



# Urgent Need to Address the Digital Divide to Achieve the Global Development Agenda by 2030

Investment solutions needed to build the infrastructure needed for the global roll-out of broadband

**T**he Sustainable Development Goals cannot be achieved without affordable and universal access to ICTs and broadband connectivity, according to members of the Broadband Commission who met on 18 September for the annual Commission meeting, held on the eve of the opening of the 71st session of the UN General Assembly.

**Ban Ki-Moon, United Nations Secretary General** said,<sup>1</sup> "The Broadband Commission's actions have produced results which are beyond my greatest expectations. It is now taken as a given around the globe that sustainable development is only possible if information and communication technology (ICTs), and particularly broadband, are deployed as a cross cutting catalyst for all three pillars of sustainable development. Thanks to the work of the Broadband Commission, the ITU and UNESCO and many others. Member States agreed last year in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that ICT and global interconnectedness has great potential to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge societies."

**President Paul Kagame, President of the Republic of Rwanda, and Co-Chair of the Broadband Commission** said, "We must remain ambitious. The Global Goals provide both a useful framework, and also the opportunity, to raise our focus beyond connecting people, towards innovation,

transformation and growth. This requires even bolder thinking and higher expectations of everyone involved. Broadband can't solve all the world's problems, but we know it can accelerate progress, in overcoming the biggest obstacles to global prosperity and wellbeing."

The Commission addressed two specific challenges during this year's meeting: firstly, how broadband can support the equitable provision of health and education in all countries and secondly, how to achieve the investment levels required for the rollout of global broadband infrastructure that connects everyone, everywhere.

The deployment of broadband plays a critical role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to the latest estimates, 59 million children are out of school, and 38 million people die annually from non-communicable diseases – broadband can reduce these dramatic numbers by making education and lifelong learning, as well as public healthcare, more available, accessible and, potentially, equitable.

**Houlin Zhao, ITU Secretary-General, who serves as co-Vice Chair of the Commission** said, "Investment in infrastructure for the roll out of broadband worldwide remains a major challenge that requires a more concerted effort and innovative public-private partnerships if we are to connect everyone, everywhere. I am also alarmed that we are seeing indications that the digital gender divide is

growing, not shrinking. Given everything we know about the importance of women's access to digital technology, and what it means for the next generation. This is most regrettable. I urge government and industry to adopt a zero tolerance policy towards gender digital divides."

**Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General, who also serves as co-Vice Chair** said, "A central tenet of the Broadband Commission is that the digital revolution must be a development revolution. It must be a revolution for human rights and dignity. It must be a revolution that empowers every woman and man, every society. This revolution is racing across the world, but we know the divides that remain. We must continue to collaborate and innovate together to achieve full global connectivity and inclusion."

**Carlos Slim, Chairman and Chief Executive of telecommunications companies Telmex and América Móvil, President of the Carlos Slim Foundation and Co-Chair of the Broadband Commission**, said, "In the knowledge society, the equal participation of all is necessary, in particular the equal participation of women," he said. Referencing a major new ITU and UN Women initiative which will be known as EQUALS, Slim said: "This is why I support EQUALS." EQUALS will be launched on 20 September.

**In a keynote address to the Commission, David Nabarro, who serves as Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Climate Change**, said, "The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) bring together

the needs of the people and the planet, the needs for sustainable economic growth, and the need for peace and partnership as the necessary elements for the future of our world. The new development agenda is universal, indivisible, must leave no one behind, and must address the digital divide, otherwise we won't succeed."

Following Dr. Nabarro's remarks, Scott Gegenheimer, Group Chief Executive of Zain Group, an innovative mobile operator across the Middle East and Africa, and Kevin Martin, Facebook's Vice President of Mobile and Global Access Policy, both of whom are Broadband Commissioners, announced an exciting collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to provide free, open and high-speed Wi-Fi internet connectivity to refugees in the Kingdom of Jordan for five years.

The connectivity project backed by Zain Group, UNHCR and Facebook will offer unlimited, 24/7 outdoor and indoor Wi-Fi access points through Zain Jordan's high-speed 4G mobile network.

Prior to this annual meeting, on 15 September, the Commission issued the latest edition of its flagship *State of Broadband* report, a unique global snapshot of broadband network access and affordability, with country-by-country data measuring broadband access against key advocacy targets set by the Commission in 2011.

The report confirmed that according to latest ITU figures, by end 2016 **3.5 billion people will be using the Internet**, up from 3.2 billion last year and equating to 47% of the global population. Progress in the 48 UN-designated Least Developed Countries has been encouraging, with the Commission's target of 15% of the LDC population online expected to be reached by the end of this year.

In total, there are now **91 economies where over 50% of the population is online**, up from 79 in 2015, the report says.

*The State of Broadband 2016* is the only report that features country-by-country rankings based on access and affordability for over 160 economies worldwide.

The Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development was established in 2010 and comprises more than 50 leaders from across a range of government and industry sectors who are committed to actively assisting countries, UN experts and NGO teams to fully leverage the huge potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to drive national SDG strategies in key areas like education, healthcare and environmental management.

**For more information please contact us at:**  
[www.itu.int](http://www.itu.int)

#### Reference:

1 Ban-Ki Moon's address to the Broadband Commission were personally delivered by his Special Advisor, Dr. David Nabarro, on behalf of the Secretary General.



Dr. David Nabarro, Special Adviser of the Secretary-General, Ban-Ki Moon and Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General and Co-Vice Chair of the Broadband Commission. Photo: © ITU.