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GSR-20: REGULATORY ASSOCIATIONS (RA) MEETING

The role of Regional and International Organizations and collaboration at regional level in a post-COVID World to address the challenges of Building Back Better

MONDAY, 31 AUGUST 2020 (13:00-16:00 CEST) ZOOM

REPORT BY THE CHAIRMAN

Mr Michel van Bellinghen, incoming BEREC Chairman, RA Meeting Chair

The 2020 annual RA meeting was chaired by Mr Michel van Bellinghen, Chairman of the Council of BIPT and incoming BEREC Chairman. He welcomed Regulatory Associations and participants and reminded that the purpose of this meeting was to provide RAs with the opportunity to exchange on activities, opportunities, and challenges.

In his welcoming remarks, Mr. Van Bellinghen highlighted that sharing information is key under crisis situations because no country, and no single regulator can fight a crisis on its own.

ITU has been setting the example, he said, by creating the Global Network Resiliency Platform REG4COVID, which was very helpful to see the policy and regulatory initiatives and actions taken from all around the world.

To address the challenges of the future we need forward looking mindsets and we need to anticipate future trends. The tasks ahead of us include: 1) thorough assessment of measures taken in the last months, and 2) deepen the collaboration between institutions.

In her welcome remarks, Ms Doreen Bogdan-Martin, ITU BDT Director, acknowledged that the role of ICTs has become critical to our social and economic survival. During the COVID-19 crisis, telecommunication/ICT networks have been pushed to the limits, but they have largely remained operational and resilient. The current crisis has also fast forwarded the adoption of digital technologies and we now live in a world where we work, interact, and do business differently. Some of these practices will remain with us on the long term, hence reliable and affordable digital access and services are now needed more than ever. As a global pandemic requires a global response, collaboration is the key for the future. And collaboration with RAs is key.

The RA chair then moved to the first part of the meeting, a discussion on how Regulatory Associations can collaborate, and to identify solutions together to build back better in a post-COVID digital ecosystem. The RA Chair introduced briefly all the panelists, including:

- **Associação de Reguladores de Comunicações e Telecomunicações da Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (ARCTEL-CPLP)**
Mr Francisco CHATE, Executive Secretary, ARCTEL-CPLP
- **Réseau Francophone de la Régulation des Télécommunications (FRATEL)**
Mr Charles Millogo, President, FRATEL
- **Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine – UEMOA**
Mr Abossé AKUE-KPAKPO, Directeur de l'Economie Numérique, UEMOA
- **COMTELCA - Comisión Técnica Regional de Telecomunicaciones Centro América**
Mr Allan Ruiz, Secretario Ejecutivo, COMTELCA
- **AREGNET - Arab Regulators Network of telecommunications and information technologies**
Ms Karima Mahmoudi, Director of the Electronic Communications Market Observatory, Instance Nationale des Télécommunications of Tunisia (INTT)

Turning to panelists, he asked them to address how regulatory associations can build back better in a post-COVID digital ecosystem, and contribute to bring affordable, safe, secure and trusted connectivity and online access and use to people in their respective regions?

Connectivity, they said, is a very timely subject now in many of the regions. In West Africa, it was highlighted, connectivity between neighbouring countries is key, and sub regional initiatives can help to ensure this connectivity. Regulatory associations need to keep on collaborating to ensure that connectivity plans are carried out.

Others added that while connectivity is primordial, connectivity has to be affordable and permanent. In some countries the cost of broadband can reach 60% of the average salary. This makes it impossible for citizens to work or follow education online. Subsidies could be put in place like for water and electricity to connect everyone.

Turning too the impact of the crisis, panelists highlighted that the current crisis has greatly affected the economy and highlighted the inequalities in our society. Digital solutions have become central in overcoming some of the challenges we are facing right now, and communication infrastructure is instrumental to help economic recovery and decrease the inequalities. Access has to be however relevant, and relevance has to be properly defined in order to best help our citizens.

Regional Associations have an important role to play, they have to establish a framework based on their experience and that of the member states and international organizations. RAs should work on harmonized measures to protect the consumers against false information, but also help financially, to ensure that there is no interruption of service and that this is resilient and available.

Looking at how Regulatory Associations can ensure optimal regulatory responses, panelists stressed that the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of collaboration. It is also important, they underlined, to collaborate with the other sectors to overcome the challenges we are facing today. These other sectors include health, agriculture, and finance, among others. We need to ensure that all regulators are involved in the processes and we should not forget about privacy and data protection either.

We have to work together regionally, they said, to come up with common rules and find economic answers to the digitalisation of our society. Discussions also have to include decision makers/ policy makers to foster the adoption of digital solutions. Harmonization, consolidation, and international cooperation are the keywords, panellists concluded.

Finally, in addressing the main priorities Regional Associations should consider in the post-COVID digital ecosystem, panelists noted that we need platforms to exchange experiences, best practices and information to enhance cooperation and to facilitate the adoption of different solutions, for instance, ITU developed last year the **ITU Regional Regulatory Associations Portal** (www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regulatory-Market/Pages/RA_Portal/Home.aspx) to give the opportunity to all RAs to share about their projects and initiatives. We need to show the cross-cutting role of digitalization.

The pandemic, they said, has accelerated digital transformation so it is essential that regulatory frameworks and policies are adapted. Regulatory associations need to ensure that all countries have the necessary tools to ensure that they are up to date with regulatory frameworks. Regulation needs to go hand in hand with economic development and recovery. Rigid regulatory frameworks have to change. The harmonization of spectrum use would allow economies of scale and could lower the cost of broadband.

The REG4COVID platform, developed by ITU, has been fundamental to share best practices and the initiative should continue. RAs have also provided input and can collaborate to scale up and leverage this initiative so that everyone can benefit from them.

The second part of the meeting focused on presentations of the main projects and activities of each Regulatory Associations. Interventions from the other RAs and regional organizations followed providing information on challenges relating to COVID-19 and how RAs have responded. Among the working areas that were mentioned as the focus on ongoing or upcoming activities were: digital transformation, digital strategies, 5G, spectrum, quality of service (QoS), international mobile roaming and consumer protection. Participants noted the value of sharing experiences and knowledge on topical regulatory issues they address.

The ITU-BDT secretariat provided an overview of the REG4COVID portal, developed and presented in response to the need for resilience and information on regulatory responses to the crisis, which serves as a one-stop-shop for RAs to share information and learn from each others' actions in relation to the pandemic. RAs were also encouraged to share their project and initiatives implemented on the [ITU Regional Regulatory Associations Portal](http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regulatory-Market/Pages/RA_Portal/Home.aspx). All presentations received will be available on the [Meeting's dedicated webpage](#).

In conclusion, the RA Chair highlighted that the situation is not alike across the world, but bridging the digital divide is crucial for everyone. More attention, he said, is being given to quality of service.

We need to work together to create portals and workshops, groups to exchange information, and repositories for documents – this to share experiences and outputs and tools for further collaboration between regional associations. He also highlighted the need to adopt harmonized approaches through guidelines and best practices in case of crisis.