

## **ENABLING ACCESS USING BROADBAND**

### **A MULTISTAKEHOLDER APPROACH**

#### **Contribution to the First Meeting of the Internet Governance Forum**

The Internet is no longer a medium for exchanging data and information nor is it anymore seen as a repository for knowledge and e-content, rather it has become a powerful instrument assisting social and economic development and affecting all facets of any nation's economy, ranging from education and health to trade and legislation, to name only a few. Attracting users online and extending Internet access to as many individuals as possible, has therefore become a priority on the agendas of governments worldwide. As articulated during the WSIS process, the development of the Internet, both nationally and internationally, can only be achieved through the involvement of all stakeholders and via multilateral partnerships between government bodies, private sector and civil society. Within this framework, establishing of an enabling environment for the Internet to flourish is an important role that only national governments can play. It is by setting policies, which encourage investments in telecommunication backbones and boost expansions in Internet capacities and broadband networks, that the growth of Internet usage is stimulated. It is also by promoting competition in the ISP industry and creating a supportive legal climate that the access to the Internet becomes affordable and diffusion is accelerated.

Lead by its conviction, that only public private partnerships will develop its Internet and broadband industry, Egypt has embarked on a new technology-driven wave to support its socio-economic development strategy. This strategy is

addressing a vision to create a vibrant ICT industry and information-literate society; and the Government collectively with the business sector are joining forces to materialize it. Widespread and affordable broadband access is fundamental in realizing the potential and development of the Information Society. Establishing a nationwide secure broadband infrastructure is essential and inline with the Government's focus to develop and deliver services and applications necessary to compliment the advancements of sectors that include education and learning, medical and healthcare, governmental and public services, as well as industry development, trade and exports,.

Egypt's Internet users pose potential, and current factual figures support that; launched in 2004 as part of the e-access program of its Information Society Initiative, Egypt's Broadband Initiative came to add a new dimension to the successful 'home-grown' Free Internet model introduced back in 2002. This new broadband model was first structured, to attract small businesses then the demand spread to individuals and homes. The model was basically unbundling the local loop and clearing spectrum for provisioning of broadband wire-line and wireless services, using DSL and WiFi technologies as well as newer technologies such as CDMA, WiMAX and FTTH. The Initiative, launched on the first day of the ITU regional event Telecom Africa, was supported by private sector investments in broadband networks. It introduced to the end user a much needed alternative for the dial-up connection and was accompanied by a brand-less promotional campaign, organized collaboratively by all stakeholders. Taking this initiative a step further, only this year in Q2, broadband prices were reduced even more and special packages for higher speeds were introduced. This restructure, via a strong partnership between the government and the private sector, aims not only at widening the user base but also at attracting new segments of the society and providing the users with a high-speed access platform that can support converged and next generation data services. Today, for prices as low as \$16 per month, citizens are able to subscribe to broadband services, enjoying higher speeds starting from 256 kbps. Current statistics

indicate that Internet users have exceeded five million for dial-up and one million for broadband (seven ISPs are offering the service), and the number of users is expected to increase by 150% by the end of 2007.

Broadband will fundamentally change the way Egyptians use the Internet. Availability of content and new communication platforms for delivery will have a key role to play in the future of the new wave of broadband in Egypt, paving the way for the region as well. This is due to introduce a new set of services aimed to address the growing needs of users; ranging from conducting business online to participating in academic learning experiences to simply enjoying entertainment via electronic means. Collectively carried out by the Government and the ISP industry, this new phase of broadband in Egypt, based on private sector investments and competition as a driver for increased bandwidth and quality, is expected to trigger innovation and stimulate nationwide spread of next generation Internet services.

Encouraging broadband access is very much coupled to the availability of suitable content, useful services and interesting applications. Operators and ISPs will increasingly invest in broadband infrastructure as new models of cultural and business content delivery arise and as more services go online. It is worth noting, that local innovative applications and e-government services were introduced to the market to encourage usage; many content providers are now investing serious efforts to develop Arabic content in order to encourage new segments of the society to get online. In this regard, Egypt launched, in 2005, its E-Content Initiative aiming to boost the Arabic content on the Web and more specifically address the needs of the local and regional market needs.

Evolving markets, such as in Egypt, usually face a number of challenges when it comes to developing their Internet industry. In addition to low computer penetration and, high international bandwidth prices, such markets suffer poor local content and language barrier, limited use of online payment and low credit card penetration, as well as lack of awareness and trust in ICT in general. With a young population, a developing economy, and an emerging broadband industry,

the Internet market in Egypt still possesses great potential. Although at a relatively early stage of market evolution, Egypt is considered a leader, in the region, in telecommunication infrastructure and a hub for traditional and digital cultural content. Further, its announced deregulation plan, will encourage more international connectivity and introduce alternative infrastructures and technologies to enable more customer choices.

In conclusion, developing the Information Society is not a task carried out by a single entity; rather it is a national mission that requires public private partnerships coupled with community initiatives and collaborative efforts of all stakeholders.