WSIS High-Level Policy Forum

Session 7

Inclusiveness, Access to Information and Knowledge for All - Bridging Digital Divides

STATEMENT BY Mr Dick Ng Sui Wa,
Chairman of the Information and Communication Technologies Authority, Mauritius

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1. As a regulator of the ICT sector for Mauritius, how does the ICTA promote digital inclusiveness and tackle the constraints/challenges of the digital gap in Mauritius?

In a spirit of digital inclusion, the ICT Authority of Mauritius, under my Chairmanship, has engaged into a number of concrete actions to bridge the digital divide in Mauritius. In this endeavour, we fully align with the tagline of the World Telecommunication Development Conference being held soon in Rwanda 'Leave no one behind'. As we are here to serve the nation and to serve the country, we have to offer an essential service emanating from strategy, innovation, inclusion and good governance.

In my view, the best way to deliver as an ICT regulator is to come up with tangible outputs through specific projects for the consumer, level playing field measures for the operators as well as the implementation of measures of Government policy and tendering of advice to the policy maker on ICT regulatory issues.

With this in view, the ICT Authority has been funding a variety of projects under its Universal Service Fund (USF) in order to foster digital inclusiveness for all citizens. Indeed, the Universal Service Fund (USF) is one of the key financing mechanisms used to connect the unserved and underserved areas where there is neither the density nor the capital for telecom operators to justify private sector infrastructure investments.

The Universal Service Fund is managed by the Authority in line with international trends to make universal services more specific by targeting the real needs of the underserved. Establishing and managing the Universal Service Fund is a statutory duty of the ICT Authority of Mauritius, under the Information and Communication Technologies Act 2001. The role of the USF embodies the commitment of the ICTA to enhance digital inclusion in a rapidly evolving ICT environment through the concerted efforts of social regulation.

The Republic of Mauritius is made up of several islands scattered in the Indian Ocean. The two main inhabited dependencies are Rodrigues and Agalega. Rodrigues, which is the main dependency, is located at about 560 km east of Mauritius, and has a population of around 42,000 people. Agalega is located about 1000 km north of Mauritius and has a population of around 300 people.

The Authority has in 2012 acquired a 118 Mega bit per second satellite connection between Mauritius and Rodrigues through the Universal Service Fund. This capacity was increased in 2013 through the acquisition of an additional 45 Megabit per second connection. In 2017 the satellite capacity between

Mauritius and Rodrigues had reached 425 Megabit per second. Now it is to be noted that Rodrigues is served by an undersea cable which connects the island to Mauritius. Satellite connectivity has also been provided between Mauritius and Agalega as well as a mobile network which has been set-up on the Island through the USF as from 2017.

The Authority is also funding the setting-up and operation of digital service centres in post offices around the island. This service allows those visiting post offices to access the Internet free of charge.

The latest project of national importance implemented by the ICTA is the Free WiFi Zone project across the country. It was successfully launched last week in the village of Chamarel in the South of the island of Mauritius, under the aegis of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Mauritius. This project emanates from a governmental decision to set-up Wi-Fi facilities, free of charge for the public, in major public areas such as traffic centres, hospitals, municipalities and district councils with the aim of reducing the digital divide and further promoting connected communities.

This project of Free WiFi Zone throughout the country is also funded under the Universal Service Fund, managed by the ICT Authority and to which operators in the ICT sector contribute. In June last year, the ICT Authority, in pursuance of its objects under section 16 of the ICT Act, carried out a procurement exercise to invite the submission of proposals from holders of an internet service licence to make available free Wi-Fi Service to all users at the 234 identified sites in both Mauritius and Rodrigues.

All the 234 sites of the Free WiFi zone project are now planned to be fully operational by October this year. The launching of the project in the remote village of Chamarel has a lot of significance and testifies the determination of the Authority to ensure that the remote villages of our country are not left behind in the hyperconnected world where more and more services are now primarily available online.

Strengthening the regulatory framework in the ICT sector of Mauritius is therefore one major challenge that has been successfully tackled by the ICTA under my chairmanship as a necessary backbone of digital inclusiveness in Mauritius from the regulatory point of view. Of course, this policy has to be supported and developed into a number of pillars.

2. What are the main pillars of the ICTA's regulatory action to embark on digital transformation strategy towards digital inclusiveness for Mauritius?

In terms of its regulatory actions, the ICT Authority of Mauritius has been working hard to keep the sector growing and at the same time ensure its proper regulation. Over the period 2020 to 2021, despite the pandemic, broadband Internet subscriptions in the Republic of Mauritius increased from 1.6 million to 1.7 million and mobile subscriptions increased from 1.9 million to nearly 2 million, for a total population of 1.26 million people.

The Authority has also embarked in reforming its licensing as well as USF contribution regimes. USF contribution is currently still based on roaming and incoming international calls revenues. These two revenue streams are seriously at stake with the advent of calls made via Over The Top (OTT) applications. Hence the Authority has made recommendations for revamping the mode of contribution. As regards the licensing regime, a modernisation has been long overdue. We are currently working with the policy maker to ensure that the investment momentum in the sector is not jeopardised.

Under my mandate, I have been giving special attention to the collaborative role the ICT Authority has to play in its environment, both internationally and locally. As such, the Authority has at heart to work with international regulators as well as local regulators from other sectors.

Locally, working relationships are well established with the Independent Broadcasting Authority and the Competition Commission, and the Authority has recently signed an MoU with the Bank of Mauritius.

At international level, the Authority has recently signed MoUs with the ICT Regulators of India and Comoros. We are looking forward to signing more agreements of this type with the French regulators with which discussions have been engaged during a visit which I recently made in France. And we are planning to develop cooperation with regulators of the African continent.

Satellite and 5G connections are also major areas where the ICTA is involved in support of the digital transformation of the country. As the 5G holds a promise for many sectors to innovate and progress, drive investments and bring essential technologies and services to more citizens, the ICT Authority of Mauritius has been proactive in issuing 5G licences to the three mobile national operators.

The ICT Authority of Mauritius has also been actively working together with other members of the SADC and ATU to obtain new satellite positions in space for Mauritius. This will enable Mauritius in the future to have its own satellite in space.

In its endeavour to support the digital inclusiveness strategy for the Republic of Mauritius, the ICT Authority has been tasked with fulfilling and balancing the stakeholders' expectations against a backdrop of technological and service convergence, in order to sustain a healthy development of the ICT sector. The whole mission of the ICT regulator of Mauritius is therefore geared towards ensuring that the benefits of any measure implemented in this sector percolate effectively to the Mauritian citizen in the spirit of digital inclusion.