Persistent and Emerging Challenges Faced by Internet Access – Connecting the Next Billion

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Moderator: Kemly Camacho - Cooperativa Social Sulá Batsú, Costa Rica

Panelists:

- Alexander Riobó - Telefónica, Colombia

- Technical Community: Carlos Afonso - CGI.br, Brazil

- Government: Carla Valverde - Ministry of Science, Technology and Technology and Telecommunications, Costa Rica

- Civil Society: Nicolás Echániz - Delegate IGF Best Practice Forum on Community Networks / Altermundi, Argentina

- Academia: Patricia Peña - FLACSO, Chile

- Youth IGF: María Angélica Contreras - Youth Observatory

- Renata Aquino Ribeiro - Delegate IGF Best Practice Forum on Gender

Rapporteur: Julián Casasbuenas (Colnodo, Colombia)

Panel Objective.

In recent years, Latin America has made significant progress in terms of Internet access. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain in the LAC region, especially for ensuring affordable and reliable Internet access that will promote the exercise fundamental human rights and support economic, social and human development. The access divide is quite heterogeneous throughout the region, and there are notable differences both among different states as well as within each country.

While certain sub-regions have very high penetration rates, many populations still have limited access. On the other hand, the people with no Internet access are often those with the least economic resources and part of the most disadvantaged groups (including women). In this sense, the Latin American and Caribbean reality demands understanding not only who is and who isn't connected. Information is also needed regarding the various levels of connectivity among the population, as this can range from groups that are completely without connectivity to those with unlimited access to broadband services. Most people, however, have access to low quality, high cost broadband connectivity.

Digital exclusion persists and there is a risk of creating new divides. The region demands better coverage of fixed and mobile broadband services, better connectivity, affordability, and the technical and human capacities needed to use the Internet, including the skills needed to deploy low-cost local networks.

These are major challenges. Likewise, bridging the digital divide and connecting the 50% of the population that has yet to use the Internet and improving conditions for those who only have access to low quality connectivity requires significant collective efforts and innovative solutions.

Session Proceedings:

The panel began by introducing the panelists, after which the moderator asked them to respond to the guiding questions, included below for reference:

1. In terms of the region's specific needs and peculiarities, what do we mean when we talk about Internet access? How should access currently be understood?

2. What public policies should guide the solution of emerging and persistent challenges to access?

3. What bottlenecks are hindering mass connectivity and the improvement low quality, high cost connections?

4. What innovative solutions can be proposed? What solutions can each sector contribute?

5. Where do we find the next billion?

6. What do we need to do in our various roles?

Brief description of the panelists' participation:

- According to the **private sector**, there has been major progress over the last 15 years in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). At the end of 2015, 90% of the LAC population had mobile access. It was noted that 85% of access in Central America is mobile and that there are multiple fee structures. In this scenario, potentially 90% of the population with mobile coverage can access the Internet; however, in reality, only 50% of the population actually does. The population with no Internet access can be broken down as follows:

  - 10% of the population has no access to fixed or mobile networks.
  - 40% (approximately 360 million people) have the possibility of using the Internet but don't.

  Research shows that the reason for this is not price, but rather the lack of locally relevant content, the lack of content available in local languages, the lack of digital literacy, and affordability.

  Fixed networks are still important – one household connected to the Internet provides access to several people. Mobile access is personalized and prepaid offerings have contributed to its expansion. Finally, participants emphasized private sector and government efforts aimed at expanding networks.

- **Governments** noted the challenges for connecting all regions to the Internet. First, deploying infrastructure in remote areas is not profitable for commercial operators. The second challenge is affordability; Internet access continues to be expensive in the LAC region, and States should work to remove this barrier. A proposal was made to offer subsidies according to each family's income level so they can connect to the Internet. The third challenge is teaching people how to use the Internet by implementing digital alphabetization initiatives.

- **Civil Society** focused on community networks. The importance of training as a way to disseminate the potential benefits of these networks was also stressed. With regard to connectivity and access, it was noted that access is widely analyzed in terms of consumption, often focusing on content that is outside the region.

  It is also important to promote cultural diversity, i.e., people should be able to publish their own content and services.

  It is not true that the entire LAC region is connected via mobile access, as mobile connectivity is limited in terms of the provision of local services and content (it is impossible to offer content and services without fixed Internet addresses). This forces the community to use external services and increases costs for local Internet providers, who must pay for the bandwidth these external services require.

  Access continues to be important – without access, women, indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities will not be able to connect to the Internet.

  Our public policies are quite fragile in terms of strategy, they are defined without consideration for the long term, and are often improvised. We don't have a strategy for access. How can we solve the problem of basic structural access? Is this sustainable? Due to a lack of resources, many networks that are implemented end up being disconnected. It is therefore important to try to work towards adequate public policies. The example of the UK was mentioned, where copper infrastructure is used for high-speed connections, noting that this would be a good strategy for using existing infrastructure in LAC.

  Mobile networks will not solve all issues. One must be careful not to count SIM cards as connected users. A single family can easily have 12 or 13 of these cards in their home, yet they cannot be counted as mobile Internet access. One must be cautious when analyzing statistics.

  The first LAC IGF meeting was held in 2008 in Montevideo. At the time, the proceedings of the session on Access noted that these same issues were brought up for discussion. The challenges are still the same, but they have grown in scale and complexity.

- Members of **Academia** described a recent research project funded by Canadian cooperation agencies which studied community access in 12 countries, including four countries in the LAC region. These studies approach the issue from a qualitative point of view, while access should also be addressed from a symbolic perspective. What does access to information or access to local content mean? This is not being

measured. We are having a hard time determining how to measure access to infrastructure. The data we have is not disaggregated, so we do not know the extent of the digital divide by gender or how it affects the various indigenous communities. It is also important to understand how access is used within each household. In other words, information is important for measuring social impact.

Research conducted by an Argentine university estimates that 250 million people throughout Latin America and the Caribbean still do not have access to the Internet. Communities want to connect and access is recognized as a right, but many communities do not consider access to be a priority.

It is difficult to think of closing the divides if public policies are not accompanied by processes that will help communities along the way. For example, telecenters were one of the strongest strategies in the 90s. Many of them closed due to a lack of political support and also due to mobile access. These places were left with no government programs. Only those supported by social organization survived. This void is currently filled by providing public wireless (Wi-Fi) access services for limited periods of time.

The importance of implementing gender and access policies in LAC was noted.

An infographic was presented on how to connect the next billion.

- As for **youth**, there was an update on the discussions that took place during the first Youth Governance Forum prior to LACIGF 9. At that meeting, participants discussed how young people use the Internet. It was noted that a percentage of young people are not connected to the Internet and have no possibility of going online, a situation that widens the divide between young people themselves. It was observed that training processes for young people should be established.

    Participants spoke of the fears women feel when connecting to the Internet, i.e., the fear of becoming victims of online violence against women and the violation of their privacy. It is important to make it easier for women to create content without exposing themselves to violence.

Audience participation.

- **Technical Community.** Indeed, public policies and challenges have not changed in the past eight years. The problem is that policies are not sustainable over time. Telecenters were not sustainable and disappeared. There are costs involved in operating a network. The challenge to regulators and governments is finding methods for sustaining projects which demand major investments so that they can continue to operate. What could these mechanisms look like?

    The need to connect the most disadvantaged communities at regional, national and global level. Communities must be part of this debate and take part in the decision-making process.

- **Civil Society.** Much focus has been placed on infrastructure. What about the people that *do* have access and resources, e.g., senior citizens? Are there are any public policies that address access by older adults?

  There is a lack of local interest. Effective connectivity is needed. People use the Internet with empty content. Three is a lack of awareness that the Internet allows people to raise their voices. Policymakers should address the use of the spectrum in order to implement sustainable models.

  Access to infrastructure is not the only relevant issue. Monitoring access, secure access, concentration of infrastructure ownership, and content control are also important aspects.

  It is important to prioritize access where people do not have access, keeping in mind that infrastructure does not enable participation. The community should be trained so they can go beyond being mere consumers and become active Internet citizens.

  There is a need for intervention in public policy, a more efficient role of the State in order to achieve inclusion. The presence of individuals and governments was considered, how individuals can influence committees and how they reflect the Forums' shared positions. Participants wondered what would be a more efficient role for implementing public policies based on the discussions of the Internet Governance Forum.

  Despite the fact that Cuba has high education rates, Internet access is very expensive in the country and limited to education and research institutions that have access quotas. Lately, public access spots have been deployed, but this is a prepaid service. The conditions are there, but freedom of expression is not encouraged. How can civil society influence the government and thus help achieve connectivity.

- **Youth.** How can we generate content and services capable of competing with those offered abroad for meeting local and regional needs? What sectors should be involved in this matter?

  Mobile access should not be tied to companies. Open alternatives exist (Wikipedia, etc.) that facilitate access to knowledge.

  The problem of access is not limited to access itself. Instead, it also has to do with quality of service, insufficient bandwidth, limitations on access, and other aspects.

Panelists' Responses to Audience Participation and Conclusions.

- **Civil Society.** It is important to consider access and participation defining priorities over time. Without access, things will not happen. We may sometimes think that the cost of deploying networks throughout a country is extremely high, but this cost is usually lower than the cost of implementing other public policies.

  People with no Internet access have no representation. They should participate in this debate.

It is important to recognize that we have indeed seen some changes since the first LAC IGF held in 2008. Many States in the LAC region have deployed optical fiber – this was not true back then. In El Salvador, Citel adopted a resolution regarding small nonprofit Internet operators. We are now at a crucial point in time: we have infrastructure but not much in terms of strategy for Internet access capillarity. There are simple strategies for working with existing technology; State connections may be appropriate for populations to self-manage their infrastructure and finally connect to the Internet.

- **Academia**. It is important for the Global IGF Best Practice Forums to record recommendations and ideas for connecting the next billion, local initiatives that can be shared to extend their implementation.

  Access to the radio spectrum is very important for deploying community networks, which in turn empower and incorporate communities so that individuals are no longer seen as mere users.

  It is important to consider both older as well as newer technologies to achieve more cost-effective solutions. It is also important to generate more competitive local content that is of specific interest to each individual.

  It is important to go beyond alphabetization models and work towards models that will empower communities.

- **Youth.** All actors must strive to connect the next billion. Evaluate the quality we accept in the connectivity offered to young people. It is important to provide user manuals, especially to older adults, as well as digital literacy processes for this population. Continue to encourage interest in the voice of young people.

- **Governments.** It is important to bring infrastructure to the most remote areas, especially to medical centers and schools. It should be noted that the money from the communications fund is not enough to sustainably maintain infrastructure. A strategy is proposed for maintaining infrastructure for 5 years, after which each recipient must finance the service.

  Community participation when competent authorities provide answers to the community's concerns (e.g., health issues associated with telecommunication towers). As for connectivity strategies, it is important to respect indigenous communities by taking into account their idiosyncrasies.

  The importance of establishing programs for empowering micro-entrepreneurs was highlighted. These programs should not be limited to providing equipment; instead, they should also offer more advanced training on how to use them. Likewise, it is important to provide training not only for children but also for teachers and persons with disabilities.

- **Private Sector.** It is important to work on affordability, designing programs so that those who cannot pay can still connect to the Internet. When designing public policies

we tend to think about our own situation; we must understand the needs of the different communities. Access to what? We are not talking about access to a social network. Instead, Internet access must be unrestricted and neutral. No one must decide what I can access and what I cannot access. In order for them to be useful and productive, government services must be provided online. Production processes are equally important in terms of the use of ICTs, digitizing processes so that citizens will find the Internet more useful. We see a concentration in the digital world. The Internet is the product of innovation, so we must evaluate the risks that concentration poses for aspects such as innovation.