



# **SAMENA COUNCIL DIGITAL SERVICES WORKING GROUP CALL TO ACTION IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19**



With COVID-19 spreading across the planet and impacting our lives at unprecedented levels, we are finding ourselves in exceptional times that require exceptional responses and actions.

Never before have the availability and accessibility of relevant digital services been so vital to our health, safety, and sanity and to keeping our economy and societies working. While digital transformation and the provision of digital services is on the agenda of most governments, the COVID-19 crisis is putting a spotlight on the key areas that need to be urgently addressed to guarantee that relevant, affordable and resilient digital services can be provided and used.

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To ensure that current challenges and barriers to the provision, availability and accessibility of relevant digital services can be flexibly and quickly tackled, the SAMENA Digital Services Working Group puts forward the following **immediate actions and recommendations** to governments and regulatory authorities:



- Release additional spectrum on a temporary basis to ensure that sufficient capacity can be guaranteed and that new technologies can be used to enhance connectivity
- Facilitate spectrum sharing
- Allow the extension of deadlines on a temporary basis for expiration / facilitate license renewals for vital digital services providers
- Temporarily allow for enhanced / more flexible traffic management / prioritization of vital digital services over other non-vital content where relevant
- Ensure that voice, text and USSD-based services are available in regions where the availability of smartphones is limited
- Temporarily allow the unrestricted use of communications apps and services, including VPNs and VoIP
- Consider temporary suspension and review of current industry fees, including royalties and taxation
- Soften quality of services rules
- Ensure cross-border data flows essential to the provision of vital digital services are not interrupted (within the bounds of privacy laws)
- Consider and encourage new ways of collaborative and cross-regional data collection and data sharing/pooling (common data pool) between telecommunications operators and also between governments for purposes of enabling, e.g., COVID-19 tracking apps and other services within clear privacy and data protection guidelines and obligations
- Ensure that the digital supply chain is not interrupted (vital equipment and inputs for the supply of digital services should continue to be available locally)
- Ease collaborative efforts between telecommunications operators and industry players to provide vital services (e.g. MNO/hospital/health centre collaboration, other)

The SAMENA Digital Services Working Group has developed a Digital Services Policy-, Legal-, and Regulatory Framework, which presents key policy, legal and regulatory enablers required to accelerate the development and provision of digital services based on collaborative and cross-regional approaches. The priorities identified within the framework remain valid.

The immediate actions and recommendations as set out above complement and augment these priorities, with the caveat that some of them are proposed as temporary and exceptional measures with the need to identify long-term solutions that are in line with current and future privacy and data protection rules and regulations. Moreover, to help governments better manage the crisis and the process of re-opening after lock-down, the key enablers of connectivity, including 5G, enablement of cloud services, including edge capabilities and the use of AI are indispensable.