1110 Vermont Ave NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005 USA
a4ai.org

Expert Group Meeting on "Socially just transition towards sustainable development: The role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all" - United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs - UNDESA's Division for Inclusive Social Development, in collaboration with UNCTAD and ITU

July 2020

Submission by the Alliance for Affordable Internet

Summary

The Alliance for Affordable Development (A4AI) would like to thank the organizers for the invitation to attend the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs - UNDESA's "Expert Group Meeting on Socially just transition towards sustainable development: The role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all" organized by the Division for Inclusive Social Development, in collaboration with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and International Telecommunications Union (ITU).

The "Expert Group Meeting is convened in preparation for the fifty-ninth session of the Commission for Social Development ("Commission"), which will be held in February 2021 and "is expected to produce a negotiated policy outcome (a resolution) on the priority theme", as per requested described in the *Draft Aide-Memoire* of the event. The "short written paper" hereunder is a contribution to "the work of the Commission by providing concrete, evidence-based recommendations on policies for enabling a socially just transition towards sustainable development, with a focus on the role of digital technologies", as well as "to provide inputs to the report of the Secretary-General on the priority theme". The following is our response to the meeting's call. The document below presents an overview of recent evidenced based research documents developed by A4AI addressing **(i) practical steps that can be taken by governments while facing the COVID-19 crisis; (ii) the new "meaningful connectivity standard" (MC standard)**; and **(iii) the rural broadband policy framework (RBPF).**

The policy recommendations outlined below are connected to the "role of digital technologies in a socially just transition"; to the "kind of national strategies and policy measures (…) would be necessary to enable developing countries to leverage digital technologies for social development"; as well as to the policies that "are necessary to ensure that no one is left behind in the transition towards a more inclusive and sustainable societies", which are some of the issues to be discussed during the Expert Group meetings.

1110 Vermont Ave NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005 USA
a4ai.org

The Expert Group Meeting discussions are also aligned with the goals of Web Foundation's **Contract for the Web**, a strong mechanism for the promotion of an open and free web. The Contract for the Web was created by representatives from over 80 organizations, representing governments, companies and civil society, and sets out commitments to guide digital policy agendas. It has nine principles. Please check the Contract's website for further information.[1]

1. What is the Alliance for Affordable Internet?

The Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) is the leading advocate for affordable and meaningful broadband in the world. A4AI is an initiative hosted at the World Wide Web Foundation (Web Foundation), whose founder is Sir Tim Berners Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web. With only half of the world's population connected to the internet today and the digital gender gap widening, there is much to do to achieve the SDG goal 9.c 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, and SDG goal 5.b to enhancing the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women. The Alliance for Affordable Internet and the Web Foundation believe that there are opportunities and challenges with harnessing new and emerging technologies to achieve these sustainable development goals and others.

A4AI is a global coalition working to drive down the cost of internet access in low- and middle-income countries through policy and regulatory reform. It is driven by the belief that affordability should not be a barrier to internet access. We use a combination of advocacy, research, and in-country engagement to develop the policies needed to reduce the cost to connect and enable everyone, everywhere to afford to come online. A4AI brings together businesses, governments, and civil society actors from across the globe to deliver the policies needed to reduce the cost to connect and make universal, affordable internet access a reality for all. Please see A4AI's website for more information.[2]

2. COVID-19 Policy Brief

In April 2020 A4AI and the Web Foundation released a series of policy briefs to address the COVID19 pandemic response. One of the briefs is the "COVID-19 Access and Affordability Policy Brief", recommending governments, companies and civil society take urgent actions to bring as

[1] Web Foundation's Contract for the Web: https://contractfortheweb.org/
[2] A4AI's Website: https://a4ai.org/

1110 Vermont Ave NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005 USA
a4ai.org

many people online as possible during the global emergency. As suggested in the Brief, **governments** should:

- Commit to providing all necessary support to keep citizens connected. Secure free access and connectivity during this crisis through initiatives such as national connectivity pledges and solidarity plans;
- Remove taxes which prevent consumers from accessing and using the internet;
- Use available funds and resources to address urgent access gaps and lack of devices;
- End internet shutdowns immediately;
- Take swift regulatory action to increase access and affordability; and
- Guarantee the safety of technical workers building and maintaining critical infrastructure networks;
- **Take swift regulatory action to increase access and affordability**.

In regards to **regulatory actions focused on addressing access and affordability issues**, governments should:

- Loosen permitting rules to **speed up roll out of critical infrastructure** (e.g. fiber networks) to unserved areas;
- Expand services to underserved or unserved communities by **making it easier for smaller companies to enter the market and alternative models like community networks to thrive**. This can be done by freeing up needed spectrum to increase traffic and loosening regulations to encourage new entrants;
- Encourage **increased sharing of network resources between operators** to ensure quality, reliable service to all customers, regardless of their network. This will further expand access, especially in rural and peri-urban areas with limited service providers.

Further details related to the recommendations outlined above were provided. Additional recommendations to companies, civil society organizations and citizens are also provided in the Brief. These recommendations are based on the extensive work, evidence-based research and applied projects A4AI has done in access and connectivity issues over the past years including, most recently, Meaningful Connectivity.

3. What is the meaningful connectivity standard (MC standard)?

To raise the bar for internet access, the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) developed **"Meaningful Connectivity**" — a new standard that measures not only if someone has access to the internet, but the level of connection they have. The Meaningful Connectivity standard is therefore a tool which addresses the quality of access and sets more ambitious policy goals for digital development. Considering that the level of connectivity, its affordability and quality varies

1110 Vermont Ave NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005 USA
a4ai.org

widely across different countries and regions, it is necessary to understand which minimum thresholds should be in place. Thus, the MC standard sets these **minimum thresholds across the four dimensions** of internet access that matter most to users, according to the following:

- Regular internet use - minimum threshold: **daily use**
- An appropriate device - minimum threshold: **access to a smartphone**
- Enough data - minimum threshold: **an unlimited broadband connection at home or a place of work or study**
- A fast connection - minimum threshold: **4G mobile connectivity**

While this seems simple, it is grounded on evidence-based, measurable, and relevant criteria to make it an effective standard. Indeed, it is a result of a series of consultations with different stakeholders, a series of research exercises including nationally representative surveys of approximately 6000 people, and in depth (focus group) discussions with over 120 people in three countries. All these efforts allowed for the feasibility and utility of the thresholds to be tested. Countries are encouraged to explore this standard taking into consideration their peculiar context. A4AI is preparing to publish **further policy guidance on the MC to guide decision makers willing to incorporate this standard.**

4. What is the Rural Broadband Policy Framework (RBPF) and its policy recommendations?

In order to achieve the universal goals for reducing inequality and achieving universal access by 2030, clear frameworks that can guide and speed up progress are crucial. This was the motivation for A4AI in partnership with the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and Facebook, to develop and publish the Rural Broadband Policy Framework (RBPF) to provide guidance to help address the persistent 'Digital Divide' faced by people living in rural areas. The RBPF acknowledges that "rural areas face special connectivity-related challenges and other severe divides not faced in urbanized areas", and provides "a basis for considering and adopting policy approaches most likely to facilitate the deployment and adoption of new and/or better broadband infrastructure and services in underserved rural areas".

Rural broadband policies should satisfy, at a minimum, the following criteria:

- Improve the availability of high-quality, affordable broadband services in underserved rural areas;
- Draw from real-world experience—locally, regionally, and globally;
- Harness the resources and capabilities of the private sector and complementary providers, such as community networks;

1110 Vermont Ave NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005 USA
a4ai.org

- Be comprehensive; and
- Be gender responsive.

The effective implementation of rural broadband policies will require that evidence and standards are in place. Further, a series of high-level recommendations that are intended to assist policymakers in crafting the policies that will support rural broadband development were identified.

1. **Harness market competition while addressing market failures**. For example, the RBPF encourages infrastructure sharing at the wholesale level, which will ultimately facilitate greater competition at the retail level. Countries such as Mexico and Rwanda have already done this through public private partnerships. Further, Universal Service and Access Funds (USAFs) can also be used to support these shared wholesale models.

2. **Streamline regulatory processes**, such as eliminating policies and regulations that are not necessary to achieve a valid and well-defined objective; creating a supportive regulatory environment for nascent rural operations; including space for innovations to scale; and simplifying regulations governing market entry in rural areas.

3. **Invest in and improve public access and universal service and access funds (USAFs).** For example, employ public access facilities as community institutions to ensure broader socio-economic impact in society, and establish and implement effective USAFs to support investments in underserved rural areas. Further, it is crucial that USAFs operate under nondiscriminatory conditions and according to transparent and consultative processes, incorporating stakeholder inputs and priorities.

4. **Effective management of spectrum resources.** Unlocking spectrum; applying more flexible rules for spectrum use in rural areas; enabling unlicensed use of spectrum at additional bands; and making spectrum available on a technology-neutral basis; and encouraging spectrum sharing under appropriate conditions are some of the recommendations.

5. **Leverage innovative technologies, architectures, and business models**. The RBPF should afford operators flexibility in structuring their networks and businesses and promote the free flow of information. This means, no blocking, throttling, filtering, or other means of limitation.

6. **Adopt appropriate tax and fee structures**. A wide variety of countries have high taxes and fees applied to rural areas, and policymakers should consider reducing them. Further, ensuring that the tax regime is competitively and technologically neutral and non-distortive is key. Indeed, policymakers should ensure, for example, that tax regimes do not render broadband services unaffordable.

1110 Vermont Ave NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005 USA
a4ai.org

7. **Stimulate demand for broadband services.** In order to achieve this goal, enhancing digital literacy amongst the rural population; protecting the safety, privacy, and personal data of rural populations; and facilitating the development of relevant content that are responsive to local needs and languages are key.

8. **Establish monitoring and accountability mechanisms.** Such assurances can lead to a successful implementation of the policy actions recommended above, as they help ensure that the multi-year momentum is kept.

5. Brief conclusions

We hope the above publications, research and their ensuing recommendations have provided some depth on A4AI's continuous work towards internet access, affordability as well as connectivity policy and regulation. Both the meaningful connectivity standard and the rural broadband policy framework outlined above are crucial to achieving universal and affordable access for inclusive social development. It is important to add that this overview does not reflect the full content of our work. We therefore encourage you to explore further details about the research and policy framework in the original documents and accompanying blogs outlined below.

Additional policy recommendations related to the above documents will soon be published by A4AI to guide the policymaking process. We hope our contribution here helps to stimulate a fruitful debate in the upcoming Expert Group Meeting.

1110 Vermont Ave NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005 USA
a4ai.org

References:

A4AI. 2020a. *Covid-19 Policy Brief: Internet Access & Affordability*. https://a4ai.org/covid-19-policy-brief-internet-access-and-affordability/ .

———. *2020 COVID19 Policy briefings.* https://webfoundation.org/research/covid-19-policy-briefings/

———. 2020b. *Meaningful Connectivity Standard*. https://1e8q3q16vyc81g8l3h3md6q5f5e-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Meaningful-Connectivity.pdf .

———. 2020c. *Rural Broadband Policy Framework*. https://a4ai.org/rural-broadband-policy-framework/ .

Sarpong E. 2020. COVID19 shows why internet Access is a basic Right, We must get everyone connected.https://webfoundation.org/2020/04/covid-19-shows-why-internet-access-is-a-basic-right-we-must-get-everyone-connected/

Thakur D., Woodhouse T., Jorge, S. 2020. *Meaningful Connectivity, Advancing the Open Internet during COVID19.* Medianama. https://www.medianama.com/2020/05/223-meaningful-connectivity-covid19-dhanaraj-thakur-teddy-woodhouse-sonia-jorge/