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| **Council Working Group on International Internet-related Public Policy Issues Sixteenth meeting – Virtual meeting, 23 September 2021** |  |
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|  | **Document CWG-Internet-16/6-E** |
|  | **10 September 2021** |
|  | **English only** |

**Contribution by Australia**

SUBMISSION TO THE OPEN CONSULTATION ON MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND FUTURE PANDEMICS

Australia is pleased to submit its response to the OPC-Internet on *Internet-related public policy in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and future pandemics* to CWG-Internet for noting, with the aim to encourage collaborative discussion during the meeting. The contribution is attached below in [Annex A](#AnnexA).

The Australian government acknowledges that the internet plays a vital role in connecting populations, enabling continued workforce participation, social interaction and economic opportunities for digital business, as seen through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our contribution first posits that, Internet accessibility should be expanded for unserved or underserved populations to share the associated social and economic benefits. Second, Internet-related public policy should ensure the safe and secure use of online services, to facilitate people-to-people connections. Third, the multi‑stakeholder approach to Internet governance is key to expanding accessibility, enhancing connectivity, addressing barriers and ensuring equity in order to promote an open, free and secure Internet.

Australia looks forward to collaborative discussion on Internet-related public policy during the upcoming CWG-Internet.

**ANNEX A**

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

# Online Open Consultation on

**“The role of the Internet and international Internet-related public policy in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and possible future pandemics”**

*(February-September 2021)*

**Summary**

The Australian Government recognises that the Internet plays an important role in connecting our populations, stimulating the economy through digital business, and providing opportunities for social inclusion and advancement. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of connecting our populations, as the pandemic has further increased our reliance on digital connectivity for vital services, economic activity, and information. With this in mind, it is vital that work related to Internet-related public policy issues focuses on expanding Internet accessibility, so people can stay connected to their family, friends, colleagues and the broader community, and may participate in and benefit from the associated social and economic benefits. Promoting the multi-stakeholder approach to Internet governance and public policies that ensure citizens can engage safely and confidently with online services, such as video conferencing and social media apps, are crucial to facilitating this connection. This will play an important role in mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 and any future pandemics.

**“The role of the Internet and international Internet-related public policy in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and possible future pandemics”**

1. Introduction

The Australian Government is pleased to submit a contribution to the open consultation of the ITU Council Working Group on International Internet-related Public Policy Issues regarding the role of the Internet and international Internet‑related public policy in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and future pandemics.

The Internet plays an important role in connecting our populations, stimulating the economy through digital business, and providing opportunities for social inclusion and advancement. Existing barriers to Internet connectivity have been exacerbated and highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as our reliance on digital connectivity for vital services, economic activity, and information has increased. Rapid digitalisation and connectivity in this respect is vital to circumvent the challenges to regular business caused by COVID-19. The importance of this is demonstrated through many international forums, including the ITU, where meetings have rapidly moved to the online environment. With this in mind, it is vital that work related to Internet-related public policy issues address the following aims:

* Expanding Internet accessibility, particularly for unserved or underserved populations, so they may participate in and benefit from the associated social and economic benefits;
* Ensuring safe and secure use of online services, to facilitate people-to-people connections; and
* Promoting the multi-stakeholder approach to Internet governance as key to expanding accessibility, enhancing connectivity, addressing barriers and ensuring equity in order to promote an open, free and secure Internet.

Focusing on these objectives will play an important role in mitigating the impacts of COVID‑19 and any future pandemics.

1. Connecting unserved and underserved populations

The Internet profoundly enables sustainable development and inclusive economic growth.   
[A 2016 OECD paper on *Economic and Social Benefits of Internet Openness*](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/science-and-technology/economic-and-social-benefits-of-internet-openness_5jlwqf2r97g5-en) found that Internet openness benefits innovation, trade, entrepreneurship, society and the economy.

The proven socio-economic benefits and opportunities provided by the Internet advances the case for global proliferation and accessibility. However, as the [*United Nations Comprehensive Response to COVID-19*](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un-comprehensive-response-to-covid-19.pdf)identifies, the COVID-19 pandemic has cost the global economy over $375 million each month since it began, with disadvantaged peoples being the most significantly harmed. During the pandemic, inequalities faced by vulnerable groups (include a [lack of access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/)) have exacerbated existing barriers to the Internet, including [digital illiteracy and unaffordability](https://www.itu.int/en/publications/ITU-D/pages/publications.aspx?parent=D-IND-WTID.OL-2019&media=electronic). The ITU is well placed to support telecommunications/ICTs capacity-building efforts to ensure that the benefits brought by digital connectivity are accessible globally, and has an important role to play in improving equitable digital skilling, access, and online safety practices. The ITU is already doing important work in this space, such as [Connect2Recover](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Pages/connect-2-recover.aspx), a global ITU initiative that aims to use technological solutions to support COVID-19 recovery efforts and maintain socio-economic opportunities during the pandemic.

1. Safe online services

The global impact of COVID-19 means people are spending more time at home — and more time online. For everyone, staying connected using digital communication tools even when we are physically apart is vital for our wellbeing. However, as more people become connected and spend extra time online, some Internet users are exploiting the situation to harm or scam people while they are at greater risk.

Ensuring safe use of online services, to facilitate positive people-to-people connections is critical. Online safety should be a key consideration of Internet public policy, especially in international and multi-stakeholder settings, to ensure people across the world can safely enjoy the benefits of connectivity while in a pandemic.

1. Managing rapid digitalisation and equitable Internet access

Digital connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled the continuation of vital services and for populations to continue receiving and engaging in socio-economic benefits, ensuring citizens can engage in government services, work, education, information, and self‑expression. In 2016, the UN Human Rights Council recognised that human rights apply on the Internet just as they do offline, and must be upheld as the Internet plays an increasingly prevalent role in enabling socio-economic and technological developments [(A/HRC/Res/32/13)](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/845727?ln=en). This point was re-affirmed by the UN Human Rights Council in 2018, which also recognised the global and open nature of the Internet as a driving force in accelerating progress towards development - including in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals [(A/HRC/Res/38/7)](https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/38/7).

Ensuring an open, free and secure Internet amidst the challenges of COVID-19 highlights the importance of effectively managed multi-stakeholder approach. The multi-stakeholder approach to Internet governance is a decentralised governance model that places individuals, industry, non-commercial interests and government on an equal level, reflects the Internet’s collaborative origins, and allows all stakeholders to contribute to discussions on the policy and technical management of the Internet. This is salient as the global population becomes increasingly reliant on connectivity and digitalisation due to the impacts of COVID-19, and access to transparent, secure and trusted digital systems underpinned by good governance practices is a requirement. Internet‑related public policy matters require open and decentralised governance to promote an open, free, safe and secure Internet. The multi‑stakeholder approach will ensure that citizens can access and engage in government services, work, education, information, and self‑expression.

1. Conclusion

The Internet plays an important role in connecting our populations, stimulating the economy through digital business, and providing opportunities for social inclusion and advancement. The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased our reliance on digital connectivity for vital services and has highlighted the importance of connecting our populations, ensuring the safe and secure use of online services, and the ongoing need for international cooperation on Internet-related public policy management. Focusing on these objectives will play an important role in mitigating the impacts of COVID‑19 and any future pandemics, and the multi‑stakeholder approach is key to expanding accessibility, enhancing connectivity, addressing barriers and ensuring equity – and promoting an open, free, safe and secure Internet.

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