

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
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Advocacy for community-led connectivity access in the global South

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<https://www.apc.org/en/node/35376>

Introduction

Since the start of the pandemic, there has been a strong revival of interest in digital rights, especially with respect to ensuring that everyone has internet access. The increase in internet traffic recorded across the world, caused by those working from home and children taking school lessons from their place of residence, is no doubt part of this revival.¹ However, COVID-19 also highlighted that home internet is not the norm; there still remains a large majority of people residing in low-income or unserved areas without any connectivity, or expensive mobile bundles as their only option. As a result, advocates have raised their voices regarding connectivity being a priority for all countries that must be achieved universally to ensure that no one is left behind.²

This thematic report walks through three stages of work completed by the Local Networks (LocNet) initiative,³ focusing on advocacy for community access, under the project name “connecting the unconnected”. Firstly, two pre-pandemic actions within LocNet helped to set the groundwork, mainly around international policy advocacy and direct support for community-led action for local connectivity.

Secondly, as a result of communities and nations being locked down due to the pandemic, the report details two follow-up actions which supported national governments with innovative regulation to legitimise local actors providing connectivity and to provide support to community network partners who are contending with substantial communications and connectivity demands in their regions. Thirdly, the pandemic led to a need for more inward reflection by the LocNet team on advocacy for local access in the future. Specifically, what does it mean to move from originally trying to broadly address universal services, or “connecting the unconnected”, to an understanding of “meaningful connectivity” coming from a community-led perspective? Finally, the chapter closes off with what is next in terms of advocacy for community-led access.

Pre-pandemic advocacy activities

The pandemic has made many of the structural inequalities that exist throughout the world clearly visible, but even more so in the global South. Prior to the pandemic, the LocNet team and the original 12 affiliated peers/partners were advantageously placed to start looking at local access challenges and the opportunities to learn and exchange ideas on how to accompany locally led connectivity processes.⁴ The team was already developing a holistic approach to advocacy that would lead to the success of community-led initiatives, and had developed five areas of work.⁵ In late 2018, advocacy would come from at least two salient strategies: 1) tackling the lack of awareness among policy makers and regulators, and developing a shared language for them around complementary connectivity models, and 2) having solid community-led cases by on-the-ground partners or champions which demonstrably provided

1 OECD. (2020). *Keeping the Internet up and running in times of crisis*. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/keeping-the-internet-up-and-running-in-times-of-crisis-4017c4c9>

2 La Rue, F. (2011). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue*. United Nations Human Rights Council. https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.27_en.pdf

3 The Local Networks (LocNet) initiative is a collective effort led by APC and Rhizomatica in partnership with people and organisations in the global South to directly support community networks and to contribute to an enabling ecosystem for their emergence and growth. Community networks cultivate bottom-up, sustainable approaches to communication technology and meaningful connectivity that strengthen autonomy and self-determination.

4 <https://www.apc.org/en/node/35438>

5 These five areas of work were defined in the following “work packages”: Work Package 1: Peer Learning Exchange, Work Package 2: Learning and Capacity Building, Work Package 3: Enabling Policy and Regulation, Work Package 4: Innovation, Technology and Sustainability, and Work Package 5: Gender and Women’s Participation. <https://www.apc.org/en/node/35376>

an alternative to traditional approaches to connectivity. In many cases, pre-COVID advocacy in these two areas were foundations to supporting community-led connectivity opportunities at the start of the pandemic.

Community network policy awareness and shared language

Prior to 2020, there were major gains around awareness raising for complementary models of internet access within international policy and regulatory spaces. Specifically, there were several like-minded groups which prepared the groundwork through the International Telecommunication Union (ITU),⁶ the African Union Commission,⁷ the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology⁸ and other forums to ensure inclusion of policy language that was acceptable and amenable to currently excluded local operators such as community networks wishing to provide service in areas that mobile operators were not reaching. Persistent presence at the international meetings and consistent contributions in study groups and council working groups, among others, were necessary advocacy activities, especially when met with moments of rejection to the community network concept.⁹ The inclusion of language in policies that enable community networks became foundational references for civil society to advocate at the regional or national levels for the inclusion of the same policy language to enable complementary telecommunications provision.

Yet even with the introduction of language supportive of community networks in policy spaces, awareness levels were still at nascent stages for many national and local government officials. Therefore, a substantial effort was made to describe this new lens for telecommunications,¹⁰ as well as working with individual countries and regions to create policy-relevant training content, and to provide awareness-raising workshops for policy makers in

Africa, Asia and Latin America.¹¹ Regional training through specific regional telecommunication bodies worked towards the much-needed effort to bring understanding of what was possible beyond traditional telecommunications provision that favours corporate national internet service providers (ISPs) and mobile operators. Beyond training, the LocNet policy team were also consistently monitoring public consultations around telecommunications, and when there was a request for public consultation, the team would mobilise and react promptly with other local civil society organisations to ensure timely submissions.¹²

Champions in community networks

In addition to policy advocacy, up to the beginning of 2020, there was a growing group of local grassroots institutions working on community mobilisation and creating “proof of concept” on-the-ground models of community networks. These “champions” were able to meet each other and exchange knowledge of their work through LocNet learning opportunities and other regional meet-ups. Specifically, before 2020, there were advocacy activities to research¹³ and document¹⁴ what existed in the community networks space. In linking some of these global South groups, further learning spaces allowed for small and medium-sized enterprises or non-profit groups to physically visit each community network site and exchange lessons on processes of community-led change and providing connectivity services.¹⁵

Through the above, many community network champions can now offer remarkable case studies,¹⁶ and advocate and meet the demand for locally led communications initiatives, particularly in rural areas and where other barriers to entry are high. The LocNet team’s work with local partners was to amplify their case studies and find opportunities to engage in close dialogue with other like-minded stakeholders, demonstrating both the successes and challenges of the community network model. From the policy perspective, these case studies were shared by the LocNet policy team and accompanying grassroots partners together at various levels of government to showcase the communication needs of local rural citizens. The ongoing dialogue and advocacy shows civil society commitment to processes of

6 The implementation of Recommendation 19 from ITU-D for the Americas region: <https://policy.communitynetworks.group/international-organisations/start#wtdc-17>

7 Specialized Technical Committee on Communications and Information Technologies (STC-CICT) from the African Union: https://policy.communitynetworks.group/international-organisations/start#african_union_commission

8 United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development work in 2019 and 2020: <https://policy.communitynetworks.group/international-organisations/start#cstd-19>

9 https://policy.communitynetworks.group/international-organisations/start#itu_plenipotentiary_conference

10 Song, S., Rey-Moreno, C., & Jensen, M. (2019). *Innovations in Spectrum Management: Enabling community networks and small operators to connect the unconnected*. Internet Society & APC. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/innovations-spectrum-management-enabling-community-networks-and-small-operators-connect>

11 <https://2016-2019report.apc.org/2016-2019.html>

12 Ibid.

13 <https://www.apc.org/en/node/34231>

14 See, for example, Finlay, A. (Ed.). (2018). *Global Information Society Watch 2018: Community networks*. APC & IDRC. <https://giswatch.org/community-networks>

15 <https://www.apc.org/en/node/35438>

16 <https://www.apc.org/en/tags/cn-stories>

changing national universal access policy, including the revision of costly licensing processes for local operators.

The LocNet team and partners worked on these advocacy strategies, which led to three outcomes: 1) raised awareness of community-led efforts within policy circles, 2) a shared understanding and exchange among like-minded community network champions to meet and learn together, and 3) a greater awareness of success stories and the development of specific community-led models to showcase widely. These outcomes presented many possibilities to make connectivity alternatives more viable, should grassroots groups be given a chance.

Priorities of access during the pandemic

After mid-2020, the two enabling advocacy strategies that were established before the pandemic – international policy recognition and the identification of and exchange among local champions – were in full swing. Within the greater drive globally for accelerating connectivity, this was an opportune moment to go to the next level of advocacy for local connectivity access. During the pandemic, the LocNet team found themselves moving to a dual advocacy stage of accompanying national-level policy framework development and the subsequent operationalisation of policy, and accelerating local community network efforts. Several national government entities had previously engaged in dialogue with local partners or the LocNet team around policy changes or participated in awareness training on community networks. Due to COVID-19, pressure was mounting to help citizens to get connected. The next steps for many of the governments concerned was getting appropriate language into national directives or policy documents, as well as operationalising appropriate policy to support resource-poor regions in their efforts towards digital inclusion. With regard to communities, existing community network models now had further demand and backing from their communities, and they now needed to find ways in which to ensure their work could follow through by ensuring consistent communications for their users, allowing them to stay informed of health information, stay in touch with family and relatives, and access some form of education and training for their home-bound children.

Revival of digital rights and access in policy spaces

At the start of the pandemic, the lockdowns made clear that there was a pressing need to expand connectivity. As citizens became more vocal about their right to communicate digitally, some policy stakeholders

took the opportunity to re-open the topic of access and, in some cases, implemented alternatives for underserved regions. Recommendations were sent to governments on ways to enable local operators.¹⁷ Due to the pre-pandemic advocacy that the LocNet initiative and others had conducted, some initial policy dialogue inroads with governments were possible. There was some recognition that community network models were propagating and that national policy implementers would not have to start from scratch. In some cases, community networks also took this opportunity to meet with governments to showcase their community network model. They voiced their challenges in their work on local connectivity and how it needs policy space and licence exemption if the model is to expand to further underserved areas.

Several national governments, such as Zimbabwe, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Indonesia and Kenya, made revisions or new provisions within their policies, finding ways in which to legitimise the existence of small operators to provide telecommunication services to unconnected or underserved communities. Kenya enacted the community network licence framework.¹⁸ Although Brazil's regulator acknowledged community networks in early 2020,¹⁹ dissemination and sensitisation of the policy had to occur in order to popularise and educate people about the licence change. The LocNet initiative offered technical assistance to the Brazilian telecom regulator Anatel to bring stakeholders together through dialogue,²⁰ and in creating a policy brief²¹ and accessible public information to accompany the policy work.²² A strong champion of community

17 APC, Redes A.C., & Universidad Politécnic de Catalunya. (2020). *Expanding the telecommunications operators ecosystem: Policy and regulatory guidelines to enable local operators*. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/APC_R1_ExpandingTelecommunication_OK.pdf

18 Kivuva, M. (2021, 9 November). Kenya adopts the community networks licensing framework. *KICTANet*. <https://www.kictanet.or.ke/kenya-ratifies-the-community-networks-licensing-framework>

19 Kopp, M. (2020, 29 June). Brazil acknowledges community networks as viable option for connectivity. *APCNews*. <https://www.apc.org/en/news/brazil-acknowledges-community-networks-viable-option-connectivity>

20 APCNews. (2021, 28 October). Multistakeholder collaboration to build an enabling environment for community networks in Brazil. *APCNews*. <https://www.apc.org/en/news/multistakeholder-collaboration-build-enabling-environment-community-networks-brazil>

21 Labardini Inzunza, A., & Zanolli, B. (2021). *Policy brief and recommendations for an enabling environment for community networks in Brazil*. APC. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/policy-brief-and-recommendations-enabling-environment-community-networks-brazil>

22 Kassouwi, I. K. (2022, 31 May). Zimbabwe unveils plans to facilitate digital communication with community networks. *Ecofin Agency*. <https://www.ecofinagency.com/telecom/3105-43638-zimbabwe-unveils-plans-to-facilitate-digital-communication-with-community-networks>

networks and our advocacy partner in Zimbabwe, Murambinda Works, demonstrated its efforts to the government,²³ and the Zimbabwe telecom regulator (POTRAZ) has now made plans for a community network rollout in each province. Uganda rolled out their new communal access service provider or network operator licences in 2020.²⁴ Argentina also benefited from strong local advocacy by AlterMundi and others, seeing legislation adopted for the use of Universal Service Funds to resource community networks in underserved communities, both rural and urban. In Indonesia, partners have now identified an entry point for local internet provision through the decentralised village fund mechanisms enacted by the Ministry of Villages. Common Room Network Foundation, along with its wide range of ICT partners, is now working with local groups to explore the fund's possibility.

The greater demand for connectivity by and for the underserved and the willingness of some governments to consider and exchange information about complementary ways for communities to develop their own connectivity pathways is reflected in these recent policy changes.

Higher demand for local connectivity

At the local level, community network partners were approached by their neighbouring communities, who now needed to be connected to the internet – many were looking for a service with adequate connectivity speeds so that their children could be online during the lockdowns. This created a special opportunity to expand their work on enabling rural connectivity. The challenge saw local partners increase their internet provision capacity, including looking into how to improve the quality of their services. How to make these changes surfaced after much self-reflection, including considerations of where to hone in on institutional strengthening efforts.

Because of their holistic nature, community networks are usually not limited to the connectivity space – rather, they are integrated with other needs of the community. During COVID-19, this was evident from community network partners participating in local emergency-driven solutions to support each other.²⁵ As a result, particular local or civil society

partners found their models put into intensive practice and use, largely based on citizen-driven needs. In order to ensure their work was recognised and amplified, their stories were shared and documented through blogs²⁶ and short videos,²⁷ and used as materials to advocate among civil society groups as well as to governments who were still unfamiliar with the community network option. The same local community network builders have also gone further to develop a national training programme – the National School for Community Networks, which has started in five countries²⁸ – as more neighbouring communities requested assistance for connectivity in their regions.

While not all civic advocacy and policy work can be attributed to the LocNet initiative, all of these examples are due to efforts by local activists and advocacy sustaining ongoing dialogue with governments – now, when the time has been most opportune, the policy changes have taken place with tremendous results in favour of community-driven networks.

Reflections on the experiences of “connecting the unconnected”

As the dual advocacy strategies – fostering enabling policy, and accompanying locally driven community network champions – started to gain significant traction during the pandemic, the LocNet team also reflected on its initial 2018 assumptions. These assumptions were developed as a project that responded to the needs for universal service by “connecting the unconnected”, but from a holistic and community-driven perspective.²⁹

Much has changed since the start of 2018. The greater demands in local connectivity during the pandemic meant that some governments have put in place “community network-friendly” policy directives, and now have the challenge of operationalising their new policy. Also, citizens who now use community network connectivity have integrated the internet better into their lives, creating new expectations of connectivity speeds or quality as well as thinking beyond the connection as to what value-driven needs can be met by the community networks.

23 APCNews. (2022, 20 April). Murambinda Community Network and the Integral Kumusha: “We feel we’re creating a movement that will be unstoppable”. *APCNews*. <https://www.apc.org/en/news/murambinda-community-network-and-integral-kumusha-we-feel-were-creating-movement-will-be>

24 <https://www.ucc.co.ug/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COMMUNAL-ACCESS-PROVIDER-LICENSE-25-05-2020.pdf>

25 APC & Rhizomatica. (2020, 22 May). Beyond Connectivity: Networks of Care. *MediaNama*. <https://www.medianama.com/2020/05/223-beyond-connectivity-networks-of-care>

26 <https://www.apc.org/en/tags/cn-stories>

27 <https://www.apc.org/en/routingforcommunities>

28 APCNews. (2022, 26 May). Meet the national schools empowering grassroots communities to bridge the digital divide. *APCNews*. <https://www.apc.org/en/blog/meet-national-schools-empowering-grassroots-communities-bridge-digital-divide>

29 <https://www.apc.org/en/project/connecting-unconnected-supporting-community-networks-and-other-community-based-connectivity>

As citizens are a part of their local community networks, and community networks are not just about connectivity, but about nurturing broader community participation and cooperation, there has been further consideration of the possibilities of leveraging the positive changes gained for local or social development. This evolution in thinking has come from the last five years of accompanying local community network processes. It is also moulding the way the LocNet team will be thinking about the possible futures or next steps that would move forward participatory or community-based processes to meet unserved communication needs.

This is where we see a point of evolution for debate. As connected communities become accustomed to a particular level of connectivity, there is a rise in expectations of the quality of service, etc. What level of digital services will local community members manage to maintain, given the structural issues they deal with in their day-to-day lives? This includes embedding connectivity within the absence of consistent energy supply, paved roads, schools and living standards. What partnerships would be appropriate to strike the right balance of community involvement and network stability and quality?

The LocNet team has learned over time that community networks can be embedded within sustainable and participatory civic action, which goes beyond connectivity and engages in local economic activities that are socially aware, gender aware and environmentally aware.³⁰ The ability to sustain activities locally can be informed by the need to recognise and support the commitment of mutual support groups or collectives to rebuild a thriving rural community and ultimately restore humanity and the dignity of life. Again, what are the responsibilities of partners towards this localised future?

In this respect, in the LocNet initiative, sufficient momentum has been reached for some of the community network partners in the “connecting the unconnected” project to carry forward their plans of either strengthening their institutional capacity to accompany communities or to help to meet the communication needs of the communities. The network has gained experience and understanding, and as partners mature one can see their internet services stabilise, and community members begin to realise the value-added services that go beyond

initial connectivity. For example, some are using the community network to support seed preservation through knowledge of these techniques being digitised and archived;³¹ creating or tweaking community-owned and context-appropriate technologies³² and services;³³ bringing local e-commerce services to rural citizens; creating Indigenous, language-diverse educational content for rural schools; and using connectivity to link bottom-up local actions for their well-being and increased meaning in their own lives. These local and participatory activities, which were reignited due to the community-initiated model of connectivity, have seen positive effects on social cohesion, strengthening the connection among people, and the creation of local value. But this has also raised community concerns of digital safety and privacy.

One angle to explore which has some resonance with the value-driven and social responsiveness of community networks is the concept of “meaningful access” or “meaningful connectivity”. At a global level, meaningful connectivity has been defined as “a level of connectivity that allows users to have a safe, satisfying, enriching and productive online experience at an affordable cost.”³⁴ Within this definition, there are measurable targets for the enabling drivers of infrastructure, affordability, access to devices, skills, and security and safety, that can inform whether one moves from no use to basic use, or skill to advanced quality of use.³⁵ Yet does this definition and its quantitative targets sufficiently fulfil or cover the local or lived experiences of community-led initiatives that have been observed in the five years of the LocNet initiative? Do they sufficiently account for making connectivity meaningful? In other words, how do we define meaningful connectivity from a community-driven or participatory perspective?

The LocNet team is taking time to unpack this idea so that it can inform and contribute to an alternative future, one that can address the on-the-ground realities and emergent needs for community networks and the people who live in the

30 “Connecting the Unconnected” project team. (2020). Community networks: A people – and environment – centred approach to connectivity. In A. Finlay (Ed.), *Global Information Society Watch 2020: Technology, the environment and a sustainable world: Responses from the global South*. APC. <https://giswatch.org/node/6238>

31 <https://videos.apc.org/u/apc/m/indigenous-communities-charting-their-journey-through-the-community-network-way/>

32 <https://videos.apc.org/u/apc/m/bamboo-tower-for-community-networks-coolab-and-portal-sem-porteiras-brazil/>

33 <https://videos.apc.org/u/apc/m/jxah-wejxia-fortaleciendo-nuestra-comunicacion>

34 Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology & International Telecommunication Union. (2022). *Achieving universal and meaningful digital connectivity: Setting a baseline and targets for 2030*. https://www.itu.int/itu-d/meetings/statistics/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2022/04/UniversalMeaningfulDigitalConnectivityTargets2030_BackgroundPaper.pdf

35 Ibid.

communities they connect. Ultimately, community connectivity creates an impetus to reinvigorate local and participatory action that unites the community, bringing people closer together so that they can better face the times ahead.

What next?

COVID-19 dramatically highlighted the digital divide and accelerated the efforts of civil society and governments to take unprecedented steps to improve policy directives for communities to be able to be connected. Advocacy for local access through community-led means has succeeded in some countries, and, as a result, certain policy measures have legitimised the operation of community networks. Yet there is a threat that these opportunities are not taken up on a large scale by local communities. What may be the cause? Are there still barriers to entry, such as technical barriers? Is there a lack of awareness or bureaucracy issues that get in the way? Perhaps there is an issue of trust? With the new policy momentum behind community networks, governments are now keen to see their legislation produce positive results. If they don't see these results, it may leave the civil society movement for local access high and dry.

Some steps forward to consider include:

- **Documenting best practices:** As community network builders and civil society groups are actively trying to operationalise the new policy opportunities, there are practical lessons to be learned by others. While the policies are good on paper, there are indications that civil society groups are not taking up the new opportunities, such as applying for social purpose licences in the new legislation regimes allowing this. The reasons for this are partly practical. From initial observations, local groups appear to be struggling to fill out the appropriate administrative paperwork and, in many cases, require help from a third party to complete the forms. It is important for the movement to document their learnings in cases such as applying for social purpose licences and share lessons with others in the movement, as well as to provide feedback to the government to show ways in which to improve its procedures for operationalising policy. This documentation – which should also cover other practical aspects of developing community networks – will also help to further develop the future narrative of the evolution of community networks beyond connectivity.
- **Ongoing national level advocacy:** While we have seen headway in some countries, the majority of current national telecommunication

policies remain unable to bring other complementary providers to underserved communities. Therefore there is a need for ongoing outreach to potential allies and partners who are willing to work together in advocating for policy that enables community networks. There remains a need for dedicated advocacy calls for reforms to policy and regulation that could help to facilitate the emergence of local network operators in specific “high potential” countries. This includes developing research on the possibilities for community-led connectivity in these countries and hopefully accompanying any local champions. The LocNet team will continue its holistic form of advocacy, working at the intersection of international and national policy and the local community, creating specific policy briefs that share impact through evidence-based case studies.

- **Sustainability of local efforts:** What remains is how the existing community networks who mature in their connectivity provision can find ways to advance their sustainability models. The pandemic has meant that many, especially those working with rural communities, are in a fragile condition. Rising inflation and the high costs of living post-COVID-19 will not help this. Yet, at the same time, it is clear that community networks can address the increasing demand by citizens for local communication, which will come as fuel costs rise and travel becomes less and less possible. In these cases, there is a need for ongoing awareness raising of their work, finding the right communication mechanisms for sharing local demands and identifying complementary partnerships and/or support. As local access is not going away anytime soon, groups are also collaborating to research the variety of financial mechanisms for community-driven initiatives³⁶ and finding ways in which their work could be better articulated to would-be funders, and thereby helping community network partners find the means to help communities continue their outstanding work.

³⁶ <https://connecthumanity.fund/ntoreport>

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

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