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| Connecting rural communities, a priority for Africa | | | | |
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| **Agenda item:**  Item 8  Summary:  This contribution intends to spark the discussions on ways to connect African rural communities.  Expected results:  RPM-AFR is invited to examine this document.  References:   1. The Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020-2030), <https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38507-doc-dts-english.pdf> 2. Digital Ethiopia 2025 |

# Connecting rural communities, a priority for Africa

The African population is growing at a fast rate. This requires governments to find ways to create increasing number of jobs as well as provide services such as health, education, government services to a growing number of populations. This creates significant strain on African governments, especially in rural areas where 70% of the Africa population lives. One major opportunity to create jobs as well as to provide the services that citizens require is through digital transformation. The digital economy brings a sea of opportunities for African countries to create jobs and increase the reach of services such as education, health, government services to under-served communities using electronic methods.

Cognizant of this opportunity, in May 2020, the African Union adopted the Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020-2030) to "harness digital technologies and innovation to transform African societies and economies to promote Africa's integration, generate inclusive economic growth, stimulate job creation, break the digital divide, and eradicate poverty for the continent’s socio-economic development ...."[[1]](#footnote-1). Similarly, the government of Ethiopia, in the Digital Ethiopia 2025 strategy[[2]](#footnote-2), asserted its objective to develop "an inclusive digital economy approach that will catalyse the realisation of Ethiopia’s broader development vision."

Both strategies aim to develop an inclusive digital society. In particular, they stress on the importance of including the rural population that represent 70% of the African and 80% of the Ethiopian population. This is an important but difficult objective considering that the rural population is currently left behind the digital economy. For example, in 2017, Internet penetration in rural Ethiopia was only 4% while the country's Internet penetration was at 18.6%2. And of course, in the 21st century, it is difficult to have a digital economy without Internet penetration.

The importance of inclusive connectivity has been very clear in the past year marred by COVID-19. Due to lockdowns and movement restrictions, most schools and many services were inaccessible physically. However, thanks to the Internet, many children, mostly in urban areas, could continue to study online. Many services continued to be accessible exclusively online. Here again, only those who had an Internet connection, could benefit from those services and the rural areas were at a disadvantage.

There are many challenges to connecting rural communities. For example, access to electricity is a major issue since while 77% of sub-Saharan Africans living in urban areas have access to electricity only 31.5% of those living in rural areas have access to electricity[[3]](#footnote-3). There are also other challenges such as illiteracy that is higher in rural areas. And, in many cases, the Internet service might be available, but it might not be used since it is not affordable, the users don't have the devices to access, etc. The GSMA Mobile Internet Connectivity 2020 Sub-Saharan Africa Factsheet[[4]](#footnote-4) indicates the usage gap (people who have coverage but don't use the Internet) has been increasing year after year to reach 49% of the sub-Saharan population in 2019.

In 2019, Ethiopia embarked in a reform of its telecom sector to bring affordable access to telecommunication services to all its citizens. In particular, by liberalizing the telecom sector, it has opened the market to new telecommunication operators that are expected to bring access to more citizens at an affordable cost. Thanks to this reform, two new nationwide full‐service telecommunications operators are expected to join the market in the coming months.

In addition, in order to bring affordable access to "all users regardless of their geographic location, physical or mental ability, race, gender, religion ..." the Ethiopian Communications Authority has established a Universal Access and Service Framework (UASF) that is expected to be approved by the council of ministers very soon. The framework establishes a Universal Access Fund (UAF) which role "shall be to supplement commercial service provision by offering financial incentives, where judged necessary". The fund will contribute to the development of the digital economy in phases. Phase 1 will be implemented in the first three years of the Fund and will focus amongst other things on extending "communications infrastructure and services to all administrative levels of human population in Ethiopia".

We know that UAF has mitigated success and we believe that discussing the successes and limitation of UAF at WTDC will benefit those countries who are starting to implement UAF as well as those who have already implementing it and are experiencing challenges.

We also believe that UAF is not a panacea and other measures should be taken in order to bring universal access, especially in sparsely populated rural areas where commercial operators might not be attracted to operate even with the financial incentives of the UAF. According to the World Bank 2019 press release[[5]](#footnote-5), providing dedicated broadband access for all in Africa demands more 100 Billion USD, which cannot be covered by UAF. African countries should find other innovative ways to connect the unconnected, so that they are not left behind the digital society for decades to come.

We therefore suggest that the WTDC discusses complementary ways to connect rural areas, including the development of non-commercial services such as community networks and National Research and Education Networks (NRENs).

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1. THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY FOR AFRICA (2020-2030), <https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38507-doc-dts-english.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. DIGITAL ETHIOPIA 2025 – A STRATEGY FOR ETHIOPIA INCLUSIVE PROSPERITY, <https://www.pmo.gov.et/media/other/b2329861-f9d7-4c4b-9f05-d5bc2c8b33b6.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. World Bank data (2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Mobile-Internet-Connectivity-SSA-Fact-Sheet.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/10/17/achieving-broadband-access-for-all-in-africa-comes-with-a-100-billion-price-tag](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/10/17/achieving-broadband-access-for-all-in-africa-comes-with-a-100-billion-price-tag)) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)