

Global Forum 2015

Digitization From Disruption to Sustainability

Oulu, Finland, September 28 – 29

Connecting the Next 1.5 Billion People: The Global Connect InitiativeDr. Adriane LaPointe
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It's good to be with you this morning in Oulu.

I'm here today to talk with you about how we can work together to extend the benefits of the Internet to the 60% of the world's population that doesn't have Internet access.

Everyone in this room can speak to the enormous economic as well as social benefits of access to the Internet—benefits for nations and benefits for individuals. According to the World Bank, for every ten percent increase in a country's Internet penetration, its total economic growth expands by 1 to 2 percent. One recent European study states that tripling mobile broadband penetration levels across the developing world would provide a return of as much as \$17 for every \$1 spent.

But the Internet can only be an engine for inclusive growth if it is available, accessible, and affordable for everyone. With only 5% or fewer of people in the least developed countries connected to the Internet, it's plain we aren't there yet.

Affordability

One barrier to access is affordability. On average, American families spend 1 to 2 percent of their income on Internet access. But a typical family in some countries has to pay 10 percent of their family income for entry-level mobile broadband and roughly four times that for fixed broadband.

To address this, the United States helped create the Alliance for Affordable Internet in 2013. This broad coalition draws on expertise from governments, the private sector, and civil society to assist policy makers in expanding access while keeping prices low. With more than seventy members—some of them here today—the Alliance is the world's broadest technology sector coalition and its statistics-based work is making a difference around the globe.

Availability of Infrastructure

But of course for some of the least developed nations, and in particular for remote and isolated communities, the problem isn't the high cost of service, but the lack of infrastructure on which service could be provided. This includes a lack of fiber broadband and of infrastructure to

support mobile Internet coverage and network access. This state of affairs is at odds with today's reality: Internet connectivity is as fundamental to economic development as roads, ports, electricity and other traditional infrastructure.

The Global Connect Initiative

It was to address just this issue that Undersecretary of State Catherine Novelli, speaking on September 27th at the UN General Assembly, announced a new initiative led by the Department of State, called "Global Connect" which seeks to bring 1.5 billion people who lack Internet access online by 2020.

To make this goal a reality through Global Connect, the U.S. will partner with other governments—the governments of highly connected countries whose expertise we can enlist, and of course recipient nations. We will work with private industry, which has created innovative solutions to connect people in remote areas.

Early next year, the US will bring together governments and other stakeholders to help bridge the digital divide. We hope to develop country-specific strategies that can create enabling environments that spur connectivity and thereby promote entrepreneurship, cross-border information flows, and open and competitive marketplaces.

At the same time, major U.S. development agencies will begin to make Internet access a top priority in their work around the world. We will urge international development banks to recognize the Internet as an essential element of every country's infrastructure, as the World Bank has already done.

Several U.S. development organizations have already announced significant initiatives to expand broadband access.

- The Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), for example, has taken important steps to open new markets to Internet connectivity and its benefits. OPIC recently announced it will provide up to 250 million dollars in financing for the development of a network of 2,500 telecommunications towers across Burma, one of the last places in the world without widespread ICT infrastructure. In 2011, only 3% of Burma's 50 million residents had access to mobile phones. With OPIC's financial support, a local company named Apollo Towers expects to create the infrastructure to enable 75% of Burma's people to have mobile access by 2016.
- OPIC is making similar efforts in Kenya, financing a local provider of solar-powered wireless Internet so millions of rural Kenyans will have digital connectivity for the first time.

- USAID and the Millennium Challenge Corporation are also affirming their commitments to extend connectivity through development assistance.

We're delighted with the support we've already received for Global Connect. The initiative has been endorsed by the Presidents of Estonia and Tanzania, by Jim Kim of the World Bank, and by 10 major technical companies and global NGOs.

We welcome your support and your thoughts about how to move this ball forward. Please reach out to me, or to any of my State department colleagues if you'd like to help.

Join Us to Connect the Next 1.5 Billion People

We all agree that no country should be left out of the Information age.

Technology is advancing even as we speak here today. Going forward, our job is to ensure that this transformative technology is more widely accessible to everyone on earth. We look forward to working with all of you to connect the next 1.5 billion people.

Thank you.