



COVID-19 POLICY BRIEF

Internet Access & Affordability



WORLD WIDE WEB
FOUNDATION



ALLIANCE FOR
AFFORDABLE INTERNET

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the shocking inequalities in internet access and affordability across the globe. Without access to reliable connectivity and devices, billions of people risk being further cut off from vital information on health and safety, online learning, and the opportunity to voice their views and engage in commerce. Never before has the need to bridge the global digital divide been more important. The [Alliance for Affordable Internet \(A4AI\)](#) and the [Web Foundation](#) recommend governments, companies and civil society take urgent actions to bring as many people online as possible during this global emergency.

Governments must immediately implement policies to ensure everyone can connect to the internet by removing barriers like consumer facing taxes and internet shutdowns, and dedicate available resources to expanding access and addressing device shortages.

Companies should play a critical role by providing affordable and accessible connectivity options and supporting existing customers, prospective customers and the general public.

Public-Private Partnerships should be formed between governments and companies to speed up the delivery of affordable access and secure reliable connectivity to underserved and unserved areas and populations.

Civil Society Organizations should also serve as a foundation for community support for citizens by providing the tools necessary for individuals to access the internet.

These recommendations are based on A4AI's [Good Practices in Policy and Regulation](#) as well as the [Contract for the Web](#) — a global plan of action launched by the Web Foundation in 2019. Together these provide guidance for providing universal access to an online world that is safe and empowering for everyone.

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www.a4ai.org

www.webfoundation.org

Definitions

Internet Affordability Target: Monthly cost of 1 GB per month of mobile data, as a percentage of gross national income (GNI) per capita. [The UN Broadband Commission's affordability target](#) is 1 GB of mobile data priced at no more than 2% of monthly GNI per capita. In 2019, for example, 1 GB of mobile data in Argentina [was equal to 0.66% of monthly GNI per capita](#), whereas in Zimbabwe 1 GB [was 10.06%](#).

Universal Service and Access Funds: [Public funds](#) dedicated to expanding connectivity for unserved and underserved communities that commercial providers do not reach. These funds are established by the government and are typically financed by mandatory contributions by mobile network operators, telecommunications providers or utilities.

Meaningful Connectivity: Mere access to the internet is not enough. To fully benefit from internet access, people need [regular access to a suitable device and enough data at sufficient speeds](#).

Consumer Facing Taxes: Taxes that fall on people purchasing goods and services, paid indirectly to the government. In the case of the ICT sector, this can be VAT or sales taxes, including taxes on devices, internet data plans, etc.

Policy Recommendations: Governments

The current Covid-19 crisis has made it clear that internet access is not only an essential public good and basic need — it is a lifeline. It has further underlined that there are many faces of the digital divide around the world. From Nigeria to Bangladesh, Brazil to the USA, governments are faced with the urgent need to secure affordable connectivity for their citizens.

Governments should

Contract for the Web: Governments must ensure everyone can connect to the internet so that anyone — no matter who they are or where they live — can participate actively online. *Read more at contractfortheweb.org.*

Commit to providing all necessary support to keep citizens connected. Secure free access and connectivity during this crisis through initiatives such as [national connectivity pledges](#) and [solidarity plans](#)

- During emergency situations, governments can adopt national connectivity pledges and solidarity plans to encourage companies to implement policies that ensure citizens remain connected — such as late fee waivers and maintaining services for those behind on bills.

Remove taxes which prevent consumers from accessing and using the internet

- Remove consumer facing taxes on data and internet services — such as [communication service taxes \(CST\)](#) and [social media taxes](#) — that increase connectivity costs for consumers.
- Remove [luxury taxation](#) on internet enabled devices to lower barriers for poor or low income communities and marginalized groups to connect.

Use available funds and resources to address urgent access gaps and lack of devices

- Use [Universal Service and Access Funds](#) to subsidize digital devices and provide free wifi internet services to low income or marginalized communities. [Research](#) has shown that these funds can be effective tools to close the digital divide.
- Establish or support [Digital Inclusion Initiatives and Funds](#) to support the distribution of internet enabled devices that can be used for online learning activities.

End internet shutdowns immediately

- Internet shutdowns are [a violation of human rights and must be stopped](#).

Take swift regulatory action to increase access and affordability

- Loosen permitting rules to speed [up roll out of critical infrastructure \(such as fiber networks\)](#) to unserved areas.

- [Expand services](#) to underserved or unserved communities by making it easier for smaller companies to enter the market and alternative models like community networks to thrive. This can be done by [freeing up needed spectrum](#) to increase traffic and loosening regulations to encourage new entrants.
- Encourage increased sharing of network resources between operators to ensure quality, reliable service to all customers, regardless of their network. This will further expand access, especially in rural and peri-urban areas with limited service providers.

Guarantee the safety of technical workers building and maintaining critical infrastructure networks

- Ensure sites are [protected from all forms of vandalism](#), such as acts of arson against mobile phone masts.

Policy Recommendations: Companies

Access to the internet is life changing — especially in times of crisis. Companies must take urgent action to make sure as many people as possible can connect to this lifeline. By relaxing policies on late fees and taking additional actions to support consumers in this unprecedented time, companies can expand connectivity and improve lives, demonstrating their commitment to their customers and to the broader public.

Companies should

Contract for the Web: Companies must make the internet affordable and accessible to everyone so no one is excluded from using the web. *Read more at contractfortheweb.org.*

Relax rules on late bills and fees

- Don't cut people off if they are [behind on their bills](#) (similar to grace periods on heating and energy bills during extreme cold weather).
- Waive any late fees for consumers [on post-paid plans](#). And provide additional data for customers who go over their allowances on [pre-paid plans](#).

Secure a basic data allowance for all

- Increase [data allowances](#) on all mobile data packages.
- Subsidize or provide mobile data hubs/data dongles with [discounted](#) or [free internet data](#) to consumers.
- Develop [special affordable packages](#) for low income groups.

Eliminate barriers to access to public services

- Voluntarily downgrade high-bandwidth streaming services while maintaining high quality across the board in line with the European Commission's [recommendation](#).
- [Zero-rate public service websites and services](#) for official health and education organizations and other essential government services, meaning accessing these sites will not draw from people's data plans.

Share infrastructure to reduce network congestion and provide seamless service to consumers

- Agree to [allow roaming on each other's network](#) where feasible.

Policy Recommendations: Public-Private Partnerships

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) are critical to speed up delivery of affordable access and secure reliable connectivity to underserved and unserved areas and populations. By joining forces and sharing resources, public and private sector players can expand connectivity. These partnerships could include multilateral banks, funding institutions, and international and regional agencies.

Public-Private Partnerships should collaborate to

Make devices affordable for all

- [Provide free or subsidized devices](#) to public institutions, low income households and marginalized population groups (e.g., women, rural and remote populations).
- Establish [a fund](#) to support device sponsorship and subsidies for students and households in need.

Make access affordable for all

- Open up [public-facing wifi](#) so residents in close proximity can log on to free wifi in areas covered by an operator.
- Expedite licensing procedures to increase alternative network providers for remote and rural communities, such as [community networks](#).
- Use mobile wifi hubs to provide connectivity for people living in low income settlements.

Prioritize capacity and uninterrupted connectivity for institutions providing [emergency services and telemedicine](#)

International development and multilateral organizations should collaborate to raise necessary emergency resources

- Establish emergency funds to subsidize quick access to devices
- Fund and support the roll out of free public wifi infrastructure to connect the unconnected
- Support policy makers and regulators to issue emergency resolutions to free up spectrum and increase infrastructure sharing to expand access by making it easier for smaller companies and alternative models like community networks to enter the market and provide connectivity options
- [Share knowledge](#) on [good practices](#) that support access and affordability and connect companies with potential funders to address urgent access gaps

Policy Recommendations: Civil Society and Citizens

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have an important role to play to support communities they serve and to equip citizens with the tools needed to take action and support each other. From providing community access, to equipping citizens with digital skills, CSOs are the foundation of community service and support.

Civil society and citizens should

The Contract for the Web asks people to engage in national and international multistakeholder dialogues to ensure the maintenance of uninterrupted internet connections. *Read more at contractfortheweb.org.*

Establish and take solidarity actions to increase access and connectivity options

- Share your mobile data plans and [mobile credit with others](#), where possible.
- Where possible, share your wifi/broadband in a privacy-protective way with neighbors who might be struggling to get online.
- Donate [spare internet enabled devices](#) to families who do not have one, where possible.
- [Speak up](#) for those who lack access to draw the attention of government and the private sector to the devastating impact of the digital divide.
- Continue to advocate against internet shutdowns to ensure uninterrupted internet connections for all citizens.

Additional Resources

- **ITU:** [Policy and Regulatory experiences and best practices that can improve Covid-19 responses](#)
- **GSMA:** [Covid-19 industry impact](#)
- **Oxford:** [Covid-19 Government Response Tracker](#)
- **Steve Song:** [Country Responses regarding Internet access during Covid-19 Pandemic](#)
- **Broadband Commission:** [Broadband Commission Community responses to Covid-19](#)