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Regulation in times of pandemic and lessons for the future: African responses- East Africa

Panel:

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Introduction

The webinar is the third and final debate in a series designed to share experiences from the pandemic in African countries. Panellists included representatives from operators, regulators, and regional bodies. It was chaired by Dan Sjöblom of the Swedish Post and Telecom Authority.

Responses to the pandemic

Speakers referred to the changes that were under way prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Networks were already evolving in their resilience and performance, with more autonomous configuration allowing much more remote operation. This was especially valuable following the surge, and high peaks, in network traffic as Covid-19 struck, and lockdown order came into force. Changes to the location of traffic were largely managed through network optimisation, with some physical interventions for maintenance and to fit additional hardware. Co-operation with governments, where access was necessary, and across the supply chain ensured that most of the necessary changes were able to be implemented rapidly.

Apps for farmers

In Uganda, operators asked for additional spectrum (although, as noted, the default is that ‘there is never enough spectrum’). The sourcing of additional equipment had not presented major difficulties. By the time the virus arrived, much of the necessary additional equipment had already been imported. However there were long queues of trucks at the borders due to additional ‘Covid checks’. In response, Wi-Fi hotspots had been placed at the borders to enable paperwork to be completed online and reduce the delays. Many farmers had been left with produce that they were unable to get to market. An app was provided for the farmers to utilise the local ‘boda boda’ network of bikes to distribute food directly to consumers. With students unable to access their computers from school as normal, education moved to television and radio, as well as physical delivery of printouts through local councils. Conspiracy theories about 5G and Covid were circulating, and addressed via a broadcast and mobile phone information campaign.

In Kenya, MSO’s were defined as essential service providers, allowing them to continue with work to maintain connectivity. Targets were set for quality of service as well as up-time. With a 50 per cent increase in mobile data consumption, operators moved to expand capacity, utilise new spectrum and optimise networks to enable schooling from home. The government issued a directive to reduce the use of cash, and lowered transaction charges on mobile payment services.

Across the region, it was clear that most regulators and operators had co-operated and responded successfully to the challenges posed by the pandemic. There was no standard response, but governments were keen to share learning among the countries of the East African region.

The ‘new normal’ post-pandemic

For the EIF¹, the aim is to support market continuity with the right kinds of tools and platforms necessary for connectivity. Policy is to broaden the digital impact outside sectors like agriculture, into areas including tourism, healthcare and mobile platforms for trading. The aim is for a single regional conversation, but currently there are too many strands and projects, with too many actors. A centrally planned programme may be more effective.

The pandemic has forced the regulators to look at issues such as contiguous spectrum, to enable operators to make the best use of the spectrum available. Net neutrality is an important part of ensuring the broadest access to services and the most flexible use of technologies. Universal service funds can be used to provide wider access to devices, especially mobile phones. Improving digital skills, for students as businesses and farmers, is also a priority.

Closing the digital divide

All of the panel members agreed that Covid-19 had further exposed the digital divide, and closing it was a key post-pandemic priority. An operator pointed out that this was not just a ‘last mile’ issue’. Connectivity had to work end-to-end – base stations need a good backhaul and a suitable transmission network, including for cross-border transmissions. Nor was it just a rural issue – urban centres often had poor broadband connections, and many dwellings only a single device. The priority for governments was the expansion of spectrum, especially the low/mid bands, and high bands for 5G. Existing infrastructure such as bus stations, offered quick solutions. Speed and efficiency could

¹ Enhanced Information Framework, a WTO-sponsored multilateral partnership dedicated to assisting developing countries

also be enhanced through infrastructure bundling – road-building projects should include the laying of fibre.

Cross-sector approaches

Another panellist agreed that Covid had created a new landscape for governments. Many were now more open to cross-sector approaches, like roaming and infrastructure-sharing. Where previously there was resistance to sectors co-operating, co-deployment was now a real possibility. In the energy sector, for example, electricity poles could be used for cables, and fibre-to-the-home had become a realisable dream. Universal service funds will need to be focused on subsidising operational support in areas that are not commercially viable. There should also be subsidised, solar-charging phones, paid for by subscription. Cost of services remains an issue. The zero rating of some sites may not be sustainable. Many parents cannot afford to contribute to the school budget, and government subsidies may be required.

Post pandemic opportunities

- Infrastructure-sharing and bundling
- Impact in sectors beyond agriculture
- Increased roaming
- Growth in mobile payments
- Common interest over competition
- Broadening educational opportunity

New possibilities have also emerged, include using technology to run education classes across different parts of the country, and helping smaller business to embrace digitisation – for example enabling a mechanic to order spares – as well as specialist provision for disabilities. Another panellist observed that the business cases for opportunities like roaming now made better sense. Governments need to seize the opportunity and ensure that money is invested rather extracted from the sector. For example, reducing import taxes on devices will result in a short term reduction in revenue, but provide a net benefit to the economy overall.

A new social contract

Participants agreed that it was important now to ensure that momentum was maintained in the move to digitisation, and that progress was not undermined by other issues rising up the agenda. Covid had provided the jolt for fresh thinking, with less focus on competition and more on the harnessing of available resources. The co-operation established during the pandemic has created meaningful relationships between public and private sector, and the possibility of a new social contract that can better reflect a country's needs. However, it's important to continue reviewing approaches, and avoid making permanent, solutions designed to be temporary.