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**Introduction**

The Internet Society appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Sixth World Telecommunication/Information and Communication Technology Policy Forum 2021 (WTPF-21). We appreciate the implementation of this collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach, which has demonstrated its effectiveness over the past years. Since our establishment 29 years ago, the Internet Society has been a leader in catalyzing initiatives that range from capacity building to community support, to the development and improvement of Internet infrastructure and network resilience. In pursuit of our vision of a globally connected, secure and trustworthy Internet for everyone, the Internet Society has been working closely with global, regional, and local entities on the development and deployment of Internet infrastructure, technologies, open standards, regulations, policies, and policy frameworks. We work with partners to build, promote, and defend the Internet.

Since September 2019, the Internet Society has been a member of the Informal Experts Group (IEG) to prepare for the WTPF-21. As a Sector Member, we engaged in this process with the objective of contributing to a positive and constructive WTPF-21. In the comments that follow we highlight some specific areas where we believe additions and improvements to the current text in the ITU Secretary General’s Report and Draft Opinions are possible.

**Comments on the ITU Secretary General’s Report**

We are happy to see the report emphasize the importance of an enabling environment to “promote investment and innovation through competition, capacity building transparency, flexibility and the active participation of all relevant stakeholders.” The report underlines that an enabling environment should support effective policymaking for infrastructure investment, which is the desired outcome; however, we believe that this is reliant on a variety of preconditions. Developing and expanding infrastructure, especially to connect those without Internet access, requires understanding local circumstances and needs, and responding accordingly. We have seen that frameworks and key principles that enable inclusive, open, collaborative, participatory processes have a high effect while also allowing stakeholders to tailor infrastructure needs based on the realities of their local or regional surroundings. In section 2.6 we see an opportunity to enhance the report's text to support enabling environments and inclusive processes for effective policymaking.

**Comments on Draft Opinion 1**

We commend the initiative in this draft Opinion to invite Member States to consider and support innovative connectivity solutions, as well as an enabling environment for these solutions. Furthermore, our experience shows that it is important to recognize them as an enabler of sustainable development, that empowers marginalized groups and individuals and fosters local entrepreneurship. We believe that integrating and highlighting the term “complementary access solutions,” as well as adding examples such as community networks to the first topic of this opinion's views, would highlight the diverse connectivity options and experiences we have seen around the world.

**Comments on Draft Opinion 2**

It is our view that topic 4, in the section that “*Invites Member States* “ to consider adopting policy and regulatory measures that facilitate infrastructure deployment in rural and isolated areas, including the sharing of infrastructure, interconnection and effective use of spectrum,” is critical to achieving universal connectivity by 2030 in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

We would like to build on Draft Opinion 2 by inviting Member States to consider regulatory frameworks that:

(a) enable access to spectrum in rural, remote, unserved and under-served areas, through spectrum sharing frameworks (“use it or share it”), dynamic allocation of spectrum and the availability of unlicensed spectrum in as many bands as possible considering new technologies, such as Wi-Fi 6 in the 6Ghz band;

(b) streamline licensing, making processes accessible and affordable; and

(c) utilize Universal Service Funds in innovative ways to reach the hardest places to connect.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Comments on Draft Opinion 3**

The Internet Society believes that enabling capacity building and digital literacy in rural, urban, remote, unserved and under-served areas is essential to achieve universal connectivity. Localized efforts with complementary access solutions such as community networks, enhance digital literacy and capabilities of local communities, by promoting self-made and self-sustained connectivity models[[2]](#footnote-2). Therefore, we propose including "infrastructure deployment" as an essential area for skills development on topic 1 of *Is of View* section of this opinion.

**Comments on Draft Opinion 4**

The ITU’s report on “Measuring digital development – Facts and Figures 2020” shows that while there is still an upward global trend on bandwidth usage, the rollout of mobile-broadband networks is slowing down, affecting primarily rural areas in Least Developed Countries (LDCs)[[3]](#footnote-3).

We commend efforts to raise awareness of the challenges of Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and would like to encourage Member States’ efforts to approach connectivity development in a multistakeholder manner, with innovative and complementary access solutions such as community networks.

**Comments on Draft Opinion 5**

The Internet is now more than ever a lifeline for many around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of connectivity for work, education, healthcare, and for keeping in touch with our loved ones. Additionally, the Internet unlocks human capabilities and provides the platform upon which an emerging digital economy can thrive, and as it becomes more essential, so does the task of connecting those who have been left behind. We encourage and invite Member States to consider complementary access solutions and initiatives, such as community networks, as one of the tools which address the digital divide, support local communities through future pandemics, and put us on the path to achieve universal connectivity.

**Conclusion**

As we reflect on the lessons learned over the past two years, let us not tire in our efforts to expand infrastructure and enable complementary forms of connectivity, to develop more efficient and effective regulatory and policy frameworks that enable faster network deployment, and to collaborate on innovative financing approaches for infrastructure development. We look forward to the forthcoming multistakeholder dialogue at WTPF-21 and wish participants a successful result.

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1. Unleashing Community Networks: Innovative Licensing approaches: https://www.internetsociety.org/resources/2018/unleashing-community-networks-innovative-licensing-approaches/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Several examples of how this takes place can be found through the case studies developed by the Internet Society: <https://www.internetsociety.org/issues/community-networks/success-stories/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2020.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)