

INTRODUCTION

The GSMA, the global organisation unifying the mobile ecosystem, welcomes this consultation on regulatory governance essentials for digital markets. Mobile connectivity is the foundational infrastructure layer through which over half the world's population accesses the digital economy. Ensuring that digital markets deliver for all requires governance frameworks that are dynamic, evidence-based, and internationally coordinated.

GSMA research shows that 96% of the global population now lives within reach of a mobile broadband network. Yet 3.1 billion people remain offline – not because of a lack of connectivity infrastructure, but because of demand-side barriers to mobile adoption and use.¹ The usage gap is now ten times larger than the coverage gap; bridging it could add \$3.5 trillion to global GDP by 2030, with over 90% of that benefit flowing to low- and middle-income countries.² Governance frameworks must therefore address both the conditions that enable continued network investment and the demand-side barriers – foremost device affordability – that prevent billions from participating in the digital economy.

THE BASELINE TOOLKIT FOR DIGITAL GOVERNANCE

Frameworks for digital governance should strive to create an enabling environment for the provision and adoption of ICT and telecommunications services. The creation of such an environment should be informed by the following three goals:

I. Closing the usage gap by addressing the demand-side barriers to digital inclusion that prevent billions of people from using the networks already available to them.

As recognised by the 2025 World Telecommunication Development Conference, the vast majority of people who remain offline are already served by networks capable of providing meaningful connectivity. However, non-coverage barriers prevent them from getting online.³ Of these barriers, device affordability is both the most acute and persistent. Regulators should support efforts to address this and other barriers by reducing import duties and device-specific taxes that inflate the retail cost of devices, expanding device financing options, and investing in digital skills programmes adapted to local contexts.

II. Sustaining the enabling environment on which network investment, expansion, resilience, and quality depend by adopting evidence-based, forward-looking policy approaches.

The investment environment for connectivity infrastructure is under significant strain. Mobile data traffic grew more than 500-fold between 2010 and 2024, yet operators have experienced sustained declines in return on invested capital.⁴ Networks must simultaneously be upgraded to absorb surging demand, extended into unserved communities, and strengthened against climate disruptions, cybersecurity threats, and supply-chain vulnerabilities. Regulators can support this investment by ensuring economic frameworks enable sufficient return on capital invested in networks, including reviewing sector-specific taxes and fees that raise the cost of deployment, streamlining permitting

¹ GSMA. [The State of Mobile Internet Connectivity](#) (2025)

² Ibid.

³ Resolution 37, World Telecommunications Development Conference 2025 (Baku)

⁴ Cisco Visual Networking Index (2011); Ericsson, *Mobility Report* (2024); OECD. *Financing Broadband Networks of the Future* (2024).

processes, and establishing licensing frameworks that provide the long-term certainty that sustained investment requires.

III. Preserving the ability of mobile networks to connect billions of people around the world and to sustain growing traffic demand by assigning and managing spectrum efficiently.

Effective spectrum policy directly affects service quality, network economics, and the feasibility of extending coverage to underserved areas. International harmonisation of spectrum allocations reduces equipment costs, supports economies of scale, and strengthens the investment case for rural deployment. Looking ahead, securing sufficient mid-band spectrum for mobile will be critical to meeting growing demand from AI and data-intensive applications. Policymakers should develop long-term domestic spectrum roadmaps aligned with international processes, including WRC-27, to ensure that mobile networks can continue to meet the connectivity needs of billions of people.

BEST PRACTICES FOR DIGITAL GOVERNANCE

Creating an enabling environment for the provision and adoption of ICT and telecommunications services requires governance frameworks that support investment, foster innovation, and break the barriers that prevent people from participating in the digital economy. The following principles can help regulators design frameworks that achieve these objectives.

Digital governance should focus on outcomes rather than prescriptive rules, with technology-neutral frameworks which promote the shared goal of universal, meaningful connectivity giving connectivity providers the flexibility to innovate and invest, while ensuring a level playing field that allows providers to compete on the benefits they deliver to consumers.

The benefits of such an enabling environment are compounded by regulatory consistency. Today, mobile network operators are subject to coverage obligations, universal service contributions, and consumer protection requirements, while other providers offering equivalent services often face lighter or no regulation. This asymmetry distorts investment incentives and undermines fair competition. Applying consistent obligations to similar services, based on what is delivered rather than who delivers it, removes these distortions and supports long-term investment.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration also brings benefits that regulation alone cannot realise. Challenges such as device affordability, digital skills gaps, and cybersecurity threats require coordinated action across sectors, bringing together operators, manufacturers, governments, development finance institutions, and civil society. Regulators can foster this collaboration by convening dialogue, supporting industry-led initiatives, and working in partnership with industry on priority policy areas.

International cooperation and cross-border consistency strengthen the enabling environment at a global level. Fragmented regulation raises compliance costs and diverts resources from investment, while spectrum harmonisation and efforts to promote interoperability at a technical level allows connectivity providers to operate more efficiently, reduces equipment costs, and supports wider coverage and innovation worldwide.

CONCLUSION

The adoption of the goals and application of the principles above would not only help close the usage gap, adding \$3.5 trillion to global GDP by 2030. It would also enable the creation of an environment which in which resilient connectivity infrastructure can be deployed at pace with technological progress. At the GSR and beyond, the GSMA looks forward to supporting regulators to design frameworks that enable network investment while tackling barriers to internet adoption, ensuring that digital markets deliver for all.