BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE THROUGH COMMUNITY NETWORKS

Highlights of the "Sharing of Good Practices on Community Networks" held on March 1, 2023 during the sidelines of the
Asia Pacific Regional Internet Conference on Operational Technologies (APRICOT) 2023 in Manila, Philippines

Today, nearly half the world's population—about 3 billion people—are still offline. In Asia Pacific, about 28% have never used the internet.[1] **Community networks** help bridge this connectivity gap by offering innovative solutions to reach unserved and underserved areas. On March 1, 2023, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), through its Better Access and Connectivity (BEACON) Project, gathered more than 30 representatives of community network champions and implementers/operators to discuss connectivity solutions and share good practices in supporting community networks in various countries.

Community Network Champions

ADB · Internet Society · APNIC FOUNDATION · Connectivity Capital

Community Network Implementers

ISEA · NexLogic · RISE · wesfardell connect

Community Networks:

- Networks built by and for the communities they serve (Internet Society)
- Connectivity serving communities (APNIC Foundation)
- Multi-stakeholder and community-led connectivity initiatives with sustainability mechanism (USAID's BEACON)

Elements of Successful and Sustainable Community Networks

CAPACITATE THE COMMUNITY AS NETWORK MANAGERS

Networks should be built by and for the local communities they serve. The community's ownership and commitment are of utmost importance. The communities should be included as much as possible during the design, deployment, and operations so they can understand and take ownership of the connectivity solution.

CUSTOMIZE CONNECTIVITY SOLUTIONS

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to building community networks. They are diverse in terms of size, technology design and set-up, purpose, and business and governance models. The network design should be tailored to fit the profile and specific needs of the local community it will serve.

PARTNER WITH LOCAL CHAMPIONS

Community networks are possible through the initiative of people in the community and local partners that support them. These champions need not be highly technically trained individuals who will operate the networks but could serve specific roles such as community mobilizers.

FOCUS ON DEVELOPMENT IMPACT

Networks built to meet specific development objectives—such as supporting the livelihood of the community, improving access to education and better healthcare services, or facilitating access to banking—are more likely to gain the support of the local community and other stakeholders/supporters.

EXPLORE COST-EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS

Community network implementers need to work on cost-effective connectivity solutions, keep operational costs low, employ appropriate business models, and build on the core competencies of their partners to sustain the operations of the networks.

INVEST IN TRAINING LOCAL TEAMS

Most successful networks are run by local implementers, rather than third parties who leave after building the infrastructure. It is imperative to train local teams on network operations, monitoring, and security. There are different resources and partners who can be tapped for this purpose.

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[1] Data from Internet Society and APNIC Foundation.

PRIORITIZE SUSTAINABILITY AT THE ONSET

Sustainability mechanisms should be incorporated early on in the project planning and design to ensure the continuous operations of the community network beyond the life of the project.

PUT IN PLACE ENABLING POLICIES

Enabling policies are crucial to deploying and operating community networks in a fast and cost-effective manner. Policies can be done at the national level (e.g. similar license exemptions and tax incentives done in other countries, or spectrum management and open access bill in the case of the Philippines), and at the local level through ordinances passed by local government units.

BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT INCLUSION

Inclusion focuses on ensuring meaningful and efficient access to the Internet for all members of the community. Inclusive community networks provide equal opportunities for women and men, ethnic groups, and other marginalized sectors to access and benefit from digital connectivity.

"Internet Society believes in **working with the right people** to deploy community networks. If the community is with you, and they realize that you're building the network with them and for them, sustainability will be possible."

NAVEED HAQ
Regional Infrastructure and Connectivity Director, Internet Society

"There is a variety of **low-cost solutions** to provide connectivity in rural and remote areas that are already operational in other countries. There's nothing hindering us from deploying these solutions here (Philippines)."

JONATHAN BREWER
Connectivity Consultant, Asian Development Bank

"Any community network, regardless of the innovation or purpose, will not be fully sustainable if not properly supported or backed by an **enabling regulatory framework**."

SYLVIA CADENA
Head of Programs & Partnership, APNIC Foundation

"USAID's BEACON is keen on **facilitating partnerships** and **supporting community network deployments** to expand internet access in unserved and underserved areas in the Philippines."

JOHN GARRITY
Chief of Party, USAID's BEACON

Resources on Community Networks

Training/Capacity Building

Internet Society offers moderated online courses, face-to-face courses, and self-paced tutorials on sustainable connectivity solutions, including community networks readiness assessment, designing and deploying computer networks (DDCN), and network operations.

Grants and Capital Support

Connectivity Capital provides debt financing, investment management, and advisory services support to advance affordable broadband connectivity across the world.

Organizations such as **APNIC Foundation** and **Internet Society** provide grants to support network deployments and other initiatives.

Technical Assistance, Advocacy Support, and other Partnerships

Development agencies such as **USAID** and **ADB** provide technical assistance and facilitate strategic multi-stakeholder partnerships to promote digital connectivity and help bridge the digital divide.

Microsoft, through the Airband initiative, also supports public-private partnerships on community networks with digital transformation as focus.