ACCELERATING ACTION FOR THE NEXT 10 YEARS OF ICT DEVELOPMENT

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE UN BROADBAND COMMISSION

The world in 2020 is in a state of unprecedented flux because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The broadband ecosystem has proven its scalability and resilience to keep health, education and financial systems, and whole economies, operating. Once again broadband has demonstrated its essential role in fueling the achievement of the SDGs. But COVID-19 also uncovered how the lack of connectivity especially among marginalized communities is widening the gap between rich and poor, and further growing the digital divide. Building back better and faster with broadband will require an emphasis on digital infrastructure and technologies in the pandemic response, recovery, and resiliency-building efforts to prepare against such future shocks, but more importantly to spur achievement of the SDGs.

Today, 174 countries worldwide have a broadband plan of some sort, with several countries currently in the process of adopting one. As the UN Secretary-General has called on all sectors of society to mobilize for a decade of action towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals, expanding broadband infrastructure and ensuring universal access to the connectivity ecosystem is critical for the global community to make progress towards the SDGs. Some countries have successfully implemented a number of policy reforms echoed by the Broadband Commission. However, opportunity remains for countries, including in the SA-ME-NA region to further their efforts to improve the broadband ecosystem in their countries by continuing to adopt more of the recommendations put forth by the Commission, with a focus on implementation.

The following Policy Recommendations are the range of unique messaging adapted from the contribution from **Commissioner Bocar BA** in his proposed advocacy plan for the Broadband Commission.

1. Implement new approaches and frameworks for spectrum allocation and licensing
2. Use of universal service funds to develop broadband
3. Update ICT regulations to promote more investment and market approaches for sustainability
4. Merge regulation and convergent services
5. Lower taxations and duties
6. Make broadband affordable by adopting appropriate policy and regulation
7. Foster locally relevant content creation and local hosting
8. Promote free flow of data
9. Implement e-government initiatives
10. Monitor and collect reliable ICT data
11. Build human digital capacity and skills to help users, SMEs and public sector agencies make the most of digital opportunities
12. Consider and, if appropriate, apply open access approaches to infrastructure
13. Undertake public consultations on policy and regulation
14. Incentivize and accelerate broadband investment
15. Foster digital innovation by preserving intellectual property (IP) rights
16. Improve IoT and Smart City policy frameworks
17. Incentivize PPP
18. Promote advanced market commitments for rural broadband access
19. Identify champions or leaders in broadband to mobilize political and technology support
20. Improve right-of-way regulations
21. Encourage e-business and entrepreneurship
22. Support efforts to provide broadband connectivity to refugees and displaced individuals
23. Include in broadband plans efforts on digital inclusion, measures to protect children online, a focus on limiting environmental impacts and addressing climate, and public access initiatives
24. Expand initiatives to map network coverage and infrastructure needs, to develop priority lists for investment
25. Integrate gender in national broadband plans and strategies and undertake action plans to advance gender equality in access to broadband
26. Boost affordability and usability of broadband-enabled products and services, with a focus on addressing barriers faced by those at risk of being left behind

While 174 countries now have a national broadband plan, more work must be done to monitor and evaluate the current state of implementation of these national plans. In some cases, even after publishing and endorsing a national plan, government transitions and competing priorities lead to situations where national plans are no longer effectively being implemented and/or targets need to be revised in order to have impact on broadband adoption. Ensuring that national broadband plans are designed to increase network availability, affordability, safety and broadband adoption requires plans that are multifaceted, incorporating many, if not all, of the recommendations that the Commission has been advocating. To implement the above Policy Recommendations, countries will need to adopt various approaches to funding these plans ranging from dedicated funds, to universal service funds, direct government subsidies and grants, government equity and debts to public-private partnerships. It will also be essential to look into the next century financing and funding models for infrastructure development, and also to look into Artificial Intelligence as a catalyst for broadband development, particularly in the provision of healthcare solutions.