ITU COUNCIL WORKING GROUP ON INTERNATIONAL INTERNET-RELATED PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES (CWG-INTERNET)

**Online Open Consultation on
"The role of public policy in promoting multilingualization of the Internet"
(October 2024 - January 2025)**

Topic

CWG Internet invites all stakeholders to submit contributions on international Internet-related public policy issues relating to the role of public policy in promoting multilingualization of the Internet.

Summary of UK's Contribution

The UK's contribution supports making the Internet more multilingual. A more multilingual Internet is shown to bring important benefits to existing and future users of the Internet. These benefits include motivating the unconnected to use the Internet, ensuring all users have meaningful access to the Internet, and increasing online safety.

The contribution also recognises the universal acceptance (UA) of Internationalized Domain Names (IDNs) as necessary to achieving a more multilingual Internet. While delivering UA of IDNs is shown to face challenges, ranging from technical obstacles to improving public awareness, the contribution explains how such challenges can be addressed through a multistakerholder approach.

The value of a multistakeholder approach to making the Internet more multilingual and accessible is demonstrated by noting the particular strengths and contributions of the International Telecommunications Union, its member states, and other stakeholders. The contribution reminds us how each stakeholder's strengths can be complementary and be used to overcome the different challenges in making the Internet more multilingual and accessible.

1. What could the ITU, its members, and other stakeholders do to ensure that the Internet becomes more multilingual and accessible to a larger portion of the global population?

With a third of the global population still offline, the Internet remains inaccessible to 2.5 billion people. But expanding Internet access is not only about building more infrastructure; it must also be driven by efforts to increase *meaningful access* to the Internet and making the Internet more multilingual is essential to this ambition. Making the internet more multilingual means allowing users to choose the languages or script they use online and ensuring that language is not a barrier to quality Internet access and participation. This means promoting and improving Universal Acceptance (UA) of Internationalized Domain Names (IDNs), fundamentally.

A multistakeholder approach is required to make the Internet more multilingual and accessible and the International Telecommunications Union, its member states, and other stakeholders can each make contributions to this effort:

- **ITU member states** can help make the Internet more multilingual and accessible at different levels. At a technical level, governments can lead by example to ensure services to the public and information published on their websites is available in all languages with significant user groups within the population. At the policy level, governments are in position to encourage the implementation and acceptance of IDNs, for example through participation in the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers' (ICANN) Governmental Advisory Committee or at UNESCO. Finally, governments can help make the Internet more multilingual when they raise awareness of IDNs in their countries, such as through procurement, or promoting the training opportunities in UA provided ICANN and others.

- **Other stakeholders**, like the private sector and the technical community, can help make the Internet more multilingual and accessible by developing and deploying technological advances in UA, and making sure all their own services are UA complaint. Their work can speed up the use of IDNs, for example by improving the process of introducing new IDNs as well as through evaluating potentially misleading uses of new languages or scripts ('variants') and ensuring interoperability between different systems and services. The technical community can also help improve the reliability of a multilingual Internet, for example when registries provide the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority with up-to-date list of variants for their IDN tables.

- **ITU** can help make the Internet more multilingual and accessible by improving public awareness of IDNs and fostering cooperation between ITU member states and other stakeholders. The Telecommunications Sector can share insights on UA and best

practices with other standards development organisations, particularly the Internet Engineering Task Force. The Development Sector (ITU-D) can work "to expand multilingualism on the Internet, including through the promotion of universal acceptance". ITU-D is well-placed to promote initiatives like the upcoming UA Day on 28th March 2025, perhaps by coordinating events with other UN agencies, such as UNESCO, whose Internet Universality Indicators emphasise the importance of a multilingual Internet. The ITU can also work in partnership with the Universal Acceptance Steering Group, an international group which advocates for the use of IDNs.

While Universal Acceptance is just one aspect of achieving universal connectivity, it is essential to ensuring the Internet becomes more multilingual and accessible to a larger portion of the global population.

2. What are the benefits and challenges of multilingualization of the Internet, particularly through the universal acceptance of IDNs?

With a truly multilingual Internet, users could find websites, engage in e-commerce, use government services, and engage in social media in their language of choice. A crucial step in this direction is the universal acceptance (UA) of Internationalised Domain Names (IDNs), which contributes to building a multilingual Internet by ensuring that any internationalized domain name is treated equally and can be used across all Internet-enabled applications, devices and systems.

There are now more than 1,200 active IDN generic top-level domains (gTLDs) and over 60 IDN country code top-level domains (ccTLDs) representing global communities in native scripts. Expanding this to UA brings important benefits by:

- *connecting the unconnected.* A multilingual Internet helps drive internet amongst new users be to come online. New users benefit when they can access relevant local content and engage with their community in their own language. It is predicted that most new users will come from Africa and the Asia Pacific region.

- *ensuring meaningful access.* A multilingual Internet is more inclusive by allowing speakers of all languages to access its benefits. UA can help transform the Internet from a network based on Latin script, where over 50% of content is in English, to one more accessible to the over 7000 languages recognized by UNESCO. UA can help to bridge digital divides by driving online inclusivity.

- *increasing online safety.* A multilingual Internet creates safer online spaces for users by allowing them to participate in their preferred language. This raises the barrier to acts of online fraud that can often take advantage of non-native speakers. A multilingual Internet is therefore crucial in a period when accessing essential services, like banking to healthcare, migrate online, by protecting users and giving them the confidence to access these services safely.

Delivering benefits of multilingual Internet to all users involves overcoming certain challenges:

- *technical challenges:* Further work is needed to ensure greater interoperability between the different software and systems in order to ensure global acceptance of non-Latin scripts in our browsers and emails. UNESCO, EURid, and others have highlighted this work in the 2024 IDN World Report.

- ***raising awareness:*** There has been a slowdown in IDN registrations since 2023, according to the 2024 IDN World Report. This challenge can be addressed by raising public awareness of the availability of IDNs. Promoting IDNs to non-technical stakeholders and emphasising how a multilingual Internet can support local needs can help drive demand for IDNs and encourage registries to promote their uptake. The launch of ICANN's new round of gTLD applications is a timely opportunity to encourage businesses and countries to apply for gTLDs in their own scripts.

- ***security concerns:*** The transition to a multilingual Internet is not without risks and there are genuine concerns regarding the misuse of variants to mislead and potentially exploit consumers or engage in cybersquatting. However, such security risks should not be overstated. ICANN report that out of more than 19 million total gTLD domains, only 754 registrations posed a risk and were non-compliant with their IDN guidelines.

These challenges should not deter our interest delivering UA of IDNs rather than help focus our attention on multistakeholder support for a multilingual Internet.