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| **Telecommunication Development Sector**  **Study Groups** | | A close up of a sign  Description automatically generated |
| **ITU-D Study Group 1 Rapporteur Group Meetings** | | |
| **Geneva, 21 September – 2 October 2020** | | |
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| **8 September 2020** |
| **English only**  **DELAYED CONTRIBUTION** |
| Question 5/1: Telecommunications/ICTs for rural and remote areas | | |
| SOURCE: | Association for Progressive Communications (APC) | |
| TITLE: | The Role of Community Networks as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic | |
|  | | |
| Action required: | To be considered for presentation during the meeting | |
| *Keywords:* | *COVID-19, Community networks* | |

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| **Abstract:** Efforts to maintain telecommunications services in the wake of the massive increases in demand resulting from COVID-19 have received a significant amount of media coverage in recent months. Other important efforts to address affordable access in the wake of the pandemic have received less attention. In particular, the important role that community networks around the world have played in supporting their constituencies in a variety of ways aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic has largely escaped media attention. Beyond the provision of affordable access, many of these initiatives have expanded to production and sharing of essential health information in local languages, addressing misinformation, and supporting digital financial services. This submission assembles and analyses the efforts of community networks submitted to the REG4COVID platform [[1]](#footnote-1)in the past few months by APC’s partners. |
| **Lessons learned and suggested best-practices (if appropriate):**   * Community networks have made significant efforts to mitigate the effect of the pandemic in the communities they serve. * Their contributions have extended beyond the provision of affordable telecommunications infrastructure and now include a variety of content-related digital services including production and sharing of local information, use of multimedia capacity building tools and digital services to address financial exclusion. * Community networks continue to face regulatory barriers which severely limit their effectiveness in most developing countries. * Ensuring a more conducive national policy and regulatory environment for community networks will substantially increase their effectiveness and ability to scale and replicate. |

**Introduction**

The essential role that telecommunication services and internet access plays in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, and indeed in modern life in general, has become abundantly clear to all. Yet half the world remains unconnected to the internet. Recent actions by regulators around the world to help telecom operators deal with the additional strain on their networks have helped to increase available capacity for existing networks, particularly in urban areas. However, rural areas with sparse populations, and often lower income levels, have yet to see significant change in the availability of access.

Community networks are based on telecommunications infrastructure that is collectively owned and managed by members of the community for social purposes. Their general complementarity to traditional commercial access models, together with their socio- economic benefits in rural areas, were covered in APC’s previous contribution to this study group[[2]](#footnote-2). This submission focusses on their role in the COVID-19 pandemic.

While most other telecommunication operators have focused mainly in maintaining their services during the pandemic, community networks, have gone an extra mile providing support to the communities they serve in a variety of ways aiming at addressing the additional challenges the pandemic has created. Note that most of these responses were added to the REG4COVID[[3]](#footnote-3) platform created by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) for regulators and other interested parties to share and discuss their own initiatives to deal with the outbreak. Some of these initiatives include the creation of additional affordable physical telecommunications infrastructure, producing health information in local languages, efforts to fight misinformation, and digital services that provide relevant content to local communities, such as financial services and community notice boards.

## AlterMundi, Argentina

In response to the pandemic, people’s lives have largely moved online. This puts in stark contrast the lives of those who have quality internet access and those who do not. AlterMundi’s priority in this time is providing connectivity to communities which have been ignored by private service providers because rural communities are not sufficiently profitable to justify the investment in telecommunications infrastructure. Given the implementation of social distancing measures, AlterMundi has developed new protocol guidelines for installations that guarantee the recommendations of social distancing and prevention of COVID-19[[4]](#footnote-4). These guidelines are currently being tested in 12 communities in the country.

## CooLab, Brazil

CooLab was founded to develop and expand the capacity and awareness of community-based, self-managed networks. Their belief is that this model creates opportunities for those who cannot access market-based connectivity options, as well as those who wish to control their own data and technological platforms. As the pandemic has altered domestic and economic habits, as well as the way in which data and information are disseminated, CooLab believes that community networks provide a valuable alternative. During this time, they are working to raise awareness of community networks in Brazil and providing support for partners and other civil society organisations who are implementing community networks. The pandemic has clarified the extent to which connectivity is crucial to accessing basic services and information. Since so many Brazilians rely on mobile data, a problem that arose early on in the pandemic was the data caps used by large telecommunications providers. In response, CooLab launched a campaign called #liberaowifi (translating to “free your WIFI”), which allows those with fibre data, ADSL, or extra mobile Wi-Fi to share their data with the community. This was implemented through channels on WhatsApp and Telegram. Another aspect of this programme was the distribution of ‘share box kits’, which consist of mobile devices that use data to create open temporary hotspots in unconnected communities.

Another aspect of CooLab’s work involves the provision of capacity for students to continue their education from home. Schools had recently banned smartphone usage in class; however, the pandemic has forced students online. Many of these digital platforms were not designed to be used over low bandwidth connections and do not allow students to work in a manner that functions with their living situations. As such, CooLab, along with local teachers and students, have begun work on free and open source educational frameworks which work within community networks that can be adapted for schools with fewer connectivity resources.

## Instituto [Bem Estar (IBE), Brasi](https://www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/CDS/REG4COVID/Display.asp?ID=54270)l

IBEBrasil focuses on the creation of community networks as a common good. Particularly during the pandemic, helping communities that have been excluded from the traditional avenues of information access to create and maintain their own networks is viewed by IBE as not only good for community health, but also good for socioeconomic development and the preservation of local culture. Given the lack of commercial interest in providing telecommunication services in rural areas, the communities have resorted to providing their own networks.

## Colnodo, Colombia

Colnodo assists indigenous and rural community networks in Colombia that previously had no access to quality communication services. Because of the pandemic, the Colnodo-supported networks have allowed residents of these communities to access information to learn about the virus virtually, preventing a community outbreak, which would not have been possible before the creation of local networks. In Cauca, in eastern Colombia, the indigenous Nasa people plan to use their networks to disseminate their own content to promote community health and education. Colnodo is currently building a wiki to discuss the processes involved in building, maintaining and managing community networks, so that communities across Colombia can share what they have learned with other interested parties and access a network of virtual support.

## Digital Empowerment Foundation, India

In India, the pandemic has created unexpected challenges, one of which is the reverse migration of workers from cities. These workers have been denied access to various aid programmes and basic facilities, like subsidised food and financial services. In response, the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) created an ICT-enabled relief programme, with more than 600 digital resource centres and more than 3,000 volunteers. These volunteers are delivering food packages, remote banking, tele-health programmes, and other emergency relief initiatives. Additionally, access to crisis counselling has been offered in response to the often-overwhelming impact of the pandemic on the personal lives of locals.

## Janastu, India

The pandemic disrupted Janastu’s community network development plans from the beginning – they were planning to send a team of eight to Uttar Pradesh in March, but only two were able to travel. They brought safety kits and wore face masks, but there was little social distancing taking place. They returned to Bengaluru the day before the nationwide lockdown was implemented. Originally, Janastu had planned to introduce WIFI mesh networks and Raspberry Pi based audio recorders to young women in Mirzapur to collect stories from the community. Lockdown meant forced re-strategising. New strategies were implemented, mostly around COVID-19 awareness and prevention. This included mask production, translating information into Kannada and other local languages, relief work in various communities, as well as story collection to hear how the pandemic was impacting their communities.

**Janastu-Futuretron Labs:**Futuretron Labs, which works on electric vehicle mobility, collaborated with Janastu once the pandemic began. The lab began producing three new products to help with curtailing the spread of the virus: a foot pedal-operated hand sanitiser, an automatic contactless sanitiser dispenser, and a UV-based disinfectant[[5]](#footnote-5).

**Janastu-Namma Halli Radio/Pragathi Foundation:** A mobile radio station in Tumakuru district has reached over 25,000 people in over 60 villages. It focuses on local languages and dialects, and students and volunteers have been helping with programme production. The production information is then shared through public service announcements in local villages. The focus has been on vital COVID-19 information, including preventing the spread of the infection, containment, personal hygiene and social distancing, as well as fighting disinformation by sharing information from experts.

## BAIF Development Research Foundation, India

The lack of digital services for remote villages, combined with the lack of work options for young women, has resulted in the eDost program to create a system of online services provided by women. The first eDost began in Maharashtra, in the village of Pathardi, and consisted of a woman named Anjali Tai offering financial services locally, which saved villagers from having to travel to the next town to procure such services. With support from APC, this model grew to 15 eDosts offering services such as cash withdrawal, money transfers and bill payments, among other financial services. The pandemic lockdown resulted in people being unable to leave their homes, and during this time, the Indian government also began offering financial support to community members. This is when the eDosts stepped up and offered financial services that enabled the community to withdraw funds and to recharge their cell phones from their front doors. Within a month, 10 eDosts offered services to 828 beneficiaries. The district authorities appreciated the project and have requested it be scaled up across the district and the programme also plans to expand into e‑governance and knowledge sharing services.

## The Spoken Tutorial, India

One of the many impacts of the pandemic has been on education, and as such, virtual learning and distance-learning platforms have become increasingly important. However, these initiatives are only available to people who have access to networks and connectivity, while there are still half a billion people in India without internet access. The Spoken Tutorial project, founded in 2009 and funded by the Indian government, aims to disseminate knowledge using free/libre and open source software, using 10-minute-long audio-video tutorials. Since the lockdown in India began, usage of the Spoken Tutorial has gone up astronomically. The main purpose of Spoken Tutorial is to promote IT literacy and address the information accessibility gap. It empowers communities to create their own content, in their own languages, and these products are then made available on the Spoken Tutorial website, easily accessible even without any prior knowledge of software technology, allowing students to download zip files in limited connectivity environments.

## Zenzeleni, South Africa

A challenge facing the Zenzeleni local access co-operative has been the lack of relevant, reliable and up-to-date information in rural communities, particularly in isiXhosa, the local language. Given that much of the nationally disseminated information was not relevant to their communities, Zenzeleni launched a digital Community Notice Board with health resources tailored specifically to the local communities, available for free to anyone connecting through Zenzeleni’s networks[[6]](#footnote-6). The notice board also includes guidelines to discern between accurate and verifiable information and misinformation. Access to reliable and affordable information is Zenzeleni’s priority, and it is exceptionally important during a global health crisis.

# About APC

The Association for Progressive Communications[[7]](#footnote-7), APC, is an international network founded in 1990 dedicated to empowering and supporting groups and individuals working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), including the internet. The APC network has 57 organisational members and 35 individual members active in 73 countries.

1. An online platform established by ITU for regulators, policy makers and other interested parties, to share and discuss their own initiatives to deal with the outbreak . see www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/CDS/REG4COVID/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. www.itu.int/md/D18-SG01.RGQ-C-0254/en [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/CDS/REG4COVID/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [altermundi.net/2020/05/22/protocolo-acompanamiento-redes-comunitarias-en-aislamiento-social/](https://altermundi.net/2020/05/22/protocolo-acompanamiento-redes-comunitarias-en-aislamiento-social/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. www.youtube.com/channel/UCfphwnMwIWuXkkXxHhUPtvQ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [zenzeleni.net/noticeboard/](https://zenzeleni.net/noticeboard/) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [www.apc.org](http://www.apc.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)