Our submission.

This submission answers the second question and draws from our relevant research over the past few years in how broadband policy – as implemented by governments across the globe – has influenced the affordability and accessibility of internet services, with a focus on low- and middle-income countries.

Our perspective. / About us.

This submission comes from the Alliance for Affordable Internet, A4AI. We are a multi-stakeholder coalition that works on policy and regulatory reform to drive down the cost of broadband. More about our work at https://a4ai.org.

On access.

The founding issue for the Alliance has been the affordability of internet services in the world. Major contributions include:

- 2021 Global Broadband Pricing Exercise (A4AI-ITU, 2021)
- 2022 Global Device Pricing Exercise (A4AI, 2022)
- *From luxury to lifeline: Reducing the cost of mobile devices to reach universal internet access* (A4AI, 2022)
- *Costs of Exclusion: Economic Consequences of the Digital Gender Gap* (A4AI, 2021)
- *Peru case study: Supporting innovation and sharing for rural access* (A4AI, 2020)

We have crucially focused on the affordability of these services: that is the price of that service as a fraction of the average monthly income to contextualise the economic barrier that prices represent for consumers based on their income. A focus on price reduction can unfairly hide the disproportionate cost that said price represents for different people on different incomes. As such, we advocate for policymaking strategies that draw evidence from such methodologies.

Affordability has been a consistent challenge, particularly in low-income countries, for women, and for those living in rural areas. For example, in *Costs of Exclusion*, we see how the digital gender gap maintained itself over time, in part because of women's more restricted earning power in many parts of the world. Increasingly, we see the necessity for broadband policies to include disaggregated targets for marginalized communities: by gender and by geography as two crucial categories. In countries with greater statistical capacity, further classifications of targets can be crucial to create accountability and track progress. (See gender targets in the 2020-2025 Nigeria Broadband Plan, for example.)

In addition to the affordability of services, the affordability of equipment (namely for our focus area, the affordability of smartphones) has a crucial impact on access. Where devices are too expensive for individual ownership, household dynamics around age and gender may influence access in a way that reenforces inequalities rather than challenging them. Rwanda's Digital Ambassadors Programme, with gender equity in recruitment, can illustrate one way for gender inequality to be addressed.

On uptake.

Beyond just access, inequalities continue to replicate in other fields of technology. We measure this lag in part through the meaningful connectivity framework. Major contributions in this area include:

- Meaningful Connectivity Framework (A4AI, 2020)
- *Advancing Meaningful Connectivity: Towards Active and Participatory Digital Societies* (A4AI, 2022)
- *Meaningful Connectivity: Rural Report* (A4AI, 2022)
- *Thailand case study: Subsidising essential connectivity* (A4AI, 2021)

Through meaningful connectivity and measuring by gender or by geography, we are able to see where, while national figures for internet access by indicate parity, a more rigorous standard such as meaningful connectivity exposes extant inequalities that persist. Where inequalities in gender, income, and geography have persisted over time in access, they translate into lagged disparities in uptake as well.

The REACT framework has been a crucial lens for analysis on the matter of uptake in relation to gender. It focuses on rights, education, access, content, and targets as areas for policy action and emphasizes the importance of a blended approach involving both supply-side and demand-side interventions to encourage uptake. This ranges from content that is locally relevant and in diverse languages and also about quality infrastructure that is considered safe and welcoming to all.

On investment.

Our work has frequently revisited the question of financing and investment for greater internet access. Major contributions include:

- *Closing the Investment Gap: How Multilateral Development Banks Can Contribute to Digital Inclusion* (A4AI, 2018)
- *2021 Affordability Report* (A4AI, 2021)
- *Philippines case study: Providing ICT centres for universal access* (A4AI, 2020)

- *Malaysia case study: Planning for affordable access nationwide* (A4AI, 2020)
- *Universal Service and Access Funds: An Untapped Resource to Close the Gender Digital Divide* (A4AI, 2018)

Within this area, our work has most recently advocated for the "crowding in" potential for capital investments in greater connectivity (in reference to Mazzucato, 2021). Particular success has been seen in several different contexts on the use of public funding to then draw in matching (or at minimum, substantial) investments from private sector partners to reduce the capital expenditure barrier to new infrastructure while still also enabling market forces to create competition.

Universal Service & Access Funds remain a crucial tool in this area, with development/utilization of these institutions patchy in several contexts.

Overall.

We submit this résumé of our work to pull out what we think are crucial lessons from the global history of internet access, namely:

- Strategies for contextualization of policy targets to prioritise those living poverty (e.g., affordability vs market price);
- The need for targeted solutions for socially and economically marginalized communities;
- The consequences of continued inaction that cascade from access gaps into use gaps and elsewhere; and
- The potential for institutions such as Universal Service & Access Funds to crowd in investment

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