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| **The Meeting of the SATRC Working Group**  **on Policy, Regulation and Services** | **SAPIX-PRS1/ OUT-03** |
| 14 – 16 May 2024, Islamabad, Pakistan | 16 May 2024 |

Working Group on Policy, Regulation and Services

**QUESTIONNAIRE ON**

**ENHANCING THE UTILIZATION OF UNIVERSAL SERVICE OBLIGATION FUND FOR DIGITAL INCLUSION**

**1. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE**

The Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF) is a vital mechanism that aims to bridge the digital divide and ensure equitable access to telecommunications and information services. It is a fund created by governments or regulatory bodies, usually through contributions from telecommunication service providers, to promote universal access to communication infrastructure and services. As members of the SATRC (South Asian Telecommunication Regulators' Council), studying the utilization of the USOF and identifying strategies to enhance its effectiveness can significantly contribute to digital inclusion efforts in the region. This study topic focuses on analyzing the current utilization of the USOF and developing recommendations to optimize its impact.

**2. SCOPE**

* Assess the Current Utilization of USOF
* Identify Best Practices
* Develop Strategies for Enhanced Utilization
* Address Technological Advancements
* Stakeholder Engagement
* Recommendations for SATRC Members

**3. METHODOLOGY FOR CARRYING OUT THE STUDY**

The study will be carried out by the Experts of Working Group on Policy, Regulation and Services nominated by the SATRC Members. Therefore, in order to pursue the study, the following questions have been developed to obtain necessary information from the SATRC Members on the subject matter of the Work Item. Based on the information, the Experts will develop a draft Report on the Work Item for consideration of SATRC-26.

**4. QUESTIONS**

* **Assess the Current Utilization of USOF:**

Q1. What is the latest best known status of digital connectivity in your country? Please indicate the following (either in terms of percentage of inhabited villages[[1]](#footnote-1) out of total villages/ or percentage of the population served):

1. Access to Basic Voice Telephony (Wire/ GSM-3G/CDMA)
2. Access to Mobile Services (at least 4G-LTE/ equivalent) – Voice & Data
3. Access to Broadband[[2]](#footnote-2) services (including wireless and wireline)
4. Any other criteria adopted may be added

Q2. Please share the current scope of USF-sponsored programs/ initiatives. Please include the relevant options as suggested below:

1. Access to Basic telephone service (wire/wireless) : Included/ not included
2. Access to Broadband service (wire/wireless) : Included/ not included
3. Back-haul augmentation : Included/ not included
4. Promoting Digital device availability : Included/ not included
5. Enhancing Digital literacy / awareness / local language content

: Included/ not included

1. Supporting innovation towards relevant solutions (R&D grant/ rewarding Start-ups working for universal connectivity)

: Included/ not included

1. Using Satellite (for back-haul or access) : Included/ not included
2. Any other activity under USF : < please mention>

Response may provide in brief as per options selected above to reflect current scope of USF.

Q3. Please share the outcomes in respect of on-going USF activities as per following sub-topics: (i) achievements

(ii) challenges, if any

(iii), need for mid-course corrections, if any, for sustainability

Q4. What is the current legal mandate for USF to operate/ undertake activities? Does it appear in main legislation (Act etc.) or in any of subsidiary legislation (Regulations)?

Q5. Is there any monitoring mechanism adopted to reinforce accountability and transparency while undertaking USF-projects? Does it require review on the state of fund-utilisation?

* **Identify Best Practices**

Q6. Kindly share the best practices that have been found beneficial by the stakeholders. It may include addressing social obligations as well.

Q7. Has it remained challenging to identify best practices and implement them in any of the work areas so far? Would you recommend any such practices for adoption by other SATRC members, and advisory thereof?

Q8. Do you see the possibility for certain alignment of USF objectives and other Development programs administered by the Government/ Public Bodies in certain areas/ target groups for optimal results (i.e. “multiplier effect”)?

Examples may include- Rural Development Programs where electricity supply, access to green-power, roads, civil works, etc. could be / have been aligned with USF activities. Besides, if there are concurrent programs such as establishment of Common Service Centers (CSCs), ICT labs in schools, digital record keeping for Child Vaccination, digital Banking, Meteorology observatory etc. please mention.

Q9. Do non-telecom entities working in infrastructure sector e.g. power, roads, pipelines, railways, readily collaborate with telecom service providers to make best use on mutual basis? Example (i): dark fibre as laid during road development/ bridge / tunnel construction is commercially available for telecom entities; Example (ii): Power distribution companies may provide Optical Ground Wire (OPGW) to telecom entities in areas with uneven terrain.

* **Develop Strategies for Enhanced Utilization:**

Q10. Are there any constraints identified regarding :

. Administrative/statutory system [Yes/No]

. Contributions by Service/Infrastructure Providers to USF [Yes/No]

. Principles for allocation of USF resources [Yes/No]

. Selection of right technologies, and network design [Yes/No]

. Availability of road & energy infrastructure [Yes/No]

. Operations & Management issue [Yes/No]

. Infrastructure Sharing [Yes/No]

. Backhaul sharing (OFC/ IP-Radio) [Yes/No]

. Audit / Impact Assessment [Yes/No]

. Others \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Identified constraints may be briefly specified (please indicate critical constraints by highlighting in yellow). It may include issue related to sustainability of USF programs (past/ on-going) as well.

Q11. How affordable are the various Services in scattered/ isolated target areas, including both (i) Shared Access, and (ii) Household Subscriptions ? Are other factors such as lack of digital awareness, cost of digital devices, cost of subscription, lack of customer service, language barriers, gender-gap are also relevant/ significant?

Q12. Are there any citizen-centric Government programs that rely upon digital connectivity to reach/identify the target beneficiaries? Example, online distribution of income/pension, availing credit / insurance / health facility online, digital sale of local produce, availing public distribution system (PDS) for fair distribution of food, etc.

* **Address Technological Advancements**

Q 13**.** Does USF permit utilization of any specified digital communication technologies or provides discretion to adopt the right mix of technologies?

Q14. How does selection of technologies for USF supported activities is made? Does it include factors such as (i) proved technology (ii) economy of scale (iii) interoperability (iv) expected quality of services (v) likely total cost of ownership & (v) expected disbursements sought from USF for handling capex/ opex? Any other relevant factors may be added as well.

Q15. Whether any innovation, local or otherwise (involving Start-up or others) looks promising/ found useful for achieving Universal Services?

* **Stakeholder Engagement:**

Q16. (a) Is Right of Way a persistent issue with respect to infrastructure augmentation?

(b) Is there a mandate for stakeholders to cooperate/ collaborate mutually e.g. sharing active or passive infrastructure, sharing spectrum, etc.?

Q17. Do you anticipate that increasing availability of suitable telecom infrastructure would add economic opportunities to local persons or help Government fulfil Sustainable Development Goals?

* **NOTE: Suitable data, illustrations, photo, web-links may be appended while responding to the Questionnaire**
* **Recommendations for SATRC Members:**

**<subject to submissions & discussions in PRS Work Group>**

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Reference List

Afghanistan <https://atra.gov.af/about-tdf/>

Bangladesh <https://btrc.gov.bd/>

Bhutan <https://www.bicma.gov.bt/>

India <https://usof.gov.in/en/home>

Islamic Republic of Iran <http://www.cra.ir/>

Maldives <https://www.cam.gov.mv/>

Nepal <https://www.nta.gov.np/>

Pakistan [https://www.usf.org.pk](https://www.usf.org.pk/about-us)

Sri Lanka <https://www.trc.gov.lk/index_e.php>

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1. If population size per village is known, does some threshold apply? e.g. villages > 100 persons qualify [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As defined in your country. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)