

# DIGITAL CHALLENGES FOR SMALL NATIONS

Telecoms security and emergency services were on the agenda at the Small Nations Regulators Forum in Miami. **RORY GRAHAM** reports



The LatAm and Caribbean TMF in Miami got off to a lively start with a discussion among delegates to the Small Nations Regulators Forum of topics chosen by members as being of most importance. Attendees included representatives from the regulators of Barbados, Bermuda, Botswana, the British Virgin Islands, Guatemala, Jamaica, Jersey, Saint Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago and the United Kingdom.

## CYBERATTACKS ON PUBLIC BODIES

Cybersecurity in the context of telecoms was the initial subject debated, with several delegates reporting that there was a reluctance amongst customers to embrace digital services due to fear of the consequences of cybercrime. Delegates recounted high profile ransomware and other attacks on public bodies in particular. It was also felt that many operators themselves were insufficiently aware of the risk to their networks – and therefore to critical national infrastructure – of either an attack from a third party or inherent lack of resilience. One consequence of this was continuing reliance on ‘old’ technology for the exchange of information rather than an uptake of online methods of communicating, particularly with medical or government institutions. However delegates also described putting on successful programmes aimed at educating users, including children and vulnerable users, on the safest ways to use digital services.

Small nations are at particular risk from ‘bad actors’ probing their networks from other jurisdictions. For this reason it is important that telecoms regulators have the legal powers to ensure that operators meet their responsibilities in maintaining the resilience and security of their networks for the benefit of consumers and businesses. Regulators also have a key role to play in educating both telcos and users on how to avoid being the victims of cyberattack and to address the fears some users may have of using digital services, particularly public sector services.

## EROSION OF EMERGENCY CALL SERVICES

Delegates next drew on their experiences of natural disasters, such as floods and hurricanes, to explore the importance of providing access to emergency call services and of providing essential information to the public in the case of an emergency. Concern was expressed that rapidly changing technology – such as ‘over the top’ voice services via WhatsApp and others – was eroding the ability of telecoms regulators to enforce public emergency call service (PECS) obligations in traditional operators’ licences. The move to fibre to the home and the replacement of copper (which continues to provide power to handsets even when other power has failed) could put vulnerable users at risk unless alternative access could be provided. Both the law and regulatory practice needed to evolve to address this, given that access to a PECS must be seen as a fundamental public need. Delegates reported on successful discussions with non-traditional access providers, such as satellite broadband providers, on the provision of a PECS.

Several delegates described the essential role that their authorities were playing as part of a coordinated approach to a PECS amongst operators, emergency services providers and government. Irrespective of the vulnerability of the jurisdiction to natural or other emergencies, it was concluded that SNRF members had a vital regulatory duty to ensure that all providers of voice services delivered an effective PECS, and to participate in the wider consideration of how advances in technology could deliver the best results to the public in their jurisdiction.

The session was chaired by Rory Graham, General Counsel of the Jersey Competition Regulatory Authority, standing in for SNRF Chair Tim Ringsdore. The view of the attendees was that it had been a useful and productive exchange of experiences and knowledge. The next meeting will be held online on 2 August 2023. Topics to be discussed will include use of satellite services and the sharing by operators of network elements.