Q&A
The Broadband Commission for Digital Development

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Q1. *Why did you set up the 'Broadband Commission for Digital Development'?*

A. ITU and UNESCO set up the Broadband Commission for Digital Development in response to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon's call to step up UN efforts to meet the MDGs. The Commission was established in May 2010 the run-up to the UN MDG Summit held in New York in September 2010, with a view to boosting broadband's importance on the international agenda.

The Commission benefits from ITU's widespread expertise in broadband technical and development issues as well as from UNESCO's focus on accessibility, multilingualism and locally-generated content in the broader transformational 'knowledge societies' we are hoping to realize. The real strength of the Commission, however, lies in its community of Commissioners, all top-level leaders in their field, representing governments, industry, academia and international agencies. They contribute real-life policy and commercial expertise of how to deploy broadband networks and services in different markets around the world, and bring a vast breadth of collective experience to the Commission.

Q2. *Why focus on broadband, when so many people still don't even have dial-up access?*

A. It's true that much of the world still lacks basic Internet access. According to ITU statistics, global Internet user penetration reached 30% in 2010, a milestone in penetration achieved in developed countries some nine years earlier, in 2001. Internet user penetration in the developing world as a whole, however, remains considerably lower, at just 21% in 2010, and was just 11% in Africa – a level which is unacceptable in the modern information era. We are not just talking about exclusion from the latest news, gossip or amusing video content – we are talking about exclusion from so much more: exclusion from critical infrastructure; from telemedicine and remote diagnosis; from the online wealth of educational information; from online services and applications which can improve the lives of millions.

It is also important to remember that broadband is also about so much more than surfing the web. In the 21st Century, broadband networks are today basic national infrastructure – just like transport, energy and water networks. With increasing machine-to-machine communications – 'The Internet of Things' – these networks will underpin a vast array of services in areas like healthcare, education, energy management, transport systems, emergency services and much more. Broadband infrastructure cannot therefore only be for rich countries – or we will quickly create a new 'broadband divide'. Everyone – wherever they live and whatever their means – needs equitable and affordable access to this infrastructure.

Q3. *What's the connection with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)?*

A. Today, the vast majority of the world's people now rely on information and communication technology (ICT) networks and applications, even if they do not themselves have first-hand access. This means that we can now leverage the tremendous power of ICTs in the development agenda, to help accelerate progress towards meeting the MDGs – through e-health, e-education, e-government, e-agriculture and more.

The MDGs are perceived by some as being most relevant to developing and least developed countries – when in fact, in my view, they represent the moral obligation of the international community towards the welfare of its less fortunate citizens. Just because broadband penetration is historically at its lowest levels in developing and least developed countries does not mean that broadband is irrelevant; quite the reverse, broadband is needed the most and can achieve the most in those countries where the needs are greatest.

This is the central role for the Commission: to advocate for greater priority for broadband infrastructure in the very highest policy circles to ensure that the needs of all countries for broadband infrastructure and services are recognized. Governments and industry need to work together, hand-in-hand, to devise strategies for driving the roll-out of these networks much more proactively.

Q. *Why and how is ITU involved in broadband?*

A. ITU has a long and distinguished history of involvement in broadband, beginning with its historical traditions in public telecommunication work, its more recent standardization work on xDSL connections and networks, its history of analysis and reports (from ITU's country case studies and series of Internet Reports on the Birth of Broadband to its more recent work on broadband stimulus plans in times of financial crisis), as well as its work on the regulatory and policy aspects of broadband networks.

ITU has a body of considerable expertise in many different aspects to do with the roll-out and deployment of broadband networks. With the Broadband Commission, ITU's expertise is married with that of UNESCO and other development agencies and institutions to achieve a vision of how broadband networks can be deployed to greatest effect, in terms of maximum impact – both nationally (as infrastructure) or for development projects and relief efforts in the field.

Q. *Won't developing countries have trouble financing these networks?*

A. There are many innovative financing models that the public and private sector can develop together, which create a win-win situation for all – indeed, that's one of the key reasons for creating the Broadband Commission: to find and publicize such models. We also know from recent studies in the developed world that small savings in the delivery of services in key sectors such as healthcare – of the order of just 3% – could pay for the cost of a national broadband network over a ten year period, and I am confident that similar effects would apply in the developing world too.

Q. *What about your community of Commissioners – who are they, and how were they chosen?*

A. Our community of Commissioners are not just leaders in their field, but have also demonstrated a strong vision and very real commitment to making the world a better place. Since broadband is a critical channel for the delivery of services spanning so many different sectors, we sought to include not just ICT experts, but people from a wide-ranging field of activities, representing both the public and private sectors. But most of all, they are people who are excited – excited about making a difference and excited about the potential for broadband delivering vital services such as healthcare and education to people who need them the most.

Q. *What are the Commission outcomes? Are you satisfied with its progress? What do you hope to achieve with it?*

A. The Commission has achieved some notable policy successes – for example, it has succeeded in boosting ICTs and broadband on the global policy agenda, as well as in the outcome proceedings of the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries in Istanbul in May 2011, and its work has also been cited by the UN General Assembly.

The Commission has published two reports to date:

- "*A 2010 Leadership Imperative: Towards a Future Built on Broadband*", presented to Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, during the UN MDG Summit in New York in September 2010, including a Declaration, Plan of Action and recommendations. This Report sought to communicate the strategic vision of the Commission, based on extensive Commissioner input.
- "*Broadband: A Platform for Progress*", published in June 2011, which looks at the economic metrics of installing and generating ROI on broadband networks, the impact of savings across key social and industry sectors, and successful case studies of broadband deployment strategies from around the world.

In addition the Commission has made available a number of reports, best practices and case studies through its website, which provides a portal for learning more about the importance of broadband in boosting economic growth and promoting progress in development projects.

I am very pleased with the work and development of the Broadband Commission to date. Perhaps I might also suggest that it has had a broader significance too, in terms of inspiring enthusiasm for greater engagement with the UN among key business figures. It has also provided a new model for multi-stakeholder engagement, with similar joint partnerships springing up among other international organizations and UN agencies.

Q. *How is the Commission funded?*

A. The Commission is fully self-funding, and does not require any additional financial contribution from ITU or UNESCO membership. A number of Commissioners and Commissioner organizations have made generous voluntary contributions to support the work of the Broadband Commission.