REPORT OF THE ROUNDTABLE ON ACCELERATING INFRASTRUCTURE DEPLOYMENT AND ACHIEVING UNIVERSAL ACCESS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM COVID-19 HELD ON 23RD MARCH 2021

Background

Covid-19 has drastically changed every sphere of our lives, including business, education, healthcare, socializing, leisure, and travel. As governments have implemented a wide range of policy responses to manage the impact of the pandemic, a unifying theme emerging from every country has been the importance of connectivity.

This event was aimed to bring together representatives of the EACO community to highlight their Covid-19 policy responses, reflect on lessons learned from the crisis, and discuss recommendations to accelerate infrastructure deployment and achieve universal access.

The roundtable would build on the findings of Access Partnership's recently released whitepaper "Lessons Learned from Covid-19: Perspectives from the Tower Industry", which analyses policy measures to enable the operation and deployment of wireless telecommunications infrastructure during the pandemic and presents international case studies and recommendations.

Representatives from the NRAs from EACO would provide insight from their countries on the following issues amidst the pandemic in ensuring connectivity: Universal Access, critical infrastructure, regional harmonisation, E government, cross border infrastructure and cooperation.

Attendance

The roundtable was workshop was attended by 33 participants who included stakeholder from regulators and operators as well as industry partners.

Roundtable Proceedings

A. Opening Remarks were given by Dr Samuel Muhizi, the Director General of ARCT Burundi. He highlighted that ICT infrastructure, both passive and active, is the backbone of ICT services. It is therefore important that we create opportunity for ICT infrastructure to be made easily available. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it c1learer that more than ever before we need to have 100% connectivity. He pointed out that should promote as a region to enhance infrastructure deployment should include promotion of infrastructure sharing in different forms, enhance our national ICT strategies to promote deployment of ICT infrastructure and promote Universal Access

B. Mr. Christopher Casarrubias, Head of Emerging Markets, Access Partnership introduced the Access Partnership's recently released whitepaper "Lessons Learned from Covid-19: Perspectives from the Tower Industry", which analyses policy measures to enable the operation and deployment of wireless telecommunications infrastructure during the pandemic and presents international case studies and recommendations.

C. Mr. Ravi Suchak, Vice President, Public Affairs – EMEA (American Tower Corporation) gave the keynote address

In his Keynote speech, Mr Ravi Suchak, thanked EACO for its efforts and highlighted the importance of multi-stakeholder conversations on accelerating infrastructure deployment and achieving universal connectivity. He highlighted American Tower Corporation's operation in the region, which currently involves 6,000 towers between Uganda and Kenya and reaffirmed American Tower Corporation's deep commitment to East Africa.

Mr Suchak cautioned that policy and regulation should not overlook the vital role that tower companies have played in sustaining and developing communications in the region and underscored that the Covid-19 crisis has shown that Internet access is not a luxury but a lifeline

whose foundation is a network of masts and towers provided by Towercos. Finally, Mr. Suchak reiterated the need for policies that encourage passive infrastructure sharing, noting its impact on reducing costs, enabling faster network rollout, improving coverage and service quality, and called on regulators to ease regulatory burdens and designate telecommunications infrastructure as critical national infrastructure.

D. A moderated session discussed the following topics: Infrastructure deployment/ sharing, critical Infrastructure, Regulatory Harmonisation, E-Government, Universals access funds and Regional Harmonisation.

The session was constituted by representatives from the NRAs for the East African Region as follows:

   a. Mr. Christopher Kemei, Director Universal Service, CA, Kenya
   b. Mr. Protais Kanyankore, Senior Manager in Charge of Universal Access & Services, RURA, Rwanda
   c. Mr. Constaque Hakizimana, Technical Director, ARCT, Burundi
   d. Eng. Lemi Laku, Director Universal Service and Access Fund (USAF), NCA, South Sudan
   e. Mr. James Beronda, Head Technical Services-Uganda Communications Universal Services Access Fund-UCUSAF

E. Outcomes.

The Roundtable discussion was able to agree on key recommendations as an outcome from the discussions that were held.   The recommendations in Annex 1 and hereby attached.

ANNEX 1: Recommendation

**Recommended Regulatory and Policy Measures
to Accelerate Infrastructure Deployment and Achieve Universal Access**

Covid-19 has made it unquestionable that communications networks and access to connectivity are essential for economic continuity and long-term prosperity. As such, additional efforts are required to accelerate infrastructure deployment, service availability and achieve universal access across East Africa. These include:

1. Encouraging infrastructure sharing, given the efficiencies it creates and the reductions in asset duplication as well as promoting environmental sustainability.

2. Identifying critical infrastructure nodes; designating telecommunications networks, including passive infrastructure as critical national infrastructure, and affording them the relevant protection.

3. Categorizing telecommunications services and workers as essential services/personnel.

4. Encouraging regulatory harmonization and streamlined regulatory frameworks for infrastructure deployment and service access at the regional and national levels.

5. Accelerating digital transformation and establishing a digital framework for all deployment-related permits and authorizations.

6. Expediting approval procedures for all deployment related permits and authorizations, including by encouraging faster response from regulatory authorities.

7. Encouraging the efficient use of Universal Service Funds, including for the provision of subsidies to accelerate infrastructure deployment in un-served and underserved areas.

8. Strengthening regional and international cooperation in telecommunications development through sharing of regulatory best practices and capacity building initiatives.

9. Promoting regional interconnectivity and interoperability.

Adopting these measures will help accelerate the deployment and maintenance of telecommunications networks across East Africa, contributing to achieving universal access and enabling the development of knowledge-based societies in the region.