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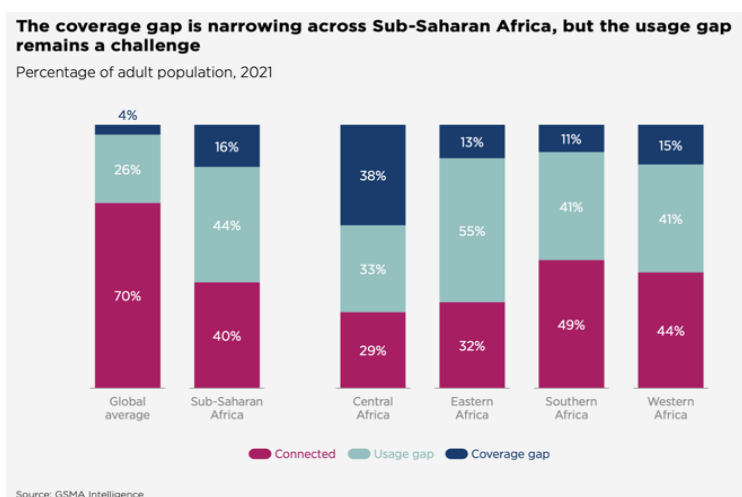
Event Name: GSMA and ATU session at the Africa Policy Leaders Forum.
Event theme: Bridging the Digital Divide- Leveraging Universal Service Funds for Enhanced Rural Connectivity in Africa.
Date: Thursday, 19th October 2023
Time: 11:00-13:00 (CAT)

In Africa, the average percentage of the population living in rural areas is beyond 52% with some countries registering percentages of more than 80%. Relatedly, access to reliable and affordable communication networks is becoming very crucial for the socioeconomic development of rural communities even as rural areas continue to face challenges in terms of limited connectivity, particularly for schools and health centres, lack of digital services and inadequate telecommunications infrastructure.

Limited coverage in rural and remote areas, high costs, and geographical barriers make it more difficult to provide reliable and affordable Internet access. Governments, in collaboration with private sector partners and international organizations, have initiated joint efforts to increase rural connectivity in Sub-Saharan Africa. These efforts include national broadband plans, public-private partnerships, and the establishment of Universal Service Funds to support infrastructure development in underserved areas.

Universal Service Funds (USFs) when well implemented can be effective in bridging the digital divide by promoting connectivity in underserved areas. Commonly, USFs are funded by levies on telecommunication service providers and other sources of government funding. These funds are then used to provide subsidies to service providers to extend their networks and services to rural and underserved areas.

However, despite a decrease and a low percentage of coverage gap (16%), there is a significant usage gap in Sub-Saharan Africa (44%), with many people not using digital services due to a lack of digital skills, low literacy rates, and affordability issues.



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In addition, several challenges hinder rural connectivity in Sub-Saharan Africa, including inadequate infrastructure, high costs of deployment and maintenance, low population density, limited electricity supply, and digital skills gaps. Overcoming these challenges requires comprehensive strategies involving government policies, private-sector investments, and community participation.

Recognising the potential of USFs to contribute significantly to increasing rural connectivity in Sub-Saharan Africa, the GSMA and ATU session on Bridging the Digital Divide: Leveraging Universal Service Funds for Enhanced Rural Connectivity in Africa has been designed to present the results of the analysis of the latest GSMA study on the use of USF in sub-Saharan Africa, and:

- Discuss policy and regulatory reforms required to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of USFs in meeting their intended objectives of increasing rural connectivity in the region.
- Find out if existing USF models are addressing rural coverage and connectivity in the region and what are the key challenges being faced to this extent.
- Identify the best, and innovative approaches and best practices for utilizing USFs to address the specific connectivity needs of rural communities.
- Share experiences, challenges, and success stories from different countries in leveraging USFs for rural development.
- Foster collaboration and partnerships among stakeholders, including government agencies, telecom operators, civil society organizations, and development partners.
- Identify strategies to promote digital literacy and skills development among underserved communities.
- Identify strategies to promote the use of USFs for the deployment of new and emerging technologies such as 5G, IoT, and satellite services.

This roundtable will bring together a diverse range of participants including governments officials from ICT Ministries, Regulatory bodies and USF Coordinators, Mobile industry leaders including network operators, service providers, and technology vendors, Academics and Researchers working in the field of ICTs and Communications, and development partners supporting connectivity projects and implementation of USF programs.

This roundtable is therefore important to foster meaningful discussions, generate actionable insights, and pave the way for increased rural connectivity through the effective use of Universal Service Funds.

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