



The Commonwealth

CONCEPT NOTE: VIRTUAL COMMONWEALTH CONNECTIVITY AGENDA CLUSTER WEEK

4th MEETING OF THE PHYSICAL CONNECTIVITY CLUSTER

THEME: ADDRESSING DIGITAL DIVIDE ACROSS THROUGH SUSTAINABLE INVESTMENT IN DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

26th November 2020 (12.00-13.40)-UK Time

1.0 Background

In April 2018, Commonwealth Leaders adopted the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda (CCA) at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) with a view to boosting trade and investment links across the Commonwealth and raising intra-Commonwealth trade to US\$2 trillion by 2030. The Connectivity Agenda is structured around five clusters: Physical Connectivity, Digital Connectivity, Regulatory Connectivity, Supply Side Connectivity and Business-to-Business Connectivity. A commitment to mainstreaming inclusive and sustainable trade cuts across each of these clusters.

Following this, separate meetings of the various clusters were conducted in 2019¹, followed by the 1st CCA cluster week meeting in August 2019 and the 2nd CCA week was held from 17-19 February, 2020. The CCA cluster week meetings had focused discussions on crosscutting issues which enabled members to identify possible synergies across the clusters. During the CCA cluster week, individual cluster meetings also took place. In relation to the Physical Connectivity Cluster (PCC), the overall objective of the cluster has been to support best practices in digital infrastructure development, as outlined in the CCA Action plan. In this regard the PCC has convened three meetings with Commonwealth member countries. The first meeting of the PCC was held in Durban, South Africa, which was merged with the Digital Connectivity Cluster as a session.² The second and third PCC meetings were held during the CCA cluster week in August 2019 and February 2020 respectively in London,

¹ The 1st Digital and Physical Connectivity cluster meeting was held in Durban, South Africa in March, 2019.

2.0 Progress to Date

The PCC cluster is led by The Gambia. The initial initiatives of the PCC includes (i) sharing of experience on how digital technologies can enhance the operation and capacity of infrastructure (ii) engaging on how countries can develop digital infrastructure (iii) developing principles of sustainable investment in digital infrastructure for Commonwealth members and (iv) exploring how countries can improve access to digital infrastructure to bridge the digital divides and promote inclusive growth. On the basis of the Action plan, members of the PCC had agreed to the Terms of Reference for the working group outlining more detailed output for the group to achieve in the long term.

To date, the cluster has made significant progress by way of sharing their experiences in relation to the feasibility and availability of digital technologies in their respective countries including identifying the existing digital divides among Commonwealth members. Members of the cluster have also submitted case studies sharing varied experiences and identifying the success and challenges in relation to physical connectivity for the Commonwealth including importance of enabling business environment, open data policies, sound regulatory environment and interoperability of the various digital infrastructure systems. The discussions from the meetings have also identified infrastructure to include both hard and soft infrastructure. The latter contains digital skills and also the research and development aspect of new technologies. The meeting however has also acknowledged that one size does not fit all Commonwealth member countries and that inclusive and sustainable development is critical to ensuring sustainable investment in physical infrastructure.

In the 2nd PCC meeting at the margins of the 1st CCA cluster week, the members of the cluster, with participation from the private sector, had developed a comprehensive “*Principles of Sustainable Investment in Digital Infrastructure*”. These principles are (i) Principle on investment in digital infrastructure to achieve sustainable growth and development for Commonwealth countries (ii) Investment in digital infrastructure to enhance economic and social inclusion (iii) Fostering intra-Commonwealth collaboration for digital infrastructure development (iv) Capacity Building on Investment in Digital infrastructure (v) Investment in digital infrastructure to promote intra-Commonwealth trade facilitation and economic efficiency (vi) Investment in digital infrastructure to encourage smart societies and networks. Following these, at the 3rd PCC meeting, members of the cluster aimed at exploring ways to implement the principles that had been agreed on sustainable investment in digital

infrastructure. As such the 3rd PCC meeting was conducted in a workshop mode in collaboration with the World Bank to (i) Build the Capacity of members in relation to infrastructure prioritization frameworks and (ii) for members to identify the capacity building needs at the meeting, with a view to further providing information after national consultations.

The 3rd PCC meeting recognized the critical factors for investment in digital infrastructure including stakeholder engagement, transparency and awareness, capacity building for cybersecurity laws and financial assistance. It has also acknowledged the importance of infrastructure prioritization framework (IPF) including for digital infrastructure for attracting foreign direct investment, private sector engagement, climate resilience and its alignment to national development plans. The meeting had urged the Secretariat, upon request from member states, to host national or regional workshops with the World Bank on IPF to build capacity of member states. The meeting also agreed that members' interested in exploring pilot projects on IPF to consult the Secretariat on further collaboration with World Bank. The Secretariat has been virtually working with member countries and has collated a list from countries expressing interest in conducting IPF workshop as first step approach for capacity building in investment in sustainable digital infrastructure. Refer to Annex 1 for list of countries requesting for capacity building assistance. However, implementation of the infrastructure scoping work at the national level will commence post COVID-19. In the interim, the Secretariat will work with member countries through virtual platforms in providing assistance where feasible.

3.0 COVID-19 and Sustainable Investment in Digital Infrastructure

The pandemic COVID-19 has resulted in global economic catastrophe that without doubt has also affected the Commonwealth members at varied levels. For developing Commonwealth in particular the small states and the least developed economies, the lockdown measures and closure of borders has drastically affected their small economies with Tourism, Travel and Retail being impacted most. Prior to the pandemic, the Commonwealth small states have been grappling with other socio-economic and environmental issues. The pandemic gravely adds to the ongoing challenges for the small states of the Commonwealth. Given the global economic slowdown and countries moving into recession, it is further ascertained that the priorities of most of the Commonwealth members have changed. For the recovery phase members are focused on ensuring effective policy measures.

The three major trends from COVID-19 are deeper digitization, higher debt and a backward shift from globalisation towards protectionist measures. Countries that have had enabling digital infrastructure have been able to cushion the effect of COVID-19 through intensifying digital mode of activities, i.e. online e-commerce, connecting MSMEs within the supply chain and retaining the consumer base both domestically and internationally. Furthermore, digital infrastructure for these economies has also enabled faster clearance processes at the border for essential goods and services during COVID-19 crisis. On the contrary for small states of the Commonwealth this has been a major challenge given the digital divide.

Against this backdrop, the Commonwealth Statement on COVID-19 Pandemic have urged *“officials working on the CCA to redouble efforts and identify ways to reduce barriers and promote the adoption of digital technologies as a positive enabler in order to increase resilient, inclusive and diverse trade and investment and to strengthen the global supply chains”*.

The work of the PCC is therefore paramount for Commonwealth economies, in particular in post COVID-19 recovery period. As economies are facing recession, slowdown of productive sector development and the need to modify business models to adapt to the so-called “new normal”, digital infrastructure is key enabling factor for digitalisation. However, countries are constrained financially, with high debt to GDP ratios. As such members do not have adequate resources to invest in digital infrastructure. As a result, targeted investment in digital infrastructure is key to ensuring efficiency as well as economies of scale. The existing work of the cluster will therefore be intensified by the cluster to address both the pre and post COVID-19 challenges for the Commonwealth member states. As business models are changing and COVID-19 has augmented the need for digitalisation, the challenges for basic and digital infrastructure remains at the core of any development archetype for Commonwealth members in narrowing the digital divide and ensuring inclusive and sustainable development.

Focus of the 4th Physical Connectivity Cluster Meeting

The focus of the 4th Physical Connectivity Cluster meeting is to address digital divide through the agreed Principles of Sustainable Investment in Digital Infrastructure. These principles had been agreed to by the members of the PCC at the 2nd PCC meeting. With COVID-19 the need for digital infrastructure is evermore paramount. However, it is also recognized that infrastructure gaps and the digital divides exist among the Commonwealth members. The

digital divide for infrastructure exists in relation to access, affordability and the quality of infrastructure as Commonwealth members are at different levels of development.

As such the 4th Physical Connectivity Cluster meeting aims to discuss the issue of digital divide and infrastructure gaps that exist among the Commonwealth and how members can work together in addressing these challenges for sustainable and inclusive development in the COVID-19 and post COVID-19 period of the cluster. The meeting will be chaired by the lead of the PCC-The Gambia. The Chair will provide an update to the cluster as **Session 1: (Agenda Item 1)** on the work of the cluster.

The discussions at the 4th PCC are as follows:

Session 2 (Agenda Item II): Infrastructure Prioritization in Post-COVID-19 Recovery

This session will include a presentation from the Secretariat on the role of Infrastructure including Digital Infrastructure in Post COVID Recovery for Commonwealth and provide recommendations to members on prioritization of work leading up to CHOGM and after CHOGM with focus on bridging the digital divide. The presentation will also provide insights from the “Commonwealth Survey on Economic Recovery for Post-COVID-19”.

Session 2 (Agenda Item III): Country experiences on the success/challenges in relation to provision/use of digital infrastructure for COVID-19 and beyond.

This session will contain two country presentations highlighting their respective experiences in terms of success/challenges and lessons learnt in relation to the provision and use of digital infrastructure. The discussions from member countries will enable the cluster in fine-tuning of the implementation of the Principles on Sustainable Investment in Digital Infrastructure.

Session 3 (Agenda Item III): Implementation of Principles on Sustainable Investment in Digital Infrastructure.

This session will discuss how the principles on Sustainable investment in digital infrastructure can be implemented. The session will include a presentation from Infrastructure Hub informing members of the existing data and how further collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat in undertaking technical analysis would assist member countries to bridge the digital divide.

Session 4: (Agenda Item IV): Way Forward

This session will provide a brief summary and possible deliverables for the cluster leading up to CHOGM next year.



The Commonwealth

4th Meeting of the Physical Connectivity Cluster

Pillar II: Addressing Digital Divides

Virtual Meeting: Webinar

Thursday 26th November 2020

AGENDA

Time (UK time)	Item
AGENDA ITEM I: OPENING SESSION	
12.00-12.05	Welcome Address from the Cluster Lead
AGENDA ITEM II: INFRASTRUCTURE PRIORITIZATION IN POST-COVID-19 RECOVERY	
12.05- 12.15	<p><u>Chair:</u> Mr. Abdoulie Jammeh, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Trade, Industry, Regional Integration and Employment, Gambia.</p> <p><i>This session will include a presentation from the Secretariat on the role of Infrastructure including Digital Infrastructure in Post COVID Recovery for Commonwealth and provide recommendations to members on prioritization of work leading up to CHOGM and after CHOGM with focus on bridging the digital divide.</i></p> <p><i>Presenter: Commonwealth Secretariat</i></p>
AGENDA ITEM III: COUNTRY EXPERIENCE ON THE SUCCESS/CHALLENGES IN RELATION TO PROVISION/ USE OF DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR COVID-19 AND BEYOND	
12.15-13.00	<p><u>Chair:</u> Mr. Abdoulie Jammeh, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Trade, Industry, Regional Integration and Employment, Gambia.</p> <p><i>This session will contain two country presentations highlighting their respective experiences in terms of success/challenges and lessons learnt in relation to the provision and use of Digital Infrastructure.</i></p> <p><i>Country 1: Ms. Vahini Naidu, Trade Negotiations, Department of Trade and Industry, South Africa</i></p> <p><i>Country 2: Dr. Anirudh Garg, Director, Neno Veda, India.</i></p>
13.00 – 13.10	Questions and Answers
AGENDA ITEM III: IMPLEMENTATION OF PRINCIPLES ON SUSTAINABLE INVESTMENT IN DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE	

13.10-13.20	<p><u>Chair:</u> Mr. Abdoulie Jammeh, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Trade, Industry, Regional Integration and Employment, Gambia.</p> <p><i>In this session representatives from the Global Infrastructure Hub on existing available data for countries on Infrastructure for further use at national level.</i></p> <p><i>Presenter: Ms. Monica Bennett, Director Thought Leadership, Infrastructure Hub, Australia</i></p>
13.20-13.30	Questions and Answers
AGENDA ITEM IV: WAY FORWARD	
13.3-13.40	<p><u>Chair:</u> Mr. Abdoulie Jammeh, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Trade, Industry, Regional Integration and Employment, Gambia.</p> <p><i>Identification of group deliverable by June 2021.</i></p>
END	