

1. What are the challenges and opportunities faced by policy makers and regulators in embracing transformative technologies for greater impact?

Challenges: As a regulator the main challenge facing the embracing of transformative technologies in St. Vincent and the Grenadines is what we refer to as access to the 2Cs (consistent connectivity). In a nutshell our country has an “affordability” challenge that contributes significantly to our digital divide. Our penetration rate for mobile phones is 94% of which 82% are smart phones. Of this figure 90% are prepaid subscribers. Fixed broadband penetration is at 70%.

However, only 66% of our mobile prepaid subscribers maintain a regular data plan. We believe the main reason for this is the way these plans are structured by the service providers in our region. Without consistent connectivity reduces the ability of our citizens to properly partake in a digital ecosystem which is the main driver of transformative technologies.

We have been able over the last 2 decades since liberalization of our telecom space to raise the penetration of mobile phones to above 90% in parallel with providing LTE mobile coverage to more than 90% of our populated areas. The challenge is how do we have the remaining 34% of our prepaid customers be connected to the internet each day of the month? Thereby being more inclusive and reaching our goal of consistent connectivity for all.

Opportunities: One of the greatest opportunities we have seen as a regulator in recent years is the ability to gather feedback from customers on wide ranging issues from QoS matters to penetration data using online survey tools. It allows for a lower cost of gathering data from consumers as well as have that data ready for analysis in a shorter time thereby allowing for faster regulatory responses. In addition, such tools also allow us to inform customers in a more timely and inclusive manner of information to facilitate more informed decisions.

2. What are the key regulatory measures and guiding principles to follow to foster positive and inclusive impact of transformative technologies? We are of the view that one of the most critical regulatory measures that needs to be examined to enable positive and inclusive impact is that of “affordability of services”. While this measure is recognized globally, we believe it needs to be redefined for specific markets and regions. It cannot be looked at as just a percentage of income. For countries with very low unemployment, it could be considered relevant but for underdeveloped and developing countries with high unemployment figures where there is no income then we must look at what “affordability” really means and how do we ensure services are affordable to all.

3. How to drive positive behaviors of market players? How to minimize risks while maximizing benefits?

This will depend on the number of players in the market. What we will have to do in a duopoly market will be quite different to that of a multiplayer market. In our region we are dominated by duopoly markets since liberalization which is mainly due to the small population sizes. In a sector that is dominated by multinational publicly traded companies that need to consistently show growth but operate in mature telecom markets, it's very difficult for the customer to be put before the shareholders. We can either try to just be silo driven and look specifically at regulatory interventions to force positive behavior which can easily result in costs being passed on to customers or we can have a wider approach that will look at facilitating general economic development that can be a win-win for both the market players and customers. This is where an effective multi-sector legal framework comes into play. One that covers trade, digital assets, fintech, data protection and cyber security etc. Thereby allowing for easier bi-directional trade of goods and services and building trust among all stakeholders. Such a framework when enacted and operationalized will touch on essential pillars of our economy thereby driving digital transformation both within and across our borders and will result in GDP growth. Such GDP growth would minimize negative behaviors of market players, minimize risks while maximizing benefits across the economy and not just in the telecom sector. We need to accelerate this process of having our small developing economies being more interoperable digitally with those of the developed countries and which we believe is much easier to accomplish at this time of such high convergence of technologies compared to a decade ago.

As Saint Vincent and the Grenadines seek to build a more inclusive and resilient digital economy, we have focused to do so on the three pillars of:

1. Policy and regulation
2. Infrastructure
3. Innovation and digital Skills development