Broadband, the Key to Bringing 'Education to All',

says UN Broadband Commission

Mobile broadband devices could be the solution to bringing 'first world' educational opportunities to the planet's poorest communities

Mobile phones, tablets and e-readers with broadband connectivity could prove the long-sought panacea in the global effort to bring quality, ubiquitous multidisciplinary educational opportunities to people everywhere, especially the world's poorest or most isolated communities, according to the UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development.

A report by the Commission's Working Group on Education, led by UNESCO, indicated that, worldwide, over 60 million primary-school age children do not currently attend school; almost half that number never will. The situation worsens as children get older, with over 70 million not enrolled in secondary school. And while classroom computers can help, lack of resources remains critical. If an average of eight children share each classroom computer in OECD nations, in Africa teachers can struggle to share each computer among 150 or more pupils. But with increasingly sophisticated mobile devices now packing more computing power than the famed 'supercomputers' of the late 1990s, the Commission believes broadband-connected personal wireless devices could be the solution.

ITU figures show that mobile broadband is the *fastest growing technology in human history*. The number of mobile phone subscriptions now exceeds the world's total population of around seven billion, and active mobile broadband subscriptions exceed 2.1 billion – three times higher than the 700 million wireline broadband connections worldwide.

Even more encouragingly, most of this progress has taken place in the developing world, which has accounted for 90% of global net additions for mobile cellular and 82% of global net additions of new Internet users since early 2010.

"Education is one of the most powerful uses to which broadband connectivity can be put," said ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao. "For the first time in history, mobile broadband gives us the chance to truly bring education to all, regardless of a person's geographical location, linguistic and cultural frameworks, or ready access to infrastructure like schools and transport. Education will drive entrepreneurship, especially among the young – which is why we must strive harder to get affordable broadband networks in place which can deliver educational opportunities to children and adults," he said.

Established in 2010, the Broadband Commission is a top-level advocacy body which focuses on strategies to make broadband more available and affordable worldwide. It is chaired by President Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Mexico's Carlos Slim Helú, with ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao and UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova as co-Vice Chairs. As the deadline for the Millennium Development Goals fast approaches, Commissioners are now focusing on ensuring broadband is recognized as a fundamental pillar of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which will be agreed at the forthcoming Sustainable Development Summit in New York in September.

The 11th Meeting of the Broadband Commission for Digital Development took place in Paris on February 26-27 ►

▶ and was held in conjunction with UNESCO's flagship ICT education-focused event, Mobile Learning Week (MLW), co-organized this year with sister agency UN Women. Broadband Commissioners participating in the MLW High-level Policy Forum of "Leveraging technology to empower women and girls" took advantage of the opportunity to interact with Ministers of Education and senior representatives of international organizations on the uses of mobile broadband for education.

"Every day, everywhere, women and men are inventing new ways to use broadband, mobile telephones and computers to be empowered, more autonomous and free," said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova. "We need to tap this inventiveness to improve education, especially for girls and women. But we have a long way to go. Two thirds of illiterate adults are women, and two thirds of the world's out-of-school primary-age children are girls. This is a huge injustice, and a gap that we must fill. The continued expansion of broadband combined with technology can help us make giant strides towards this."

Speaking at the opening of the Commission session, President Paul Kagame stressed that broadband should be regarded as a basic utility, like water and electricity. "In Rwanda, investing in ICTs has been indispensable to the attainment of our development goals. Broadband enables business and social entrepreneurs to find ways to offer world class education at low cost, to populations that have never had access. These centres of knowledge already exist, but in order for developing countries and isolated communities, to access and use them productively, they will need faster, more reliable, and more affordable Internet. The same principle extends to government more widely, particularly in delivering essential services. Broadband technology can enhance public administration efficiency and accountability to citizens, no matter where they live."

President Kagame was joined by co-Chair, Carlos Slim Helú, who asked Commissioners to consider whether the power of ICTs was being sufficiently exploited in today's school environments. "Broadband and ICTs are now

available in many schools around the world – but are we seeing a concrete impact in the quality of education? We need to be sure that the potential of broadband for education is fully leveraged so that successful initiatives, such as new online course platforms, and many valuable education and training contents, become quickly available to people worldwide. Technology should be used for inclusion, and we should make vigorous efforts to ensure this."

The Broadband Commission first tackled the key issue of education in 2013 through a special Working Group on Education, led by UNESCO. At the morning session of the Commission, important reports emerging from ITU's m-Powering Development and Smart Sustainable Development Model Initiatives were also presented to the group. The m-Powering Development Initiative report, developed by a multistakeholder Advisory Board led by ITU's Telecommunication Development Bureau (BDT), finds that technological innovations and initiatives that use mobile phones can potentially bring exponential benefits to entire communities and make a valuable contribution to the global development agenda. The report by the Smart Sustainable Development Model Initiative, also led by BDT, focuses on the link between ICT for Development (ICT4D) with ICT for Disaster Management (ICT4DM) and their role in sustainable development processes.

To learn more about the current state of broadband connectivity worldwide, read the 2014 edition of ITU's State of Broadband Report: Broadband for All, featuring country-by-country rankings based on broadband access and affordability for over 160 economies.

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From left:
UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda, Mexico's Carlos Slim Helú and ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao.