PLANNING FOR PROGRESS

WHY NATIONAL BROADBAND PLANS MATTER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In today's digital era, the role for broadband – and the benefits of broadband connectivity – in underpinning a country's progress have never been greater. That is why ITU and the ITU/UNESCO Broadband Commission for Digital Development have conducted research into the role of policy frameworks for broadband, in conjunction with Cisco.

This Report finds that there has been strong recent growth in Plans, with some 134 Plans in force by mid-2013. Plans may take different forms (e.g. legislation, policy framework, strategy and/or regulations) and vary in emphasis (e.g. IT, Information Society, ICT, Digital Agenda, or Broadband). Plans prior to 2005 tended to focus on Information Technology (IT) or Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The Information Society proved most popular as the focus of Plans in 2007-2008, with broadband growing sharply as the focus of Plans from 2008 onwards. Most recently, Digital Agendas account for a small, but growing, number of Plans. However, all of these Plans share a common emphasis on the vital role of broadband in underpinning national competitiveness, and aim to extend national footprint of broadband networks and usage of broadband-enabled services and applications.

Although the nature of the Plan clearly matters (with important differences in status between binding statutory requirements, broad policy guidance or detailed regulations), this Report finds that the exact name of the plan or policy framework may not matter as much as other factors, such as political support, buy-in, quality (comprehensive, clear identification of priorities), and enforceability.

The full benefits of broadband for enhancing national competitiveness and empowering citizens are most likely to be realized where there is strong partnership between government, industry and other stakeholders and where governments engage in a consultative, participatory approach to the policy-making process, in conjunction with key stakeholders.

There is a need to move from 'silo thinking' to a more comprehensive point of view encompassing different sectors, in recognition of the nature of broadband as a cross-sectoral enabler. Implementation is still an issue, with broad-based buy-in by different stakeholders critical to a Plan's success. Some Plans have been produced as landmark events to help clarify mandates and/or put regulators on the map.

In a fast-changing technological environment, Plans should be regularly reviewed and updated. This Report finds that the average lifespan for superseded Plans is 8.4 years, while the lifespan for existing Plans currently in force is 7 years. Given evidence of such long lifespans, it is likely that Plans need to be updated more regularly to take into account the rapid shifts in the industry in revenue, pricing and technology. Revisions every 3-5 years are likely to balance the costs involved in policy-making with developments in a fast-changing industry.

Research conducted for this report suggests that the introduction or adoption of a broadband plan is associated with 2.5% higher fixed broadband penetration, and 7.4% higher mobile broadband penetration on average. This result is consistent with a National Broadband Plan focusing efforts across industry in coordination with policy-makers, emphasizing the role of broadband as a national priority, and signaling national commitment to the roll-out of broadband.

The same research also found that a competitive market is also associated with a higher broadband penetration, with a stronger impact for mobile broadband – competitive markets may be associated with broadband penetration levels some 1.4% higher on average for fixed broadband and up to 26.5% higher on average for mobile broadband (where markets are generally more competitive).

Broadband Plans are one key means of dialogue, which should seek the views and engagement of all key stakeholders. Ultimately, there is no single way to improve broadband; there are many different ways, with different success factors, depending on existing country circumstances. Broadband Plans should be viewed as part of a process towards building consensus around a vision for the development of broadband within a society, rather than the final outcome itself.

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