



## **Arab IGF Community Contribution: Connecting the Next Billion**

### **How would you define the issue “Connecting the Next Billion”?**

In the context of the Arab region, the issue around connecting the next Billion of Internet users is specific to bridging the persisting both urban and rural digital gaps. There is a need to address infrastructure issues namely spectrum availability of 3G and 4G services which are critical mainly because mobile broadband is a key enabler of consumer economic benefit. Affordability of Internet access, which is affected by the regulatory framework and the scarcity of IXP's at the national and regional level can significantly impact lowering the cost of communication. Devices cost and computer illiteracy are also the main reasons why Internet penetration is still sluggish which affects directly the establishment of a robust local content industry and profitable Internet economy. The foresaid challenges trigger a domino effect, hence is the need to set up a long term vision which takes into account policy implementation that does not conflict with the overall benefit of being connected to the Internet.

Therefore, in order to define the issue of “Connecting the Next Billion”, we need to answer the following questions: Who are the Next Billion and where will they come from? Will they come from undeserved and remote areas? How will the Next Billion be connected? The need to address issues of infrastructure, affordability and low cost devices. What are the needs of the Next Billion and what will they do online? Profiling the Next Billion and the need to address issues of local content, local application and E-commerce.

### **Have you observed any regional or national specifications regarding connectivity (e.g. Internet industry development)?**

Mobile connectivity is playing a major role in reaching remote areas, provided that it's economically viable to deploy. In case economic viability is not clear, governments have the option to utilize Universal Access Funds to build infrastructure and/or subsidize connectivity. Different last mile technologies can then be utilized (fixed/wireless).

Some countries in the Arab region have set ambitious action plans which will mark a turning point in the Internet industry. A case in point is the strategy of the Lebanese government to replace the existing copper and link all end-users to fiber optic by 2020 in response to the huge demand, knowing that this project will attract foreign investments into Lebanon while contributing to economic development and providing job opportunities. It's worth noting that fiber optic networks already exist, yet the new plan "Lebanon 2020" will assure among others Fiber To The Home (FTTH) and Fiber To The Office (FTTO).

**Do you know of existing policy measures, and private sector or civil society initiatives addressing connectivity? If yes, was the policy a government policy, industry policy (either collective best practice or corporate policy), technical policy, or did it pertain to civil society collaboration? Describe them.**

Most initiatives to address connectivity issues in the Arab region are led by the government. The Ministry of Telecommunications In Lebanon for example took the following measures to reducing the tariffs of communication on local, international and mobile calls along with sharp decrease on Internet services fees, which resulted in an increase in landline and Digital lines (DSL) subscribers and led to an increase in Internet penetration from 70% in 2013 to 86% in 2015. It also upgraded the DSL network introducing VDSL2 technology increasing the Internet speed to between 30 Mbps and 50Mbps.

Jordan on the other hand has developed a five year strategic plan for the telecommunications and information technology sectors, prepared in full partnership with the private sector, with the purpose of improving the role of ICT in Jordan's economic development and job creation. The strategy is designed to be aligned with the Government of Jordan's Policy in the Telecommunications and IT Sectors in its recommendations. The strategy was prepared by INTAJ "Information & Communication Technology Association-Jordan" and is entitled "National ICT Strategy 2013 - 2017", available at: [http://www.intaj.net/sites/default/files/jordan\\_nis\\_june\\_2013.pdf](http://www.intaj.net/sites/default/files/jordan_nis_june_2013.pdf)

**In your opinion, what worked well in the development of the policy, and what impediments were encountered?**

In general the policy development process should be designed in an inclusive manner ensuring the participation of the different stakeholders. In the Arab Region, it is becoming now a common practice by the policy makers and regulators to call for "Open Consultations" where a set of clear questions are identified in a way that helps to shape the policy framework intended to be developed at a later stage. Although, providing an open consultation document a mean for each stakeholder to express his thoughts, concerns and suggestions, still more progress need to take place across the different phases of the policy development cycle. For example, different countries in the Arab Region (i.e. Egypt - UAE - Qatar- Lebanon) have developed their own "National Broadband Plans" - such plans reflect the strong will and deep awareness of the governments to promote broadband nationwide, but for the plan to be effective, and workable it is crucial to design it in a way that clearly identify the role, responsibilities and

benefits of all stakeholders (end user - private sector - civil society - academia). Another important factor that is critical for success of the policy development is to prove the socio-economic benefits of broadband connectivity, its impact on the national economy (GDP - Jobs/Business Creations - Environment) and not to ignore its direct effect across different verticals (Education - Health - Transport - Finance - Energy etc..)

### **What was the experience with implementation?**

As stated earlier, the success of the policy development lies in the clear identification of the roles, responsibilities and benefits of every stakeholder in the value chain, which is then directly impacting the implementation phase. By experience, in the Arab region it is the government and regulators who set the policy framework. The challenges in implementation are more or less common across different countries. One major challenge is to come up with a plan that meets the end user demand expectations and at the same time is not harming the business model and revenues of the service providers and operators. Here comes the role of the government in playing the mediator role by maintaining the balance between consumer and business needs. Various solutions can be adopted to achieve this, such as reviewing the industry taxation and licensing scheme, planning the usage of universal service fund, implementing public private partnership programs, setting investment friendly policies, adopting open Internet collaborative governance, applying fair usage policies, and ensuring an open competitive market between the different players.

### **Did you experience any unintended consequences of policy developments/interventions, good and bad?**

Unintended consequences usually occur due to the fact that policies and technologies are not developing in the same speed. It is important to state that the Arab world is of a unique nature in terms of eagerness of new technologies adoption; which is faced with the policy development process that is facing different bureaucratic challenges. Another element is the interference of other governmental bodies (i.e. ministry of finance - ministry of defense - ministry of interior) that might slow down the implementation process by imposing additional financial burdens or security measures. From the end user side, the content consumption nature is another major challenge that is hard to predict in the Arab world. The consumption of video content is ranked number one in the region but at the same time this can be understood due to the lack of the arabic content. Therefore, it is becoming mandatory when setting up any policy framework or a business model to set up the consumer demand to the maximum.

### **Can you think of unresolved issues where further multistakeholder cooperation is needed?**

Over the last decade, it has been proved that there is no one stakeholder can manage or govern the Internet and its development on his own. Therefore, cooperation across the different stakeholders is always needed to be in place. The level of cooperation might be different from one issue to another. Some clear examples where cooperation is still highly needed in the Arab region are: setting up IXPs on

both national and regional levels, deployment of IPv6, the number of domains registered to each ccTLD, (Arabic) IDN TLDs and Broadband (Fixed and Mobile) roll out. In addition, it is critical to identify the unconnected users' type, demographic, education level, income vs. DPI. Studying those factors will help in providing customized holistic solutions (that include descent connectivity - affordable devices - relevant content) and will strongly serve to overcome the challenges preventing the unconnected from being connected and to bridge the digital divide.

### **Did you gain any insight as a result of the experience?**

Efforts are still needed to work on increasing Internet users in the Arab region. Despite the fact that many Arab countries suffer from bad economic conditions, still Internet services are highly priced, making it even more challenging for people to get connected. From a penetration perspective, rural areas mostly have lower level of Internet access. On the other hand, in urban areas primary schools are not yet connected to the internet. Hence initiatives to develop Internet infrastructure and get more people online need to focus more on rural and undeserved areas and ICT reforms in the educational sector.

Raising awareness about the benefits of technology as well as ICT literacy is key. The Media sector can be an effective partner in that respect, and could play a major role in raising awareness especially in rural areas where both radio and TV have prominent presence. For many segments of the societies in Arab countries, Internet services are not considered a priority, specifically due to the poor economic climate. Targeted campaigns could address the lack of interest in getting connected, especially for specific market segments, such as women and higher aged citizens.

Internet could play a major role in creating job opportunities in rural areas, spread and improve the quality of education. It could also contribute to improving the quality of public services, save time and money. Hence connecting people, can vastly increase the quality of living of rural communities of the Arab region. More government / private sector partnerships are needed to provide Internet-based solutions that guarantee sustainable economic development, fairer distribution of wealth and robust administrative procedures.

### **List proposed steps for further multistakeholder dialogue/actions**

Foster private-public partnerships to invest in telecom infrastructure to reach out to disadvantaged areas.

Establish national and local dialogues on the benefits of the Internet and how it could improve the economic situation of individuals.

Develop policies and regulations that cater for a competitive access-price strategy to ensure the Internet is affordable at the macro level.

Engage with CSO's to reinforce their role in mobilising the communities they work with.