

# The Role of International Organisations

One of the main barriers to the adoption of an enabling regulatory framework for local operators is that few people know they even exist. This applies not only to the rural communities that are most likely to benefit, but also to policy makers and regulators, and development organisations.

Policy makers and regulators worldwide coordinate their efforts and share experiences as part of their engagement in different global and regional organizations. Each of these organizations, and the spaces they convene and their outputs, provide an opportunity for bringing the voice of community networks and introduce in their recommendations favorable wording that can then be used by champions at the national level to change local policy and regulations.

In this section, the different organizations, and their processes, where such an advocacy has taken place are first described and, where the outputs contain favorable language, excerpts beneficial for community networks included. As some people may want to go straight to the latter, without necessarily wanting read the entire wiki, the most favorable wording, classified by year, can be found at:

- 2014
  - [WTDC's ITU-D Recommendation 19](#).
- 2018
  - The [presentation](#) of the “The implementation of Recommendation 19 from ITU-D for the Americas Region”.
- 2019
  - Inclusion of CNs in the UN ECOSOC's [WSIS Resolution](#).
  - Africa Union [Declaration](#) requesting the promotion of CNs.
- 2020
  - Community Networks featured in different [ITU-D reports](#).
  - [ITU-D Study Groups reports](#) recommending regulation enabling CNs.
- 2021
  - Specific consultation and report about CNs at the [CWG-Internet](#).
  - Inclusion of CNs in the preparatory documents for [WTDC-21](#) as well as in the draft Action Plan for some regions.
  - The final versions of the reports of the [2017-2021 cycle for Questions 1/1 and Question 5/1](#) incorporate several mentions to CNs, highlighting as part of the lessons learned during the cycle how they can contribute to close the digital divide.
  - Very favorable language for community networks in the [Best Practice Guidelines from the Global Symposium for Regulators 2021](#).

## Global Organizations

### International Telecommunication Union

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is the specialized agency of the United Nations responsible for all matters related to information and communication technologies. The roots of the ITU. date back as far as 1865 as a venue for consensus-building on standards for wireless

communications which addressed both devices and frequency use. In 1947, a decision was made to bring the ITU into the newly created United Nations, recognising it as the specialized agency for telecommunications. As of 2016, the ITU Constitution and Convention has 193 state parties, which includes 192 United Nations member states plus the Holy See. The ITU also has over 700 Sector Members and Associates from industry, international and regional organizations, as well as academia. While sector member do not have voting privileges, the larger sector members from industry do wield considerable influence.

The ITU is governed by the [Plenipotentiary Conference](#) and the administrative [ITU Council](#). The ITU comprises three sectors:

- [Development](#) (ITU-D).
- [Radiocommunications](#) (ITU-R).
- [Standards](#) (ITU-T).

Within these sectors, different mechanisms and processes have been established to inform and make decisions to meet their own mandate. Participation in ITU processes is mainly open only to their members. In most cases cases, Member States have voting rights whereas Sector Members play a more advisory role. The big majority of the multinational companies in the telecommunications industry are Sector Members of the ITU. The Association for Progressive Communications and the Internet Society are Sector Members too.

The ITU is further divided into Administrative Regions to streamline administration of the organization and to ensure equitable distribution in the ITU Council. More information about them can be found when [Regional Organizations](#) are described below.

The ITU also operates six regional offices. These offices help maintain direct contact with national authorities, regional telecommunication organizations and other stakeholders.

Understanding this maze of Sectors, Regions, Offices, etc is not easy. In this section of the wiki, a we attempt to provide a description of different ITU processes and conferences, and the interrelation among them , as well as the contributions from different stakeholders to leverage them to create an enabling environment for community networks.

Note that for accessing some of the documents linked in this section, a certain type of access from ITU, named TIES, is required. TIES access is granted to member states, and sector members of the ITU, such as APC. If interested to engage further on these topics, and get TIES access, please send an email to [itu@apc.org](mailto:itu@apc.org)

## ITU Plenipotentiary Conference

The Plenipotentiary Conference is the supreme organ of the Union. It is the decision making body which determines the direction of the Union and its activities. It meets every four years in order to set the Union's general policies.

### PP-18

At the Plenipotentiary Conference in 2018 (PP-18), community networks became a hot topic for

debate, as the Americas region delegation brought forward a proposal for a resolution in their support, that was eventually rejected.

## ITU Council

The Council acts as the Union's governing body in the interval between Plenipotentiary Conferences, meeting twice a year. Its role is to consider broad telecommunication policy issues to ensure that the Union's activities, policies and strategies fully respond to today's dynamic, rapidly changing telecommunications environment.

ITU Council also prepares a report on the policy and strategic planning of the ITU and responsible for ensuring the smooth day-to-day running of the Union, coordinating work programmes, approving budgets and controlling finances and expenditure.

The Council also takes all steps to facilitate the implementation of the provisions of the ITU Constitution, the ITU Convention, the Administrative Regulations (International Telecommunications Regulations and Radio Regulations), and the decisions of Plenipotentiary Conferences and; where appropriate, the decisions of other conferences and meetings of the Union.

## ITU Council Working Groups

There are different Working Groups set up to provide input to the ITU Council in different matters. In the last last Council Group (February, 2020) meeting four appeared to be active <sup>1)</sup>:

- Council Working Group on International Internet-related Public Policy Issues (CWG-Internet)
- Council working group on Child Online Protection (WG-CP)
- Council Working Group on WSIS (WG-WSIS)
- Council Working Group on Financial and Human Resources (CWG-FHR)

The participation in those working groups varies and some are for Members States (MS) only, others allow for the participation of Sector Members (too).

### CWG-Internet

CWG-Internet is limited to Member States, but they hold an open consultation to all stakeholders. This poses one of the few opportunities for Civil Society Organizations that are not Sector Members of the ITU to present their views to the ITU Council. In most other ITU's consultations, organizations such as the Association for Progressive Communications and the Internet Society, both with Sector Member status do their best to bring the voice of the Civil Society in general, and of community networks in particular to these spaces.

In particular, CWG-Internet is tasked to identify, study and develop matters related to international Internet-related public policy issues and to disseminate its outputs throughout ITU's membership, as well as to report annually to the Council on activities undertaken on these subjects <sup>2)</sup>. More on the mandate of this Council Group can be found here <sup>3)</sup>.

### *13th Session CWG-Internet*

The 13th Session of the ITU Council Working Group on International Internet-related Public Policy Issues (CWG-Internet) decided on 20 September 2019 to hold an open consultation (online and physical) on “*International internet-related public policy issues on harnessing new and emerging telecommunications/ICTs for sustainable development*”<sup>4)</sup>. All contributions are available here <sup>5)</sup>.

The

contribution

from the Association for Progressive Communications made a link between this topic and community connectivity.

#### 14th Session CWG-Internet

In that very same meeting on 20 September 2019 it was also decided to focus the 14th session of the CWG-Internet on “*Expanding internet connectivity*”<sup>6)</sup>. Additionally, among the three questions in the consultation <sup>7)</sup>, there is one directly requesting input on community networks: “*How can small/community/non-profit operators help in promoting the increase of Internet connectivity?*”. This poses an unique opportunity to showcase directly to the Council the work done by different community networks around the world.

The Deadline was the 15th December 2020, and some contributions are already available here <sup>8)</sup>, including the one from the Association for Progressive Communications

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The virtual meeting to discuss the submissions was held on the 25th January, and all the documents are available here (<https://www.itu.int/en/council/cwg-internet/Pages/open-consultations.aspx>) including the webcast. The summary of the Chairman includes very valuable points for community networks advocacy

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“4.4 A number of policy issues related to expanding Internet connectivity were highlighted, including affordability, security and user trust, digital skills and capacity development, competition and innovation (including complementary access solutions such as community networks), investment, infrastructure, and spectrum management.”

“4.5 There was general consensus that a robust enabling environment is key to foster investment in the infrastructure, products and services that are critical to bridging the gaps in connectivity and affordable Internet access. Stakeholders are invited to share and to implement as appropriate good practices in innovative and complementary access solutions that have been implemented in various regions, countries and local environments as a way to enhance connectivity.”

“4.6 There was also consensus that there is a need for greater multi-stakeholder action and a closer cooperation between the different stakeholders involved. Specific examples of how governments could facilitate better collaboration with the private sector, small/community/non-profit operators, and civil society were highlighted. The important role of the ITU in connecting the unconnected was recognized by the participants.”

#### 15th session CWG-Internet

The topic for the 15th session was: “The role of the Internet and international Internet-related public policy in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and possible future pandemics”

and the ITU is expecting submissions by the 20th August. More information is available here <sup>9)</sup>

The Deadline was the 20th August 2021, and contributions are already available here <sup>10)</sup>, including the one from the Association for Progressive Communications and Derechos Digitales which discussed the role of community networks in mitigating the impact of COVID-19. [Download](#)

[In the public session held on the 20th September, many speakers mentioned the need for fostering community networks, and so it was captured in the Chairman's summary under the steps to expand meaningful internet connectivity](#)

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“Fostering community networks to reduce digital divides while taking into consideration national and international policies in this regard”.

#### *20th session CWG-Internet*

The ITU Council Working Group on International Internet-related Public Policy Issues (CWG-Internet) held an open consultation in September 2024 <sup>11)</sup> on the following topic and questions: 1. How relevant multilateral and multi-stakeholder processes, including but not limited to UN-based processes such as Summit of the Future, WSIS+20 and the IGF, could address aspects related to Internet development? 2. What are the challenges and opportunities, good practices and favourable policy environments to strengthen the Internet? 3. How can we promote international multistakeholder cooperation on public policy issues that are focused on promoting the development aspects of the Internet?

United Kingdom, APC, Article 19, Derechos Digitales and Internet Society, made reference to community networks and community-centred connectivity in their submissions <sup>12)</sup>.

### **World Telecommunications Policy Forum (WTPF)**

The purpose of the World Telecommunication/ICT Policy Forum (WTPF) is to provide a venue for exchanging views and information and thereby creating a shared vision among policy-makers worldwide on the issues arising from the emergence of new telecommunication/ICT services and technologies, and to consider any other policy issue in telecommunications/ICTs which would benefit from a global exchange of views, in addition to the adoption of opinions reflecting common viewpoints.

Since the creation of the Forum, there has been 5 instances, with a period among them that does not quite follow a pattern. At the last [Plenipotentiary Conference](#) it was agreed to hold a 6th one scheduled to take place in 2021 <sup>13)</sup>.

Each Forum is preceded by a series of preparatory meetings where member states and sector members can comment on the Report by the Secretary General, as well as on the Opinion Documents to each of the topics for reflection. The draft opinions are submitted by the member states. They are intended as policy recommendations, in contrast to the report, which is used to frame the questions for the WTPF. Once finalized, these are discussed at the Forum with the intent of reaching consensus such that they can be released as the policy outcome of the WTPF.

## WTPF-21

By Decision 611, the 2019 Session of ITU Council decided that the theme for WTPF-21 will be “*Policies for mobilizing new and emerging telecommunications/ICTs for sustainable development*” and that the WTPF-21 would discuss how new and emerging digital technologies and trends are enablers of the global transition to the digital economy. Themes for consideration would include AI, IoT, 5G, Big Data, OTTs etc. and focus on opportunities, challenges and policies to foster sustainable development.

Different stakeholders have been engaging on the preparatory meetings since the beginning of the process, making contributions to the draft report by the Secretary General:

- APC made a submission supporting Community Networks in the report to the first draft of the report.

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- APC made a submission entitled “*Mobilizing New Solutions for Connectivity and Community Networks*” to the third draft of the report.

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- ISOC made also a submission in support of Community Networks to the third draft of the report.

[Download Document](#)

The report is in its final stages with only final edits to be added to it. So far, APC edits were successful as they were enabled under the euphemism of “*complementary access solutions*”. Including more specific language will involve continued push, but room has been made to accommodate them in the Opinions as instances of new solutions.

Additionally, the report is accompanied by Opinions, that contain more nuanced recommendations around the topics in the report. These Opinions are discussed in the different meetings of the Expert Working Group. APC submitted comments to: \* 4th Virtual Meeting, suggesting language around the impact of emerging technologies to the climate crisis.

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. \* 6th Virtual Meeting, suggesting language around complementary access models and community networks.

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In the final Report by the ITU Secretary-General for the Sixth World Telecommunication/Information and Communication Technology Policy Forum 2021 <sup>14)</sup>, the following was included:

- “recognising [...] c) that among sectors and stakeholders, ICT investments, including those in new and emerging telecommunication/ICT services and technologies, and complementary access solutions, should be coordinated to avoid fragmentation and duplication of efforts;”
- “is of the view [...] 6. that use of new and emerging telecommunication/ICT services and technologies, and complementary access solutions can promote sustainable development, and that policies in the field of telecommunications/ICTs should consider environmental challenges such as climate change mitigation;”
- “invites Member States [...] 1. to consider how best to foster an enabling environment that is

conducive for mobilizing new and emerging telecommunication/ICT services and technologies, as well as complementary access solutions for sustainable development, to maximize their benefits, and minimize their risks;”

- “invites Member States, Sector Members and other stakeholders to work collaboratively [...] 7. to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship in local populations, including by encouraging community support for entrepreneurship and locally based programmes, including those for complementary solutions and networks”

## ITU Plenipotentiary conference

Resolution 139 (REV. BUCHAREST, 2022) of the ITU Plenipotentiary <sup>15)</sup> on “Use of telecommunications/information and communication technologies to bridge the digital divide and build an inclusive information society” included the following:

- “instructs the Director of the Telecommunication Development Bureau, in coordination with the Directors of the other Bureaux, within their respective mandate [...] 7 to support sharing national experiences and information, such as case studies, and support enabling environments for the use of affordable technologies for bridging the digital divide, such as current and emerging telecommunication/ICT infrastructure, including telecommunication/ICT complementary access networks and solutions;”
- “invites Member States [...] 4 to consider facilitating an environment for sharing national experiences for bridging the digital divide, as appropriate, using affordable technologies, such as current and emerging telecommunication/ICT infrastructure, including telecommunication/ICT complementary access networks and solutions, according to national regulations;”

## ITU-D

ITU-D’s mission is to foster international cooperation on telecommunication and ICT development issues as well as to build human and institutional capacity. ITU-D works to expand telecommunications infrastructure in developing nations throughout the world which make up the majority of member countries.

## The World Telecommunications Development Conference (WTDC)

The World Telecommunications Development Conference (WTDC) is the main ITU-D conference, and it is organized in the period between two Plenipotentiary Conferences to consider topics, projects and programmes relevant to telecommunication development. WTDCs set the strategies and objectives for the development of telecommunication/ICT, providing future direction and guidance to the ITU Telecommunication Development Sector (ITU-D).

## WTDC-14

During WTDC-14, thanks to the work from colleagues from Rhizomatica and Redes, the biggest achievement for community networks to date at an ITU process took place with the adoption of Recommendation 19



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, which includes the following:

<callout>10. that it is important to consider small and non-profit community operators, through appropriate regulatory measures that allow them to access basic infrastructure on fair terms, in order to provide broadband connectivity to users in rural and remote areas, taking advantage of technological advances;</callout>

<callout>11. that it is also important that administrations, in their radio-spectrum planning and licensing activities, consider mechanisms to facilitate the deployment of broadband services in rural and remote areas by small and non-profit community operators;</callout>

#### **WTDC-17**

During WTDC-17 which took place in Buenos Aires <sup>16)</sup>, a global resolution in favour of community networks proposed, but it did not pass.

As part of the Regional Initiatives, “*AMS3: Deployment of broadband infrastructure, especially in rural and neglected areas, and strengthening of broadband access to services and applications*” was passed. This, in turn, led to decisions within CCP.I which have contributed significantly to the implementation of Recommendation 19 in the Americas Region. More info [here](#)

#### **WTDC-21**

The next one WTDC is scheduled to take place in Addis Ababa from 8-19 November 2021 <sup>17)</sup>, and regional preparatory meetings (RPM) are starting to take place.

#### *Asia-Pacific RPM*

The first RPM for Asia took place on the 9-10 March 2021 online. All documents from the meeting can be found [here](#) <sup>18)</sup>. Community networks were not featured as part of the submissions and the discussions. Some points of entry could be around the huge rural gap in the region as identified in the report “*Digital Trends in Asia 2021*” presented by the Telecommunication Development Bureau: “only 37 per cent of rural households had access to the Internet in 2019, compared with almost twice this figure (70.4 per cent) of urban households”.

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#### [In terms of the Regional priorities for Asia](#)

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[, some room for action could be within “ASP3 - Fostering development of infrastructure to enhance digital connectivity and connecting the unconnected\)”](#). This seems to be an evolution of the ASP3 they included in the Buenos Aires Action Plan (ASP3 - Fostering development of infrastructure to enhance digital connectivity) and where activities related to bridging the connectivity divide took place.

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Those ASP3 activities were included in the impact report from the Buenos Aires Action Plan as part of



a similar Expected Result to the one included in the Regional Priorities for 2022-2025, namely:

<callout>Review and revise, if necessary, existing national broadband objectives and enhance capacity to develop and implement national broadband plans (including support to study the status of national broadband networks and international connectivity) in order to provide broadband access to unserved and underserved areas; promote affordable access, especially for youth, women, indigenous peoples and children; select appropriate technologies; develop and use universal service funds effectively; and develop business models that are financially and operationally sustainable.</callout>

### Africa RPM

The first RPM for Africa took place on the 29-30 March 2021 online. All documents from the meeting can be found here <sup>19)</sup>. Community Networks were mentioned in different documents and discussions:

- The report “*Digital Trends in Africa 2021*” presented by the Telecommunication Development Bureau

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, includes within “*Box 6: Possible consideration for the Africa region to address affordability and meaningful connectivity*” the following text:

<callout>Review universal service fund (USF) models and approaches, **including exploring new community network access models** and public community access points (Wi-Fi hubs) for underserved and rural communities.</callout>

- The submission from Ethiopia, with title “Connecting rural communities, a priority for Africa”, suggests “*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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- The submission from the Internet Society titled “Expanding Internet access to remote and rural areas” focused on the benefits of community networks in the region.

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- Those two submissions led to interventions from the floor that were captured in the minutes (available here: [https://www.internetsociety.org/2021/03/30/af2021-minutes/](#)) inviting ISOC to the working group discussing the Regional Priorities for the next cycle to explore how they could they be included.

[Download Minutes](#)

and

[Download Chairman Report.](#)

[The Regional Priorities that were agreed as part of this meeting can be found here:](#)

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. The only clear space for community networks is within “*AFR2: Implementation and expansion of broadband infrastructures, connectivity and emerging technologies*” and specifically as part of Expected Result: <callout>Provide support and share best practices on national broadband strategies and strengthen capacity development, implement and monitor national broadband plans to use universal service funds effectively and develop financial and operational sustainable business models in order to provide affordable broadband access to unserved and underserved areas.</callout>

### Americas RPM

[The first RPM for America took place on the 26-27 April 2021 online. All documents from the meeting](#)

[can be found here](#) <sup>20)</sup>. Community Networks were mentioned in different documents and discussions, and more importantly they were included as part of two Expected Results within the Regional Priorities

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. In particular within:

- AMS1: Deployment of modern, resilient, secure and sustainable telecommunication/ICT infrastructure

<callout> Expected result: Assistance in the design, funding and implementation of national, regional and sub-regional broadband plans and resilient networks, including support to **community networks**, with special attention to indigenous communities, underserved and unserved areas, critical environment areas and vulnerable populations, taking into account innovative connectivity solutions that can be locally deployed and managed, including access to spectrum and high-speed networks;</callout>

- AMS-4 - Development of enabling policy and regulatory environments to connect the unconnected through accessible and affordable telecommunications/ICTs that support the achievement of SDGs and the progress towards the digital economy.

<callout> Expected result: Support for Member States in the implementation of policy and regulatory strategies to connect the unconnected with a focus on affordability, including support of small operators and **community networks**; </callout>

## ITU-D Study Groups

ITU-D Study Groups provide an opportunity for all Member States and Sector Members (including Associates and Academia) to share experiences, present ideas, exchange views, and achieve consensus on appropriate strategies to address ICT priorities <sup>21)</sup>. ITU-D Study Groups are responsible for developing Reports, Guidelines, and Recommendations based on input received from the membership. Information is gathered through surveys, contributions and case studies and is made available for easy access by the membership using content management and web publication tools. The Study Groups examine specific task-oriented telecommunication/ICT questions of priority to developing countries, to support them in achieving their development goals.

Outputs agreed on in the ITU-D Study Groups, and related reference material, are used as input for the implementation of policies, strategies, projects and special initiatives in Member States. These activities also serve to strengthen the shared knowledge base of the membership. Sharing of topics of common interest is carried out through face-to-face meetings, online e-Forum and remote participation in an atmosphere that encourages open debate and exchange of information and for receiving input from experts on the topics under study.

There are two Study Groups, which are structured around working groups focusing on certain areas clustered around a give “*Question*” or topic of interest. A full list of the Questions is available here <sup>22)</sup>. But mainly two “*Questions*” in Study Group 1: “*Enabling environment for the development of telecommunications/ICTs*” are of interest for the work of community networks (See below). Each Question working group meets twice a year, during the years between two WTDC, and the reports from each question inform the WTDC discussions.

### Question 1/1: Strategies and policies for the deployment of broadband in developing countries

- ITU-D contribution to the February 2020 session, ITU Last Mile Connectivity Guidelines, is full of references to community networks <sup>23)</sup>.
- APC's contribution to the September 2020 session contained an earlier version of the *"Expanding the Telecommunications Operators Ecosystem: Policy and Regulatory Guidelines to Enable Local Operators"* report <sup>24)</sup>.
- ISOC, in collaboration with APC, Article 19 and IBE Brazil, made a contribution to September 2020 session, entitled *"Creating an Enabling Regulatory Environment for Community Networks"* <sup>25)</sup>

In August 2021 the final report of Question 1/1 was released. It contains an entire section on "Establishment of community networks" from ISOC's submission as well as several good recommendations in licensing and spectrum from APC's contributions contained in the **Good Practice** section of this wiki.

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### Question 5/1: Telecommunications/ICTs for rural and remote areas

- APC, in collaboration with Article 19, made a contribution entitled *"Economic and social development enabled by complementary connectivity approaches"* to the September 2019 Session <sup>26)</sup>.

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- APC made a contribution entitled *"The Role of Community Networks as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic"* to the the September 2020 Session <sup>27)</sup>.

Download Contribution

- ISOC submitted to Q5/1 the same submission it made to [Q1/1](#) to the September 2020 session.
- The Annual Deliverable 2019-2020 from ITU-D Study Groups Question 5/1 <sup>28)</sup> includes *"the following recommendations can be made for now: [...] Ease regulatory requirements for community network operators"*.
- Brazil's delegation submission to September 2019 also mentioned community networks <sup>29)</sup>
- Côte d'Ivoire submission to the September 2019 meeting <sup>30)</sup> highlights the Lomé (Togo) workshop organized by the West African Regulators Association (WATRA), APC and ISOC from 26 to 28 June 2019, where policy makers and Telecommunication/ICT Regulatory Authorities, discussed the need to consider community networks as a viable form of connectivity. The participants at this workshop call for reflection at the international level through the ITU for a more global response to this concept.

In August 2021 the final report of Question 5/1 was released. It contains plenty of references to the contributions above throughout the text. Mainly the third lesson learned in the executive summary [reads](#):

<callout> "Community networks are an important part of connectivity ecosystems, and they help bridge the digital divide". </callout>

Additionally:

- Section "6.2 - Complementary access and village connectivity networks",

- Section “6.4 - Strategies to promote small complementary operators”,
- Section “9.1.4 - Conclusions about Financing mechanisms”, that contains the following text: *“Community networks are one of the options available to meet current Internet connectivity challenges, and the logistics and administration of community networks are less expensive because of their scale and local nature. They can also be sustainable as they frequently make use of renewable energy such as solar power”*; and
- Section “9.2 - Guidelines for Member States”, that contains the following text: *“It is important for an optimum mix of licensing models should be used for connecting rural and remote areas. The mix can include [...] the community network model, where small and medium operators are run by local entrepreneurs or cooperation or groups”*

Part of the inclusion of this wording in the document was due to contributions to earlier versions of the document that were made available for consultation like the “*Working document - Draft Final Report for ITU-D Question 5/1*” presented at the September 2020 session <sup>31)</sup>.

## Global Symposium for Regulators (GSR)

Since 2000, the Global Symposium for Regulators (GSR) brings together heads of national telecom/ICT regulatory authorities from around the world and has earned a reputation as the global annual venue for regulators to share their views and experiences on the most pressing regulatory issues they have identified.

### GSR - 2019

During GSR-2019 <sup>32)</sup> community networks were discussed as part of two sessions in the program <sup>33)</sup>:

- “From first Mile to Last Mile - thinking out of the box”
- “Connectivity for all: Do the basics still apply?”

### GSR - 2020

Somehow disappointingly given the attention all other ITU processes had give to Community Networks during 2020, and even GSR itself during 2019, GSR-2020 didn't quite discuss it during it's virtual session <sup>34)</sup>.

- APC made a contribution to it's public consultation prior to the event to try to include Local Operators as part of the discussion <sup>35)</sup>.

### GSR - 2021

Somehow surprisingly, but consistent with the change of trend within the ITU about favorable language for community networks, the GSR 2021 Best Practice Guidelines <sup>36)</sup> do include references to community networks in two places:

- When describing “Regulatory tools are at hand to bridge the funding and financing gap in digital

markets” it includes: “Promote local innovation ecosystems and provide incentives for the participation of small and community operators in deploying low-cost rural networks, including specific licensing measures, access to key infrastructure and funding, and social coverage promotion programs.”

- When describing how “Spectrum innovation is key for the digital future” it includes “Adopt a multifaceted approach to freeing up additional spectrum in the

low, mid, and high bands for a variety of business plans to successfully meet the need for additional network capacity while facing finite spectrum resources, including releasing spectrum for the establishment of community networks on a technology-neutral basis.”

## GSR - 2023

The trend continued in 2023 with the Best Practice Guidelines <sup>37)</sup> includes the following in their section about “Incentives towards achieving meaningful connectivity”:

- Innovative regulatory last mile connectivity solutions: Policy makers and regulators are encouraged to consider facilitating last mile solutions to connect the unconnected, through means such as municipal, community and mesh networks and social enterprises, as well as spectrum and infrastructure sharing and co-investment to extend networks and services to unserved and underserved areas.

## Other ITU-D reports and studies

In 2020, ITU-D launched reports where community networks are featured importantly in many sections. These include:

- ITU Smart Villages Blueprint <sup>38)</sup>
- ITU-D Last Mile Connectivity Guidelines <sup>39)</sup>

The report that ITU-D and UNICEF commissioned to the Boston Consulting Group for the GIGA initiative on “Meaningful School Connectivity: An assessment of sustainable business models” <sup>40)</sup>, contains two models based on “Community Network” principles

Further in 2023, the ITU launched its Universal Service Financing Efficiency Toolkit <sup>41)</sup> which contains within the “Application of innovative finance models” it recommends the following: “USAF 2.0 financing toolkit can move beyond grants and subsidies, and complement existing tools with innovative funding models, in particular, it can be positioned to support: \* through, amongst others, providing funding and advisory support for school connectivity projects and the connection of other strategic institutions; \* through providing funding and advisory support form community network projects, as well as facilitating their collaboration with other parties such as operators and municipalities. ”

## ITU-R

ITU-R exists to broker consensus and develop standards in the use of space and terrestrial wireless communication. It works to achieve agreement among all UN Member States on the allocation of

radio-frequency spectrum bands for specific uses and in satellite orbital slots, dealing with a range of services including fixed, mobile, broadcasting, amateur, space research, meteorology, GPS, monitoring and communication.

## **World Radio Conference (WRC)**

From the point of view of spectrum management, the World Radio Conference (WRC) which is organised by ITU-R and which also happens every four years, is the principal decision-making event related to the allocation of radio spectrum frequencies to specific purposes and use. The outcome of the WRC is the ITU Radio Regulations which is a binding international treaty governing the use of the radio spectrum. Preparations for WRCs typically begin years before the event, with countries working through study groups to develop positions to be agreed on specific issues at the event. Most countries and regions hold their own preparatory process to prepare for each WRC. This is a political process that requires significant investment of time and resources to engage in.

The treaty nature of the Radio Regulations is complex, as the ITU constitution also recognises “the sovereign right of each State to regulate its telecommunication”<sup>42)</sup>. Ultimately countries can do what they like with radio spectrum but mostly they find it useful to agree on international standards, especially given the dependence on multinational manufacturers. It is relevant to note that many countries also coordinate their border communications in order to avoid interference with their neighbours.

To date it has been really challenging for community networks supporting groups to influence this process in any meaningful way.

## **ITU-T**

ITU-T works to broker consensus in non-wireless telecommunications standards which range from video and audio compression standards to fibre optic infrastructure protocols. It collaborates with a range of other standards bodies around the world.

## **World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly (WTSA)**

This is the main ITU-T conference. The World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly is held every four years and defines the next period of study for ITU-T. WTSA-20 will take place in Hyderabad, India, 23 February to 5 March 2021 preceded by the Global Standards Symposium on 22 February 2021<sup>43)</sup>.

Very little relation has been found in between this process and creating an enabling environment for Community Networks.

## **UN ECOSOC**

The Economic and Social Council is at the heart of the United Nations system to advance the three

dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental. It is the central platform for fostering debate and innovative thinking, forging consensus on ways forward, and coordinating efforts to achieve internationally agreed goals. It is also responsible for the follow-up to major UN conferences and summits.

The UN Charter established ECOSOC in 1945 as one of the six main organs of the United Nations.

## **Commission on Science and Technology for Development**

The United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) is a subsidiary body of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It holds an annual intergovernmental forum for discussion on timely and pertinent issues affecting science, technology and development.

Its members are composed of national Governments, however civil society contributes to discussions that take place. Strong links exist with other UN bodies (The Commission on Status of Women, Regional Commissions, ITU, UNESCO).

Outcomes of the CSTD include providing the United Nations General Assembly and ECOSOC with high-level advice on relevant science and technology issues.

UNCTAD is responsible for the substantive servicing of the Commission.

As part of informing the decisions made at the Annual Forum two reports are circulated prior to the event:

- “Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels - Report of the Secretary-General”
- “Implementing World Summit on the Information Society outcomes”

Based on these two reports and the discussions during the Forum, a resolution known as the “WSIS Resolution”: “Assessment of the progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society”, is produced at the end of every meeting.

### **CSTD-19**

For CSTD-19, the two input documents included community networks:

- “Implementing World Summit on the Information Society outcomes, 2018” <sup>44)</sup>, included the following paragraph:

<callout> “16. Approaches to these challenges are multidimensional. During the past year, for example, there has been increased interest in the potential of community networks to provide connectivity in areas that have proved to be difficult or expensive for traditional broadband suppliers. Investment by Governments and international donors, alongside private investment, is likely to remain important in remoter rural areas, particularly those with limited populations or difficult topography.” </callout>

- “Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels - Report of the Secretary-



General”<sup>45)</sup>, which included:

<callout>“Renewed interest in community networks included discussions at regional IGFs and publications from ISOC and from APC, whose Global Information Society Watch report drew together experiences of community network deployment from 43 countries.”</callout>

Furthermore, the WSIS resolution recognized for the first time community networks as Numeral 54<sup>46)</sup> included “*Community Networks*” as an emerging topic.

## CSTD-20

At CSTD-20 the “Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels - Report of the Secretary-General”<sup>47)</sup> refers to community networks in two places:

- When defining what Civil Society has done: “[APC] also published reports on community-led connectivity, spectrum management and online content regulation”
- When describing the Implementation of action lines - The enabling environment (C6): “ISOC, APC and Mozilla made recommendations for innovations in spectrum management to support community networks.”

## CSTD-21

At CSTD-21 the “Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels - Report of the Secretary-General”<sup>48)</sup> refers to community networks:

- “The deployment of community networks for underserved communities is promoted by stakeholders, including APC and ISOC.”

## CSTD-22

At CSTD-22 the “Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels - Report of the Secretary-General”<sup>49)</sup> refers to community networks:

- “The deployment of community networks for underserved communities was promoted by stakeholders, including APC and ISOC, which published Community Network Readiness Assessment Handbook”

## CSTD-23

At CSTD-23 the “Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels - Report of the Secretary-General”<sup>50)</sup> refers to community networks:

- “Many agencies explore the implications of meaningful access, namely, the relationship between connectivity and social and economic inclusion. APC worked with regulators and policymakers to promote community approaches to rural connectivity, particularly in southern Africa.”

## CSTD-24

In 2024, APC continued making inputs to the Secretary General report, but this report has not been published yet. Still, it participated actively in the process and in particular during the Intersessional Panel, where a Side Event titled “Exploring innovative financing mechanisms for community-centred connectivity: A WSIS+20 agenda to leave no one behind” was co-organized between ISOC and APC <sup>51)</sup>

## UN SG’s High Level Panel on Digital Co-operation (HLPDC)

### The Report of the HLPDG

The report “The Age of Digital Interdependence, Report of the UN Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation” <sup>52)</sup> states that:

<callout>Governments have an important role to play in creating a policy framework to enable private sector enterprise, innovation, and cooperative, bottom-up networks (page 12) </callout>

and concludes in its recommendations that:

<callout>Second, investments should be made in both human capacity and physical infrastructure. Creating the foundation of universal, affordable access to electricity and the internet will often require innovative approaches, such as community groups operating rural networks, or incentives such as public sector support. (page 29)</callout>

## G20

### Ministerial Meeting Covid-19

The COVID-19 Response Statement from the G20 Virtual Ministerial Meeting on April 30, 2020 includes <sup>53)</sup>:

<callout>Furthermore, digital capacities should be expanded, in particular by increasing broadband connectivity using fixed, mobile, and satellite technologies and by exploring non-traditional means of connectivity, such as community networks. </callout>

# Regional Organizations

## Africa

### African Union Commission

In Africa, the **Specialized Technical Committee on Communications and Information Technologies (STC-CICT) from the African Union** [included](#), in its 2019 **Sharm El Sheikh Declaration (STC -CICT-3)** the following text directing the African Union Commission to:

<callout>29. PROMOTE the formulation of strategy and pilot projects for Unlocking Access to Basic Infrastructure and Services for Rural and Remote Areas including Indigenous Community Networks, and develop guidelines on legislation on deployment of technologies and ICT applications, to accelerate infrastructure role out in collaboration with ATU and other regional institutions;</callout>

### Broadband Commission - Moonshot report

The **Broadband Commission “Connecting Africa Through Broadband: A strategy for doubling connectivity by 2021 and reaching universal access by 2030”** [recognizes](#) the role of community networks in 3 of the 7 Objectives of its Action Plan. Of particular interest is Objective 5: <callout>Provide direct funding support for extending affordable broadband access to commercially challenging rural and remote areas, to women, and low-income users</callout> and the recommendations under Objective 1 “Ensure that the commercial broadband ICT market is open and structurally prepared for competitive private investment”: <callout>Adopt open wholesale and retail telecommunications market entry policies, especially competitive and unified licensing regimes, and liberal, dynamic spectrum policies. Such policies should also accommodate community and nonprofit focused network operators who offer services in underserved areas. </callout>

## Regional Regulatory Associations

CRASA

EACO

WATRA

## Americas

In the Americas region, the Inter-american Telecommunications Commission tracks the implementation of resolution ITU D-19 regarding small, not for profit and community operators,

through resolution 268-PCC1. The report<sup>54)</sup>, presented in 2018, shows the development of inclusive regulation for small and community operators in each of the countries.

## Inter-American Telecommunication Commission (CITEL)

The Inter-American Telecommunication Commission (CITEL) is an entity of the Organization of American States. Contributing to the region's economic and social development is the objective of all elements of the work of CITEL, whether it is coordinating the rules needed to facilitate infrastructure deployment and telecommunication service delivery; harmonization of the radio frequency spectrum to reduce the cost of providing wireless services; information and communication technology (ICT) training; or helping countries devise telecommunication development strategies<sup>55)</sup>

### Permanent Consultative Committee I - PCC.I

Most of the progress at the regional and international level has taken place through engagements at PCC.I. For instance the resolutions proposed at both [WTDC-17](#) and [PP-18](#). Although those were not passed, other progress has taken place thanks to this engagement:

- Structures within PCC.I. The names and objectives of the Rapporteurships were modified during one of the PCC.I meetings attended. As part of this, we were successful in adding a specific term of reference on community networks in Rapporteurship 1.4., which is the Rapporteurship on *"Broadband, universal access, digital inclusion and gender equality"*. The term of reference states as follows: *"b) Encourage the study, creation, and strengthening of public policies, regulatory frameworks and incentives conducive to new service mechanisms in non-served or under-served areas, particularly in rural areas involving the participation of indigenous peoples, other peoples, community operators, non-profit operators, and small operators."*
- Operationalizing Initiatives for the Americas Region agreed at WTDC-17: Decision PCC.I/DEC. 274 (XXXI-17) from CITEL which resolved to send member states a survey about "The implementation of Recommendation 19 from ITU-D for the Americas Region". Karla Velasco was appointed in charge of carrying out this task. The results of the survey were presented at the meeting in Washington DC in August 2018<sup>56)</sup>. More details can be found elsewhere<sup>57)</sup>.

## Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)

The IACHR is a principal and autonomous organ of the Organization of American States ("OAS") whose mission is to promote and protect human rights in the American hemisphere. It is composed of seven independent members who serve in a personal capacity. Created by the OAS in 1959, the Commission has its headquarters in Washington, D.C. Together with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ("the Court" or "the I/A Court H.R."), installed in 1979, the Commission is one of the institutions within the inter-American system for the protection of human rights ("IAHRS").

### Guide No. 3 How to Promote Universal Access to the Internet during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the framework of the Coordination and Timely and Integrated Response to the crisis related to the

COVID-19 pandemic (SACROI COVID-19) and in collaboration with its Special Rapporteurships on Freedom of Expression (RELE) and on Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Rights (REDESCA) published the third edition of the series of practical guides that address issues related to human rights in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of this process, the IACHR published on 26 March 2021 *Guide No. 3 How to Promote Universal Access to the Internet during the COVID-19 Pandemic*<sup>58)</sup>.

Among other things, on page 9 the guide proposes temporary and short-term measures to be adopted by states should include:

- Actively promoting use of the spectrum and facilitating licenses for the deployment of local and community networks;

and

- Working to expand and improve coverage collaboratively with both small operators and community networks.

## Asia

### UNESCAP

In Asia Pacific, community networks are a relatively new topic. Still, they were discussed in 2019 at the Third Session of the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Steering Committee and WSIS Regional Review, in an event organized by ISOC and UNESCAP and included in its deliberations<sup>59)</sup>.

On the 18th August 2021, a second edition of the event where community networks were discussed took place<sup>60)</sup>. The final documents of the summit are still being produced, but draft versions incorporate very positive language about the role that community networks can play in the region.

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