. goals for sustainable development without the internet*, 22 June 2017, available online: <https://www.accessnow.org/cant-reach-u-n-goals-sustainable-development-without-internet/>; See also Access Now, *More than 3.5 billion left in the dark: why we're still fighting to reach U.N. targets for internet access*, 5 November 2020, available online:

<https://www.accessnow.org/internet-access/>

¹⁵ PEW Research Center Internet & Technology, *Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet*, 12 June 2019, available online:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband>; See also National Telecommunications and Information Administration, *The State of the Urban/Rural Digital Divide*, 10 August 2016, available online: <https://www.ntia.doc.gov/blog/2016/state-urbanrural-digital-divide>.

¹⁶ Nils B Weidmann, Suso Benitez-Baleato, Philipp Hunziker, Eduard Glatz, Xenofontas Dimitropoulos, *Digital discrimination: Political bias in Internet service provision across ethnic groups*, Science Vol 353 Issue 5304, 9 September 2016, DOI: 10.1126/science/aaaf5062; *Supra* note 14.

¹⁷ UN ECOSOC, *Report of the Secretary-General towards the Sustainable Development Goals*, UN Doc E/2020/57, 28 April 2020, available online: <https://undocs.org/en/E/2020/57>.

impact affects people's social and economic prospects and their human dignity — to which we are entitled as a part of our basic human rights.

Make it easier for people, particularly those in low-income communities, to access the internet

Governments should develop or expand emergency funding to help broaden connectivity initiatives, both to help ensure infrastructure build-out (including to anchor institutions like schools and libraries) and to increase the affordability of connections. This may include direct infusions of capital or government subsidies to individuals for internet access. During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments should seek to deploy the resources of Universal Service Obligation Funds or other equivalent programs, exploring ways they can be used to cover data usage by individuals, especially women and girls, and those from low-income or otherwise under-represented communities.¹⁸ Where regulatory changes or legal authorizations may be required, governments should expeditiously seek the approval of such measures. The new connections should be forward-looking and future-proof, and the funding should be easy to access. Governments should require telcos not to disconnect anyone for pandemic-related reasons. Voluntary agreements like those instituted by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission is a step in the right direction but a mandatory requirement will better protect people.¹⁹ Governments should remove barriers to access to technology like mandatory SIM card registration. Mobile phones and laptops, where possible, should be made available to those in need. Women and girls, often afforded fewer opportunities to control ICT devices, should receive targeted support to ensure that digital access and literacy levels grow despite the crisis.²⁰

Encourage the growth of community networks and internet infrastructure: Governments, particularly municipalities, should consider creating their own networks and investing in infrastructure, especially where private telcos cannot or will not ensure high-quality internet access. Governments should also ease restrictions on publicly owned or publicly run networks.

Avoid relaxing or repealing pro-consumer policies like Net Neutrality and privacy protections: Regulators may be tempted to reduce regulatory “burdens” on telcos during the COVID-19 pandemic, but now is not the time to sacrifice human rights and the basic principles that underlie the internet, risking negative repercussions that last well beyond the crisis. Governments should avoid making these types of policy changes.

¹⁸ Alliance for Affordable Internet, *Universal Service and Access Funds: An Untapped Resource to Close the Gender Digital Divide*, 20 March, 2018, available online: <https://a4ai.org/research/universal-service-and-access-funds-an-untapped-resource-to-close-the-gender-digital-divide/>.

¹⁹ See Order of the Governor of the State of Maryland, 2020, available online: <https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Executive-Order-Prohibit-Termination-of-Residen%20tial.pdf>. (“No ... telephone, ... cable television, ... or internet service provider ... shall terminate the service of a [residential] customer.”).

²⁰ See In Tech-Driven 21st Century, *Achieving Global Development Goals Requires Closing Digital Gender Divide*, UN News, 15 March 2019, available online: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/03/1034831>.

Allow temporary use of unused wireless spectrum to improve internet service: Temporary use of certain bands of spectrum may help address a COVID-19-related increase in network traffic (particularly wireless), but a policy for such allowance should revert to the prior regime once the COVID-19 pandemic is over, and the temporary use should not impact unlicensed bands.

III. Mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and possible future pandemics should not expand the ITU mandate into other aspects of telecommunications and ICTs

Expansion of the ITU mandate into other aspects of telecommunications and ICTs would jeopardize its core mission, at a point of time where the COVID pandemic has shown the importance of doubling our efforts around telecommunication infrastructure access and improvement. The ITU has a clear and narrow mission and objective: to facilitate the interoperability of telecommunications infrastructure. The scope of the ITU's work should therefore remain focused on its highly particularized capacity and expertise.²¹

While the issue of cybersecurity has amplified amid the COVID-19 pandemic, conversations about cybersecurity should not be expanded under the ITU mandate. Any discussion of the regulatory or policy aspects of privacy must be driven by the public interest, which should be determined through a human rights framework. These discussions must be conducted in open and transparent forums. The structure and mandate of the ITU render it an environment that does not have the capacity or expertise to do so. States should turn to better suited existing instruments and forums, such as bilateral and multilateral agreements, national laws, and other frameworks, and therefore refrain from discussions that diminish and detract from conversations regarding connectivity, which is directly under the mandate of the ITU.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the urgency to mobilize political will to expand access to the internet to ensure everyone can meaningfully participate in daily life and exercise their human rights. It is crucial to ensure that diverse stakeholders — including civil society — are involved in conversations that will guarantee that the race for better connectivity is not blind to human rights implications and impact. Access Now looks forward to participating in discussions stemming from this submission.

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²¹ Access Now, *Privacy, yes! But not at the ITU*, available online: <https://www.accessnow.org/privacy-yes-not-itu/>, 16 October 2017.



EXPANDING CONNECTIVITY TO FIGHT COVID-19: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS AND TELCOS

This report is an Access Now publication. It is written by Eric Null. We would like to thank the Access Now team members who provided support, including Verónica Arroyo, Jennifer Brody, Sage Cheng, Marwa Fatafta, Estelle Masse, Peter Micek, Laura O'Brien, Isedua Oribhabor, Javier Pallero, Gaspar Pisanu, Emna Sayadi, Raman Jit Singh Chima, Carolyn Tackett, Berhan Taye, and Donna Wentworth.

Expanding connectivity to fight COVID-19: recommendations for governments and telcos

April 2020

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Executive Summary

Access Now is committed to protecting human rights and helping guide governments' responses to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. These responses must promote public health, prevent discrimination, and ensure access to reliable and timely information; defend unrestricted access to an open, affordable, and secure internet; ensure the enjoyment of freedom of expression and of opinion; and protect privacy and personal data.

Both international and domestic laws recognize that extraordinary circumstances require extraordinary measures. The COVID-19 pandemic is such an extraordinary circumstance, and it requires that telecommunications companies (“telcos”) and governments take extraordinary measures to ensure that people are not cut off from internet or phone service, often their lifeline to vital resources. To keep people safe and healthy in the context of physical distancing and lockdown measures, governments and telcos must work together to provide everyone, and especially women, girls, and others in under-represented and at-risk communities, access to an affordable, open, secure, stable, and high-speed internet.

As COVID-19 continues to spread, governments and telcos around the world are taking a variety of approaches to internet connectivity, some beneficial and some harmful to human rights and public health. Below, we discuss some of these approaches and provide recommendations to help decision-makers increase connectivity and save lives.

I. Introduction

Since late 2019, the world has been fighting the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, now recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a pandemic.¹ As part of the response, governments and telecommunications companies (“telcos”) around the world have been trying to determine how to improve internet connectivity to help ensure people can communicate and access the information and services they need to live. The decisions they make, and the extent to which they can ensure everyone access to an affordable, open, secure, stable, and high-speed internet connection, will be critical for dealing with the crisis and will help determine how quickly our global society can recover.

In the present context it is imperative that everyone, especially those in under-served and at-risk communities, such as low-income people, have access to a high-quality internet connection. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, many services for daily functioning in societies around the world, such as banking, had long ago moved online. The internet today is an essential tool for employment, education, health, communication, political engagement, and accessing a wide array of important resources. Moreover, those without a connection are cut off from enjoyment of a broad range of

¹ *WHO Timeline - COVID-19*, World Health Organization (April 27, 2020), <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/08-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>.

human rights, including the right to access information. Yet only 54% of the world’s population has an internet connection, despite the fact that 193 countries have signed on to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, including Target 9.c, which calls to “significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the internet in least developed countries by 2020.”²

The COVID-19 pandemic has only made the need for high-quality internet access more clear and urgent. The effort to stop the spread of the disease and “flatten the curve” requires that people stay home and access information and vital services online, in what the U.N. Secretary General calls a move to “mass digitalization.”³ In this movement, existing inequalities are becoming more evident; we are all in this together, but not equally. People who have an internet connection and can work remotely are less likely to suffer economic hardship than those who do not.⁴ It is also easier for them to follow public health guidelines for stay-at-home orders and self-quarantine. Yet we must all act collectively to fight the spread of this disease. At a time when both physical distancing and access to information is necessary to save lives, it is not acceptable for anyone to navigate the situation isolated and without a high-quality internet connection.

Over the past few months, governments and telcos have each taken a variety of approaches to connectivity during COVID-19. In this report, we highlight some of these responses and offer recommendations for decision-makers to expand connectivity and promote an effective global public health and humanitarian response.

II. How telecommunications providers are responding

Telco providers, including those run by government entities, play a critical role in COVID-19 pandemic response. They are best able to determine what temporary relief they can provide to their subscribers, how they can entice new subscribers to their network, and how to ensure that as many people as possible have access to a high-quality internet in these difficult times. All telcos should be thinking about how they can help their communities and subscribers get connected. A pandemic is not the time to maximize revenue to the detriment of public health, human rights, and the broader economy.

² *ICT Statistics: Individuals Using the Internet*, International Telecommunications Union, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>; Sustainable Development Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/infrastructure-industrialization>.

³ Mario Villar, *UN Chief: Post-Coronavirus World Will Be Even More Digital*, EURACTIV (April 3, 2020), <https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/un-chief-post-coronavirus-world-will-be-even-more-digital>.

⁴ See Lesley Chiou & Catherine Tucker, *Social Distancing, Internet Access and Inequality*, National Bureau of Economic Research, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w26982.pdf> (“the combination of having both high income and high-speed Internet appears to be the biggest driver of propensity to stay at home. Our results suggest that the digital divide — or the fact that income and home Internet access are correlated — appears to explain much inequality we observe in people's ability to self-isolate.”).

So far, telcos have taken a variety of approaches to pandemic response, in some cases moving quickly, and acting in ways that have ranged from helpful to harmful. Below, we discuss several case studies from around the globe, and then provide recommendations to strengthen and improve response.

Case studies

Middle East and North Africa

In **Tunisia**, Tunisie Telecom launched the #Men_Dari (“from my house”) initiative, designed to support Tunisians during the country’s confinement period by reducing the price of internet connection and increasing speeds.⁵ It also announced plans to increase international bandwidth from below 300 Gbps to 350 Gbps and may increase its national backbone.⁶

In **Saudi Arabia**, Saudi Telecom, Mobily (Etisalat), and Zain Saudi Arabia are waiving telecom bills for their customers in quarantine for the month of April.⁷

Latin America

In **Argentina**, the National Communications Authority (ENACOM), Argentine Satellite Solutions Company, and several other telcos announced an agreement to ensure connectivity during a mandatory isolation period.⁸ The agreement allows operators to divert data traffic to each other’s networks, if needed, to manage increased network traffic.

In **Costa Rica**, Movistar is providing both prepaid and postpaid customers with free browsing (zero-rated access) for video learning and collaboration tools

⁵ #Men_Dari de Tunisie Telecom pour Accompagner les Tunisiens durant leur Confinement, WebManagerCenter (March 31, 2020), https://www.webmanagercenter.com/2020/03/31/447092/men_dari-de-tunisie-telecom-pour-accompagner-les-tunisiens-durant-leur-confinement; see also *Tunisie Telecom: Vérifiez en Ligne la Capacité Maximale du Débit que Supporte Votre Fixe*, Tunisie Haut Débit (February 4, 2020), <https://thd.tn/tunisie-telecom-verifiez-en-ligne-la-capacite-maximale-du-debit-que-supporte-votre-fixe>.

⁶ *MEA Telecom Operators Offering Support During Coronavirus Pandemic*, Verdict (March 25, 2020), <https://www.verdict.co.uk/mea-telecom-coronavirus>.

⁷ Chris Kelly, *Saudi Telcos to Provide Free Connectivity for Citizens under Quarantine during April*, CommsMEA (April 1, 2020), <https://www.commsmea.com/business/financials/21632-saudi-telcos-to-provide-free-connectivity-for-citizens-under-quarantine-during-april>.

⁸ *Internet en Cuarentena: El Enacom, Arsat y las Compañías de Telecomunicaciones Anuncian un Acuerdo para Asegurar la Conectividad*, La Nación (April 2, 2020), <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/tecnologia/internet-cuarentena-enacom-arsat-companias-telecomunicaciones-anuncian-nid2350175>.

including Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangout, BlueJeans, and WebEx.⁹

Europe

In **Italy**, Telecom Italia and the government's telecom company, Infratel, are accelerating efforts to improve broadband access in rural areas that currently lack acceptable broadband connections, aiming to deploy fiber networks in up to 320 municipalities by May.¹⁰

In **Belgium**, Telenet and Proximus have opened public connections to help children of families without internet connections stay online.¹¹

Africa

In **South Africa**, in response to increased network load, VodaCom SA plans to invest R500m in its network to expand smart energy management solutions, increase capacity, and improve network resiliency. It also cut the prices of some of its plans and zero-rated "essential" services.¹²

In **Zambia**, Zamtel is offering all mobile prepaid customers "complementary five calling minutes, 50 Mb of data and a further ten on-net SMSs on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays while the COVID-19 pandemic lasts."¹³

In **Kenya**, SafariCom is offering data-capped plans with zero-rated educational resources up to 250MB per day for 60 days.¹⁴ SafariCom has also doubled the internet speed of its home broadband customers, free of charge.¹⁵

⁹ *Measures Taken by Telefónica in the Fight against COVID-19: Costa Rica*, Telefónica, <https://www.telefonica.com/ext/westayconnected/index.html>.

¹⁰ *TIM and Infratel Speed Up Rural Fibre Rollouts*, Comms Update (April 3, 2020), <https://www.commsupdate.com/articles/2020/04/03/tim-and-infratel-speed-up-rural-fibre-rollouts>.

¹¹ *Telenet et Proximus Ouvrent Leurs Connexions Publiques aux Élèves sans Internet*, Médias de Bruxelles (March 26, 2020) <https://bx1.be/dossiers/coronavirus/telenet-et-proximus-ouvrent-leurs-connexions-publiques-aux-eleves-sans-internet>.

¹² *Vodacom SA to Spend R500-million on Network as Traffic Increases*, ITWeb (April 15, 2020), <https://itweb.africa/content/o1Jr5Mx96X9qKdWL>.

¹³ Michael Malakata, *Zamtel Launches Fresh Offering as Subscribers Feel the Pinch*, ITWeb (April 9, 2020), <https://itweb.africa/content/LPwQ5Ml6mrvpNgkj>.

¹⁴ *Safaricom, Education Content Providers Partner to Enable Free Access to Digital Learning*, Safaricom (April 2, 2020), <https://www.safaricom.co.ke/about/media-center/publications/press-releases/release/919>.

¹⁵ Dennis Waweru, *Exclusive: Safaricom Doubles Home Fiber Speeds for Current Customers*, Gadgets Africa (March, 17, 2020), <https://gadgets-africa.com/2020/03/17/safaricom-doubles-home-fibre-speeds-for-current-customers>.

Asia-Pacific

In **India**, Airtel is giving those working from home because of the COVID-19 pandemic unlimited data at 1 Gbps speeds over their fiber network.¹⁶ Airtel, Reliance Jio, and Vodafone are improving their wireless plans with more speed and data and extending validity packs.¹⁷

In **Nepal**, Nepal Telecom is extending billing deadlines and waiving penalties for late payments during lockdown.¹⁸

North America

In **Canada**, TELUS, Rogers, and Bell are taking several actions, such as removing data caps and waiving overage fees during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁹

In the **United States**, Verizon removed data caps on its Fios and DSL offerings,²⁰ T-Mobile increased free data allowance for schools and students,²¹ and AT&T

¹⁶ Saba Haider, *India under 21-day COVID-19 Lockdown: Know What Airtel, Reliance Jio and Vodafone Offering*, Gadget Bridge (March 29, 2020), <https://www.gadgetbridge.com/news/india-under-21-day-covid-19-lockdown-know-what-airtel-reliance-jio-and-vodafone-offering>.

¹⁷ Yuthika Bhargava, *Telecom Operators Extend Validity of Packs Till End of Shutdown*, The Hindu (April 18, 2020), <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Industry/telecom-operators-extend-validity-of-packs-till-end-of-lockdown/article31372694.ece>.

¹⁸ *Nepal Telecom to Extend the Deadline for Billing During Lockdown*, My República (March 26, 2020), <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/nepal-telecom-to-extend-the-deadline-for-billing-during-lockdown>.

¹⁹ Carli Berry, *TELUS, Rogers, Bell Waiving Fees, Providing Free TV Channels to Customers During Pandemic*, Infotel News (April 11, 2020), <https://infotel.ca/newsitem/telus-rogers-bell-waiving-fees-providing-free-tv-channels-to-customers-during-pandemic/it72111>.

²⁰ *Verizon Response to COVID-19: What is Verizon Doing to Help Customers?*, Verizon, <https://www.verizon.com/about/news/covid-response-customers>.

²¹ *T-Mobile Update on COVID-19 Response*, T-Mobile (March 13, 2020), <https://www.t-mobile.com/news/t-mobile-update-on-covid-19-response>.

waived overage fees for domestic plans if subscribers seek a waiver.²² All three also signed the “Keep Americans Connected” pledge, written by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, along with 650 other telcos.²³

Google has pledged to help students in rural **California** stay connected by providing free Wi-Fi to 100,000 families for the rest of the school year, and giving out 4,000 Chromebooks to students.²⁴ Similarly, in **Austin, Texas**, the city school district is sending out 110 buses equipped with Wi-Fi for use between 8 a.m. and 2 p.m. to help students in neighborhoods with limited connectivity.²⁵

In **North Dakota**, the BEK Communications co-op is offering free internet for four months to new subscribers and is doubling internet speeds for no additional charge.²⁶

Recommendations for telcos

Ease financial burdens for customers.

During COVID-19, telcos that have the means should waive all fees related to an inability to pay, including overage fees, late fees, and subscription fees. Waived fees should not be contingent on signing contracts for future service and should not be required to be repaid in the future.

Telcos should also waive fees and relax deadlines on device activation, replacement, return, and repair.

²² COVID-19: Our Responses, AT&T, <https://about.att.com/pages/COVID-19.html#networkl>.

²³ Keep Americans Connected Pledge, Federal Communications Commission, <https://www.fcc.gov/keep-americans-connected>.

²⁴ Jon Porter, *Google Donates Free Chromebooks and 100,000 Mobile Hotspots for Rural California Students*, The Verge (April 2, 2020), <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/2/21204057/google-free-chromebooks-wi-fi-hotspots-california-schools-students-remote-learning-coronavirus>.

²⁵ Andy Jechow, *Austin ISD Is Rolling Out 110 Buses Equipped with Wi-Fi for Neighborhoods with Limited Online Access*, KUT (April 10, 2020), <https://www.kut.org/post/austin-isd-rolling-out-110-buses-equipped-wi-fi-neighborhoods-limited-online-access>.

²⁶ BEK Communications “BEK Cares” Initiative in Response to COVID-19 Creates a Connection to the World for Rural Students and Work-From-Home Residents, BEK Communications (March 25, 2020), <https://cdn.bek.coop/bek-communications-bek-cares-initiative-3.24.2020.pdf>.

Improve service offerings and remove limits on subscription plans.	<p>Telcos should lift limits around total voice or text allowances, data allowances, the types of content people can access, times during which people can use the network, and the expiration of unused data, for at least the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>In service offerings, telcos should also increase speeds and capacity during the pandemic.</p>
Ensure the internet is open, following the principles of Net Neutrality.	<p>Telcos should offer access to an open internet — that is, with no blocking, throttling, or paid priority and zero-rated access — and they should not circumvent these rules through manipulating interconnection points. Especially during a pandemic, telcos should not pick winners and losers in an information ecosystem and act as the arbiters of what information is important to users.</p> <p>Instead of zero-rating or giving priority to certain content or services, telcos should remove data caps. At minimum, telcos should refrain from zero-rating content they produce, own, or have received compensation or entered into arrangements to market or promote.</p>
Be transparent about policies and practices.	<p>Telcos should notify customers directly of policies and practices they implement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; it is not sufficient to have only a general pandemic website. They should also provide updates as necessary and communicate about any changes in real time throughout the crisis.</p> <p>If possible, they should implement all new connectivity-related policies immediately and automatically, without requiring customers to jump through burdensome hoops.</p> <p>The policies telcos put in place should be easy to understand and not dependent on the day of the week, time of day, or other arbitrary attribute.</p>
Invest in maintaining and improving networks to ensure high-quality internet access now and in the future.	<p>Investment should go beyond creating public Wi-Fi networks. While such Wi-Fi access can be helpful in specific situations, people need access to high-quality, high-speed internet at home to use the internet to its fullest potential, including for remote work and education. Using public Wi-Fi networks often requires close proximity to the router and thus to other people, which goes against social distancing policies. No one should have to risk their lives to connect to the internet.</p> <p>Telcos should upgrade their networks to support an increased number of connections. Network equipment and resources should be redistributed as appropriate to increase connectivity.</p>

III. How governments and regulatory agencies are reacting

In implementing policy on connectivity during COVID-19, governments have tremendous power to either protect or harm their citizens. For example, legislators, ministers, telecom regulators, and many other public officials can protect people against private-sector abuses such as price gouging, and can enact policies or provide relief to expand and improve access to the internet and make it more affordable. Unfortunately, some government officials are carrying out harmful acts. They are shutting down the internet, engaging in online censorship, levying heavy taxes for access to online platforms, and imposing other restrictions that make it difficult to access and use the internet.

Access to the internet can save lives, particularly during public health crises. Limiting or shutting off access to the internet has obvious problems. When governments shut down or slow access to the internet, or block or restrict access to social media platforms, websites, and other sources, it harms people and interferes with their human rights. This has led the United Nations to condemn internet shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁷ During this crisis, people need access to the internet to find out how to protect themselves and others, access telehealth services, communicate with their loved ones, and work and learn remotely, among many other things. Internet shutdowns directly interfere with these actions and impede the public health and humanitarian response. It is imperative that governments respond by immediately removing, not imposing, barriers to connectivity.

Government responses in the wake of COVID-19 outbreak have been varied and multi-faceted, with some responding relatively quickly. Following are several case studies from around the globe, broken down into three categories: internet shutdowns, censorship of content, and other regulatory responses. In some cases, the responses have both positive and negative implications. We provide recommendations based on these examples to help governments improve their approaches.

Case studies: internet shutdowns

Asia-Pacific

In **India**, since August 2019, the government has imposed internet restrictions in the Jammu and Kashmir regions, leaving people without reliable, secure access to an open internet. The government originally implemented a blanket shutdown. After India's Supreme Court intervened, the government restored

²⁷ Michelle Bachelet, *COVID Is "a Colossal Test of Leadership" Requiring Coordinated Action*, High Commissioner Tells Human Rights Council, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (April 9, 2020), <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25785&LangID=E> ("I also urge an end to any blanket Internet and telecommunication shutdowns and denials of service.").

access, but only to 2G mobile internet. As a result, medical staff in the region have been unable to help patients online, download medical data and information about COVID-19 intensive care units guidelines, and otherwise adequately respond to the pandemic.²⁸

In **Myanmar**, since mid-2019, authorities have cut or restricted access to the internet in Rakhine and Chin states, leaving people unable to access the internet during the longest shutdown globally in 2019 (now extended to 2020).²⁹ The government has expanded network disruptions to more townships in these states³⁰ and issued new orders to censor content and information.³¹

In **Bangladesh**, the government has shut off mobile internet connections in refugee camps where Rohingya refugees reside, and disallowed these refugees, who are in close quarters and a high-risk group for COVID-19, from use of SIM cards and other communication tools.³²

In **Pakistan**, authorities have ordered internet shutdowns in former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan and part of Balochistan, disconnecting residents of these two regions from the rest of the world. Reports indicate that while the majority of students in Pakistan have transitioned to online schooling, students residing in ex-FATA and Balochistan regions have been left behind due to the lack of internet access.³³

²⁸ Majid Maqbool, 'An Hour to Download ICU Guidelines': Amid COVID-19, Kashmir Doctors Struggle With Slow Internet, *The Wire* (March 20, 2020), <https://thewire.in/rights/coronavirus-kashmir-slow-internet>.

²⁹ *Myanmar: Lift Internet Restrictions to Protect Public Health*, Fortify Rights (March 26, 2020), <https://www.fortifyrights.org/mya-inv-2020-03-26>.

³⁰ Thu Thu Aung & Sam Aung Moon, *Myanmar Reimposes Internet Shutdown in Conflict-torn Rakhine, Chin States: Telco Operator* (February 5, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rakhine/myanmar-reimposes-internet-shutdown-in-conflict-torn-rakhine-chin-states-telco-operator-idUSKBN1ZZ0LC>.

³¹ *Blocking of 230 Websites in Myanmar Based on Directive from the Authorities*, Telenor (March 30, 2020), <https://www.telenor.com.mm/en/article/blocking-230-websites-myanmar-based-directive-authorities>.

³² *Bangladesh: Internet Blackout on Rohingya Refugees*, Human Rights Watch (September 13, 2019), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/13/bangladesh-internet-blackout-rohingya-refugees>.

³³ Umar Daraz Wazir, *DRM Exclusive: Internet Shutdown in Former FATA – Online Classes a Hurdle to Right to Education of Students in the Region*, Digital Rights Monitor (April 20, 2020), <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/drm-exclusive-internet-shutdown-in-former-fata-online-classes-a-hurdle-to-right-to-education-of-students-in-the-region>.

Case studies: censorship of content

Asia-Pacific

In **Myanmar**, the government has blocked more than 200 websites. Most recently, the government censored news agencies and those that are serving and based in Rakhine state.³⁴

Middle East and North Africa

In **Algeria**, the government has blocked websites for The Maghreb Emergent and Radio M, which provide critical health and other information amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁵

In the **United Arab Emirates**, in response to a COVID-19 lockdown, the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority lifted a block, on an “exceptional” and temporary basis, of several VoIP platforms and applications, such as Google Meet, WebEx, Blue Jeans, and Slack, to allow for distance learning.³⁶ However, the government continues to block apps such as WhatsApp, Skype, and FaceTime, which have been essential tools for communicating, especially among migrant workers and foreign nationals. Use of VoIP products that are not licensed (those not provided by telcos Etisalat or Du) could be punishable under the cybercrime law.³⁷

Latin America

In **Venezuela**, government-owned CANTV, the largest telco in the country, blocked coronavirusvenezuela.info, a website created by the National Assembly to disseminate official information about COVID19.³⁸ After a fire in a networking facility, the block was lifted.³⁹ In addition, Movistar Venezuela blocked teleconsulta.presidenciave.org, a website for medical information.⁴⁰

³⁴ Rebecca Ratcliffe, *Myanmar Blocks Hundreds of News Sites and Threatens Editor with Life in Jail*, The Guardian (April 1, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/31/myanmar-editor-could-face-life-in-jail-for-interviewing-rebel>.

³⁵ *Algeria: Maghreb Émergent and Radio M Online Media Blocking*, The Maghreb Times (April 15, 2020), <https://themaghrebtimes.com/04/15/algeria-maghreb-emergent-and-radio-m-online-media-blocking>.

³⁶ *Additional Apps for Distance Learning*, Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (March 30, 2020), <https://www.tra.gov.ae/en/media-hub/dgspeech/2020/3/30/additional-apps-for-distance-learning.aspx>.

³⁷ *Freedom on the Net 2017: United Arab Emirates*, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates/freedom-net/2017>.

³⁸ *Bloquean Sitio Sobre Coronavirus COVID-19 Organizado por la AN y Juan Guaidó*, VE sin Filtro (March 18, 2020), https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/bloqueado_portal_coronavirus_AN.

³⁹ Tweet by VE sin Filtro (April 7, 2020), <https://twitter.com/vesinfiltro/status/1250581767549059073>.

⁴⁰ Tweet by VE sin Filtro (April 15, 2020), <https://twitter.com/vesinfiltro/status/1250579061937770496>.

Europe

In the **European Union**, Market Commissioner Thierry Breton asked CEOs of large platforms (e.g., Netflix and YouTube) to throttle their services to prevent bandwidth issues on the network.⁴¹ The parties made agreements to do so by phone, outside the scrutiny of telecom regulators or legislators. It is not clear whether there is a congestion problem to address, as the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications, the E.U. telecom regulator, released a report indicating an increase in overall traffic but no problems in handling it.⁴²

Case studies: other regulatory responses

Asia-Pacific

In **Pakistan**, the government directed telcos to offer cheap student and work-from-home packages of 2Mbps with a 40GB data limit at a reasonable rate of less than Rs600 per month.⁴³

In **Thailand**, the government approved a scheme by the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission to provide mobile subscribers with 10GB of free data per month until June 30 if they text a specific number.⁴⁴

Africa

In **Uganda**, since June 2018, the government has been taxing citizens \$0.05 *per day* (or approximately 4% of monthly income) to access critical communications and information platforms like Skype, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Igor Bonifacic, *EU Asks Netflix and Other Services to Stream in SD to Ease Internet Burden*, Engadget (March 19, 2020), <https://www.engadget.com/2020-03-19-eu-netflix-sd-streaming-to-serve-internet.html>.

⁴² *Updated BEREC report on the status of internet capacity in light of Covid-19 crisis*, BEREC (April 6, 2020), https://berec.europa.eu/eng/document_register/subject_matter/berec/press_releases/9247-press-release-updated-berec-report-on-the-status-of-internet-capacity-in-light-of-covid-19-crisis.

⁴³ Ramsha Dahangir, *PTA Asks Internet Providers to Launch Cheap Packages During Outbreak*, Dawn (April 5, 2020), <https://www.dawn.com/news/1546558/pta-asks-internet-providers-to-launch-cheap-packages-during-outbreak>.

⁴⁴ Komsan Tortermvasana, *Mobile Users Get 10GB Perk from April 10*, Bangkok Post (March 31, 2020), <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/1890240/mobile-users-get-10gb-perk-from-april-10>.

⁴⁵ *Social media is free. But not in Uganda*, Free Social Media, <https://freesocial.media/#intro>.

North America

In the **United States**, the telecom regulator granted several wireless carriers, including Verizon, AT&T, T-Mobile, and U.S. Cellular, access to additional spectrum to help address the increase in demand.⁴⁶ The agency also granted the Indigenous Navajo Nation access to unused airwaves.⁴⁷

Recommendations for governments

Do not shut down the internet under any circumstances.

Internet shutdowns are especially harmful at a time when access to the internet is imperative to survive the COVID-19 pandemic and to operate in modern life. There should be no deliberate internet shutdowns anywhere, and all such shutdowns and restrictions should immediately be lifted.

Governments should take extra measures to ensure that people in at-risk groups (such as people in low-income communities, refugees, and others) are not disconnected from the internet. Where they have been disconnected, access should be swiftly restored so they can reconnect.

Ensure access to an open internet.

People should be free to access information from a variety of sources without interference, and neither governments nor telcos should manipulate network traffic to silence or favor particular voices or content, for profit, political advantage, or other reasons.

To protect a free and open internet, governments should pass and enforce strong Net Neutrality rules, prohibiting blocking, throttling, paid priority, and zero-rating content, and disallowing the circumvention of those rules through manipulation of interconnection points.

Any network management that is necessary and directly caused by quarantine-related network congestion should be application-neutral and temporary, lasting only through the end of the congestion period.

In addition, governments should permanently lift bans and blocks of lawful websites and applications, particularly communications platforms, as

⁴⁶ *FCC Grants AT&T and Verizon Further Temporary Spectrum Access to Keep Americans Connected During Coronavirus Pandemic*, FCC (March 20, 2020), <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-363211A1.pdf>; *FCC Provides T-Mobile Temporary Access to Additional Spectrum to Help Keep Americans Connected During Coronavirus Pandemic*, FCC (March 15, 2020), <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-363051A1.pdf>; *FCC Provides U.S. Cellular Temporary Access to Additional Spectrum to Help Keep Americans Connected During Coronavirus Pandemic*, FCC (March 17, 2020), <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-363114A1.pdf>.

⁴⁷ *U.S. Grants Navajo Nation Authority to Use Unassigned Airwaves*, Santa Fe New Mexican (April 18, 2020), https://www.santafenewmexican.com/ap/u-s-grants-navajo-nation-authority-to-use-unassigned-airwaves/article_55e26b01-749b-5fa3-b3ef-f673a142ed8b.html.

	<p>stay-at-home and similar quarantine orders make these services essential for people to remain connected.</p>
<p>Make it easier for people, particularly those in low-income communities, to access the internet.</p>	<p>Governments should develop or expand emergency funding to help broaden connectivity initiatives, both to help ensure infrastructure build-out (including to anchor institutions like schools and libraries) and to increase the affordability of connections. This may include direct infusions of capital or government subsidies to individuals for internet access. During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments should seek to deploy the resources of Universal Service Obligation Funds or other equivalent programs, exploring ways they can be used to cover data usage by individuals, especially women and girls,⁴⁸ and those from low-income or otherwise under-represented communities. Where regulatory changes or legal authorizations may be required, governments should expeditiously seek the approval of such measures. The new connections should be forward-looking and future-proof, and the funding should be easy to access.</p> <p>Governments should require telcos not to disconnect anyone for pandemic-related reasons. Voluntary agreements like those instituted by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission are a step in the right direction but a mandatory requirement will better protect people.⁴⁹</p> <p>Governments should remove barriers to access to technology like mandatory SIM card registration. Mobile phones and laptops, where possible, should be made available to those in need.</p> <p>Women and girls, often afforded fewer opportunities to control ICT devices,⁵⁰ should receive targeted support to ensure that digital access and literacy levels grow despite the crisis.</p>

⁴⁸ *Universal Service and Access Funds: An Untapped Resource to Close the Gender Digital Divide*, Alliance for Affordable Internet (March 20, 2018), <https://a4ai.org/research/universal-service-and-access-funds-an-untapped-resource-to-close-the-gender-digital-divide>.

⁴⁹ See *Order of the Governor of the State of Maryland*, <https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Executive-Order-Prohibit-Termination-of-Residential.pdf> (“No ... telephone, ... cable television, ... or internet service provider ... shall terminate the service of a [residential] customer.”).

⁵⁰ See *In Tech-Driven 21st Century, Achieving Global Development Goals Requires Closing Digital Gender Divide*, UN News, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/03/1034831>.

Avoid relaxing or repealing pro-consumer policies like Net Neutrality and privacy protections.	Regulators may be tempted to reduce regulatory “burdens” on telcos during the COVID-19 pandemic, but now is not the time to sacrifice human rights and the basic principles that underlie the internet, risking negative repercussions that last well beyond the crisis. Governments should avoid making these types of policy changes.
Allow temporary use of unused wireless spectrum to improve internet service.	Temporary use of certain bands of spectrum may help address a COVID-19-related increase in network traffic (particularly wireless), but a policy for such allowance should revert to the prior regime once the COVID-19 pandemic is over, and the temporary use should not impact unlicensed bands.
Encourage the growth of community networks and internet infrastructure.	<p>Governments, particularly municipalities, should consider creating their own networks and investing in infrastructure, especially where private telcos cannot or will not ensure high-quality internet access.</p> <p>Governments should also ease restrictions on publicly owned or publicly run networks.</p>

IV. Conclusion

In today’s digitally connected world, high-quality internet access is a necessity at all times for all people, including those who are especially at risk, such as people in low-income communities, the disenfranchised, refugees, and others. Getting connected is even more urgent during this global public health crisis, when access to information and physical distancing will save lives. Telcos and governments must step up to protect people by keeping them connected to the internet, consistent with their obligations under international human rights law. This report provides several recommendations for how they can do that. Working together, now and in the aftermath of the pandemic, we can reach the goal of global, universal internet access that benefits everyone.

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