

Global Symposium for Regulators (GSR 23)

Consultation: Best Practice Guidelines - “Regulatory and economic incentives for an inclusive sustainable digital future”

Collaborative regulatory frameworks capable of addressing the broad impacts of the digital economy across sectors are required. The Universal Postal Union (UPU) working with member states and the wider postal sector stakeholders, is ready to advance the socio-economic development of all communities around the world, as a coordinated effort amongst the post and telecom sectors.

According to recent UPU estimates,¹ there are more than 650,000 post offices worldwide, most of which are located in rural and isolated areas, enabling social, financial, and digital inclusion for both people and businesses, in particular MSMEs. This postal network is made available by the postal operators assigned by their Governments to fulfill a universal postal service obligation. This national critical infrastructure offers a unique physical and logistical network to facilitate the deployment of sustainable digital infrastructure and provide the all-important human touch point in underserved communities. Unfortunately, communities that lack connectivity also suffer from a lack of digitalized postal services, hampering their socio-economic development.

This contribution proposes an initial set of concrete areas of collaboration to enhance current strategies and regulatory frameworks to accelerate the full realization of the opportunities for an inclusive and sustainable digital economy, utilizing the national postal infrastructure, regularly under the common oversight of the Post and Telecommunications regulatory authority.

Defining regulatory and economic incentives to stimulate the deployment of sustainable digital infrastructure, especially in rural and isolated areas

The capillarity of the postal network is helping to facilitate digital infrastructure deployment, especially in co-location of infrastructure and services. For example, the United States Postal Service (USPS) leases out space for communications infrastructure at 62 facilities.² Furthermore, this can facilitate the implementation of renewable energy sources by sharing the costs between Posts and Telecoms. To enhance this capability, e.g. the rights of way in postal facilities for towers and antennae can be expedited and streamlined.

In addition, accurate and up-to-date data on service quality is essential for informing policy decisions and implementation. In many countries, Posts actively collect data on wireless broadband services and contribute to setting up Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to map national infrastructures to identify black, white, and grey areas. These can inform deployment efforts, enabling data-driven decision-making. For example, Australia Post uses its trucks to find rural mobile coverage blackspots

¹ <https://www.upu.int/en/Universal-Postal-Union/Activities/Research-Publications/Postal-Statistics>

² Data from 2020. Source: <https://www.uspsoig.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2020/RISC-WP-20-007.pdf>

to inform locations selected for upgraded regional telecommunications. Österreichische Post in Austria has deployed a mobile network coverage tool using data from its vehicle fleet.

Identifying the right incentives required to ensure the introduction of emerging ICT technologies and business models

The financial sustainability of digital infrastructure deployment is a crucial issue. To enhance the market conditions for investment, regulators and governments can leverage on the postal network to implement demand-side interventions by, e.g.:

- fostering access to domestic and international e-commerce for people and local businesses, strengthening the economic development of these connected communities;
- utilizing Posts as demand aggregators to increase certainty for investors and operators.

In addition, to accelerate the deployment and adoption of secure digital services, granting the postal operator the status of registration authority for digital services would bring greater inclusion and accessibility opportunities. Regulators and governments can leverage on the postal network, as a universal services institution, to promote the development of trusted digital services at national level, accessible in all communities. Posts can play the role of a digital trusted third party to contribute to the marketing and promotion of the registration to and use of digital services necessary for the development of the digital economy. This role can cover:

- making digital identity more accessible in urban and underserved communities by facilitating the creation, verification and distribution processes through such services as validating a person's physical address location;
- rigorous identification of electronic certificate applicants, in particular through face-to-face verification of an identity document or through video, meeting certain technical requirements;
- the development of electronic authentication and signature services via mobile, which is becoming a natural evolution of electronic certification services.