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The Ministry of Post and Telecommunications and the Liberian
Telecommunications Authority

along with

USAID Liberia and
Global Development Lab

**Access to Broadband Connectivity in Liberia
in the post-Ebola context:
A Roundtable with Public and Private Sector Stakeholders**

Friday, May 15, 2015
8:30AM - 1:30PM
Monrovia, Liberia
Venue: Cape Hotel



Access to Broadband Connectivity in Liberia in the post-Ebola context: A Roundtable with Public and Private Sector Stakeholders

Background

Problem Statement

Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) has killed over eleven thousand individuals in Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone combined, and despite eradication in Liberia, the region remains at risk of re-emerging until fully eliminated across the three countries. Limited broadband and mobile telephone connectivity throughout the region severely hampered global response and prevention efforts. Both the Government of Liberia (GoL) and donor community recognize the **digital infrastructure as a priority response tool** as well as an engine to drive the recovery of the regional and national economies.

The digital infrastructure includes broadband and mobile telecommunications, real-time data management systems, and digital payment services. This critical infrastructure underpins each of the critical functions of disaster management and response, supporting command and control, case reporting and contact tracing, and population-level social mobilization.

Prior to the Ebola outbreak, Liberia and its neighbors experienced a weak and poorly integrated baseline digital infrastructure. The Ebola outbreak further degraded what existed, with mobile network operators (MNOs) and internet service providers (ISPs) in particular, experiencing substantial losses in revenue due to a sharp downturn in GDP. High-value accounts scaled back or closed completely. Operating costs increased significantly in the form of fuel, security, equipment maintenance, cash management, and technical personnel. Rural communities, often living in sparsely populated and remote areas, are particularly disadvantaged with regard to access to digital services.

The Digital Infrastructure in Liberia

In the case of Liberia, Government commitment to advancing the digital economy is evidenced by the development of a National Strategic Plan for Broadband Adoption, and prioritization of connectivity under the Agenda for Transformation and the Ebola Economic Stabilization and Recovery Plan (ESRP).

Connected only two years ago to the ACE undersea fiber-optic internet cable, Liberia formed a public-private partnership to manage ACE called the Cable Company of Liberia (CCL). The market diffusion of fiber connectivity stalled however, with just 20% of the cable's capacity currently used. To address this issue, The Ministry of Post and Telecommunications designed a Universal Service/Access Fund (UAF) model to bring connectivity and services to underserved populations and geographies. The UAF is not yet operational due to the onset of the Ebola crisis.

The Opportunity

The elimination of Ebola transmission in Liberia provides a unique opportunity to take stock and consider how the substantial resources flowing into the region can be used not only to address ongoing recovery needs but to strengthen the broader digital infrastructure – with the objective of **dramatically strengthening government systems to respond to future emergencies, disasters and public health threats**. In addition to improving response capability, the digital infrastructure will bolster citizen confidence in government, improve integration of rural citizens into the national economies, stimulate the urban and rural economies, and improve preparedness to handle future crises.

This will require an integrated strategy with mobile networks, broadband backbone, digital financial payment systems, data/mapping systems, e-governance platforms, and human capacity in the workforce in order to expand connectivity and provide a diverse range of high-quality services. **Consensus for action, policy commitment, co-investment in shared infrastructure** are necessary prerequisites for progress in the sector.

Public-Private Sector Stakeholder Roundtable

The planned Roundtable, co-hosted with MoPT and LTA, will bring together stakeholders in the public and private sector to examine the impact of Ebola on future investment in the digital economy, as well as articulate a commitment toward collaboration and coordination in the sector.

USAID's experience in promoting broadband deployment and advancing connectivity across a number of countries demonstrates catalytic power of integrated ICT approaches. The Leland Initiative and the Asia/Near East Bureau ICT4D Program assisted scores of countries throughout Africa and Asia to modernize policy, attract private investors, promote sustainable rural access, and strengthen the utility of digital access to rural households and businesses. Based on this extensive experience, a number of critical preconditions must be met to create a propitious environment for investment.

Roundtable Objectives

1. To convene under the auspices of the GoL (MoPT and LTA), a half-day workshop of public and private sector stakeholders related to connectivity in the post-ebola context
2. To present key findings from the review of the impact of Ebola on the national digital infrastructure and associated services
3. To support the policy framework to ensure improved affordability and access to broadband infrastructure and related services to all citizens
4. To identify the short-term network investments to improve network performance and services, and to build the attractiveness of inward direct foreign investment in the sector

Anticipated Outcomes

1. Raised awareness of NetHope network assessment, Partnership for Digital West Africa
2. Political will and consensus around a common investment plan and harmonized approach
3. Shift in policy stance toward people-focused connectivity based on shared public good investments, affordability and accessibility
4. Action plan with concrete commitments/agenda

Format

Plenary with high level dialogue, scenario planning based on consultant assessment, then break out into concurrent streams.

- Plenary:
 - MoPT presentation
 - Sectoral overview
 - Ebola impacts and opportunities
 - Scenario planning
- Breakout Sessions (10-12 pp)
 - policy alignment
 - infrastructure prioritization
 - last mile distribution
 - eGov/shared services