

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

ECLAC SUBREGIONAL HEADQUARTERS FOR THE CARIBBEAN



Report of the expert group meeting on using universal service funds to increase access to technology for persons with disabilities





UNITED NATIONS



Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean

Expert group meeting on using universal service funds
to increase access to technology for persons with disabilities
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Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

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**REPORT OF THE EXPERT GROUP MEETING
ON USING UNIVERSAL SERVICE FUNDS TO INCREASE ACCESS
TO TECHNOLOGY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

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A. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is a need to update universal service fund (USF) legislation in the region, in order to allow USFs to deliver both universal service and access to telecommunications, to adopt an inclusive definition of disability in keeping with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and to include technologically-neutral language that enables them to fund projects for new technologies. Where necessary, USFs should also amend their legislation to ensure the sustainability of their underlying economic models, given the changing structure and revenue sources of telecommunications markets in the Caribbean.

2. Many persons with disabilities (PWDs) and their representative organizations in the region are unaware of the existence of USFs in their countries. USFs should use public awareness campaigns to increase PWDs' knowledge of USFs and the availability of funding. Communications strategies should be tailored to the special needs of PWDs, including ensuring that they reach PWDs who have no access to online information and are not registered with organizations for persons with disabilities. USFs should also engage directly with organizations for persons with disabilities and invite them to submit project proposals.

3. PWDs and their representative organizations require training and other support to build capacity to submit project proposals. USFs should facilitate trainings on this subject and also develop user-friendly guidelines and online content to guide PWDs through the project proposal, design and approval processes. Local organizations for PWDs can partner with disability organizations in other regions to stay up-to-date on new assistive technologies.

4. To increase the representation of PWDs within USFs, these bodies should appoint disability focal points and employ PWDs as staff members. It is important that focal points are ICT experts so that PWDs' unmet technological needs can be translated into projects utilizing the latest assistive technologies. Disability focal points would engage directly with PWDs and local organizations for PWDs, keep USFs up-to-date on the latest assistive technologies and advocate for PWDs in the project selection and allocation processes.

5. Caribbean countries would benefit both from up-to-date model USF legislation and a common regional space to discuss and find solutions to challenges facing USFs, including improving engagement with persons with disabilities and other target groups. Countries with unimplemented USF legislation could then amend their legislation based on the model legislation, while countries without USF legislation would be encouraged to adopt the model legislation with appropriate changes for the national context. Furthermore, countries with active USFs could update their legislation using the model legislation as guidance.

B. ATTENDANCE AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK

1. Place and date

6. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) subregional headquarters for the Caribbean convened an expert group meeting to discuss the study entitled "Using Universal Service Funds to increase Access to Technology for Persons with Disabilities". This meeting took place on 6 August 2019 in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

2. Attendance

7. The expert group meeting was attended both in person and online by persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, senior officials from universal service funds, telecommunications departments and regulatory bodies from various Caribbean countries, and representatives of regional telecommunications organizations, the Caribbean Telecommunications Union (CTU) and the Eastern Caribbean Telecommunications Authority (ECTEL). Persons with disabilities and representative organizations took part from the following ECLAC Member Countries: Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and Trinidad and Tobago. Officials from universal service funds, telecommunications departments and regulatory bodies in ECLAC Member Countries, Barbados, Grenada, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, also participated. Furthermore, representatives from telecommunications regulatory bodies in ECLAC Associate Member Countries, Bermuda and the Cayman Islands, participated in the meeting.

3. Agenda

1. Welcome remarks and introduction
2. Overview and presentation of the study
3. Plenary discussion on presentation and study
4. Closing remarks

C. SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

1. Opening of meeting

8. The Director of ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean welcomed all participants attending online and in person and stated that the meeting would provide an opportunity to discuss how universal service funds can be used to increase access to technology for persons with disabilities in the Caribbean. She noted that USFs have the potential to improve the lives of persons with disabilities in the region, as well as those of the Caribbean population, but that access to the internet and other ICTs is not evenly enjoyed in the Caribbean and many people in the region still experience a digital divide.

9. The Director informed participants that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) requires States to take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to ICTs on an equal basis with others. She stated that universal service funds are one such measure that can be used to finance equal access, but also noted that USFs have faced various challenges across the world, ranging from high levels of undisbursed funds to low levels of transparency and mismanagement.

10. ECLAC's study, "Using Universal Service Funds to increase access to technology for Persons with Disabilities", aims to build on these lessons by exploring common challenges encountered by USFs in the Caribbean and identifying best practices and recommendations to support Caribbean governments to effectively use USFs for the benefit of persons with disabilities.

11. In accordance with the principle of 'nothing about us without us', the Director underscored that the study actively consulted and involved persons with disabilities and their representative organizations as well as ministries and other bodies responsible for telecommunications and USFs in

a range of ECLAC Member Countries and Associate Member Countries in the Caribbean. The Director discussed the study's methodology, which included interviews, questionnaires, and an analysis of legislative and regulatory frameworks for USFs, and thanked stakeholders for their high level of engagement and prompt replies to the questionnaires and interviews.

12. She encouraged the active participation, questions and comments of all present in the expert group meeting and thanked participants for this opportunity to work together to improve the lives of persons with disabilities in the region.

2. Presentation and discussion of the study “Using universal service funds to increase access to technology for persons with disabilities”

13. The Associate Programme Management Officer of ECLAC Caribbean started by thanking all participants for their engagement with the study, “Using Universal Service Funds to increase access to technology for Persons with Disabilities”. She noted that the purpose of the expert group meeting was not only to present the study's draft findings but to ensure it is ready for publication and can serve its purpose of helping countries in the region better utilize USFs to increase access to technology for PWDs. As a result, she encouraged the questions and comments of all participants in the plenary discussion.

14. The Officer gave a brief overview of the draft study, beginning with the motivations for embarking on the research. She explained that there are 1.3 million persons with a disability of some kind and around 250,000 persons with a significant disability in the Caribbean and that this group faces barriers that prevent their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Persons with disabilities' use of the internet and other technologies lags behind that of persons without disabilities in the Caribbean, even after accounting for age differences of persons with and without disabilities. She noted that the study uses the CRPD's definition of disability because it recognizes that disability is a social construct resulting from the interaction between persons' impairments and external barriers that hinder their participation in society.

15. She stated that USFs are a valuable yet under-utilized resource that can be used to fund programmes to increase access to technology for PWDs in the Caribbean. USFs increase access to telecommunication services through projects funded by legally-mandated contributions from telecommunication providers. They are often used in combination with Universal Service Obligations (USOs), which place an obligation on telecommunications providers to make telecommunications services available to virtually all consumers in a country.

16. Advocates for PWDs have encouraged a reshaping of USFs towards ensuring both universal service and access to telecommunications. Universal access recognizes that not only do remote, disadvantaged and vulnerable populations require an available connection to telecommunications, but that they must also be made accessible to PWDs and other marginalized groups by providing necessary skills, equipment and support.

17. The Officer explained that 10 Caribbean countries have USFs and USOs, and that 7 of these countries' USF legislation has a specific mandate for persons with disabilities. Of the 10 countries with USFs, 5 belong to ECTEL, whose founding treaty requires Contracting States to establish a USF. ECTEL is reaching the end of a review process, which will result in significant changes to its universal service framework. The other 5 countries – Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and United States Virgin Islands – have active USFs but not all have arrangements in place to ensure universal service and access to telecommunications for persons with disabilities.

18. She further explained that 10 Caribbean countries have enacted legislation enabling the establishment of a USF but have not implemented it. They are Anguilla, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Guyana, Montserrat, Suriname and Turks and Caicos Islands. Only Guyana has indicated that it is in the process of establishing a USF. Of the 10 countries, 6 have legislative instruments that contain a specific mandate for persons with disabilities.

19. Following this initial overview, the Associate Programme Management Officer presented the challenges, both general and related to projects for PWDs, experienced by USFs in the Caribbean. General challenges include non-implementation of enabling legislation, focus on universal service to the exclusion of access, failure to use technologically-neutral language in legislation, low fund activity levels, and difficulties meeting reporting obligations. Challenges related to projects for PWDs include terminology falling short of CRPD standards, lack of engagement with PWDs in project allocation and design processes, lack of project proposals targeting PWDs and their access needs, lack of knowledge of disability organizations on available ICTs, and inability of disability organizations to apply for USF funding.

20. Next, the Officer gave a series of recommendations and best practices as set out in the draft study. These included the need for Caribbean countries to implement their enacted USF legislation after updating it to reflect technological change and modern approaches to disability; for countries with active USFs to update their legislative and regulatory frameworks in accordance with the study's recommendations; for USFs to increase their engagement with persons with disabilities at each stage of a project's lifespan; and to increase the representation of PWDs within USFs through employing staff with disabilities and designating focal points. Furthermore, she recommended that USFs invest a fixed percentage of funds in projects to increase access to technology for persons with disabilities; make structural changes to ensure the timely disbursement of USF funds; increase USF transparency and accountability through regular monitoring and reporting; and seize on opportunities for national and regional cooperation and capacity building.

3. Plenary discussion on presentation and study

21. The Director of ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean asked each participant to introduce themselves and their relationship to persons with disabilities, telecommunications and/or universal service funds in the region. Representatives for USFs detailed current projects for persons with disabilities and ideas for future projects. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines' USF Administrator stated that its National Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (NTRC) is in the process of designing its first project for PWDs. PWDs and their representative organizations from across the region noted that many PWDs are not aware of the existence of USFs and welcomed this study as an opportunity to raise awareness on and better utilize USFs for the benefit of PWDs.

22. ECLAC Caribbean's Director began the discussion by asking participants if model USF legislation would be a positive way to address the challenges raised in the draft study and whether a regional forum would help USFs to find common solutions to the challenges they face, including improving engagement with persons with disabilities. The CTU consultant echoed the need to harmonize legislation, noting that there is an outdated precedent for this in the region, and that it is imperative that new model legislation adopt technologically-neutral language.

23. The CTU's telecommunications specialist added that the Caribbean Single ICT Space project aims to harmonize policies, legislation and regulations related to ICT to bring about greater integration of Caribbean markets. He supported the recommendation to have disability focal points at USFs but cautions that they should also be ICT specialists. Another option would be for

telecommunications service providers to consult directly with PWDs and their representative organizations.

24. Saint Lucia's USF administrator also supported the idea of disability focal points and would like to explore this idea in addition to that of directly inviting PWD organizations to submit project proposals. A person with disability from Saint Lucia stated that he is only learning of the country's USF through this study and encourages USFs to include PWDs in the design and implementation of projects and to employ persons with disabilities to increase their representation within USFs. The Chair of the Saint-Lucia based Caribbean Community-based Rehabilitation Network also noted that he only became aware of Saint Lucia's USF through the invitation to this expert group meeting.

25. The CTU consultant encouraged mention in the study of the issue of whether USFs' underlying economic models are self-sustaining, since he is informed that the revenue of many telecommunications providers in the region is decreasing. The Executive Officer of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT) stated that, while some sources of revenue of telecommunications providers are decreasing, profits are increasing in other areas, including internet subscriptions. Therefore, she believes that telecommunications providers' revenues are overall increasing but that USF legislation needs to include all forms of revenue to ensure the sustainability of USFs. She also supported the ideas of model legislation and a common regional space for discussions relating to USFs.

26. The ECTEL representative noted that there seems to be a lack of awareness of the part of PWDs about the existence of USFs and emphasized the need to promote USFs and the availability of funding. On the topic of sustainability of USF revenues, she noted that several models exist in the region but that USFs in ECTEL Contracting States receive a portion of providers' overall revenues and it is important that contributions are not linked to a specific service. TATT's market analyst noted that Trinidad and Tobago's legislation provides relief to providers at times of low revenue.

27. The Chief Executive Officer of the National Centre for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) of Trinidad and Tobago noted the common thread that persons with disabilities and civil society organizations are not aware of the existence of USFs, and that the job of raising awareness around USFs falls to these bodies themselves. She further stated that USFs must use an inclusive definition of disability encompassing all its forms, noting that a current disability project of TATT only benefits recipients of the government's disability grant. This excludes some groups of PWDs, for example, children with learning disabilities.

28. The CTU's consultant suggested that USFs embrace the idea of 'access to ICTs on an equal basis to others' found in the CRPD but questioned whether there is a sound understanding of what this phrase truly means. He also noted that stigma against PWDs is a huge issue in the Caribbean of which USFs must be cognizant. ECLAC Caribbean's Director agreed that stigma against PWDs must be tackled and that PWDs must be incorporated in decision-making processes affecting them. She noted that ECLAC is working with CARICOM to implement the Declaration of Pétion-Ville, which concerns the rights of persons with disabilities.¹

29. The Managing Director of Ipsum Technologies stated that organizations in the region, including USFs, suffer from a silo mindset and lack of communication with one another. USFs need communications strategies tailored to the special needs of PWDs. This includes reaching PWDs who have no access to online information and are not registered with organizations for persons with disabilities. He further stated that persons with disabilities require support to draft project proposals

¹ CARICOM (2013), Declaration of Pétion Ville, 6 December 2013, Haiti.

if USFs wish to increase the number of projects targeting PWDs. As ICTs for PWDs are designed and produced outside the region, local PWDs organizations are not well-placed to inform USFs on them but local organizations could partner with PWD organizations in other regions for this purpose.

30. A PWD from Saint Lucia agreed that training is critical to ensure that PWDs and their representative organizations have the capacity to submit project proposals. He noted that not all persons with disabilities are member of disability organizations, so USFs should tailor their communication strategies to reach individual PWDs. The representative of the Saint Kitts and Nevis Association of Persons with Disabilities added that, while persons with disabilities do not always have technological expertise, they are in the best position to describe their needs. Therefore, collaboration between USFs and PWDs is essential and should include capacity building initiatives for drafting project proposals.

31. The Chair of the Caribbean CBR Network posed the question of how USFs and PWDs can act on the recommendations in the draft study. The CTU's telecommunications specialist stated that regional organizations, including the CTU and ECLAC, can provide guidance to Member States, but the process of implementing the recommendations should be locally driven and PWDs should begin by liaising directly with the USF or telecommunications regulatory body in their country.

32. The ECTEL representative noted that, even if PWDs do not have the capacity to draft project proposals, they should raise their project ideas and unmet technological needs with USFs who can develop the ideas themselves. Grenada's USF Administrator added that its NTRC already works closely with organizations for PWDs during the project selection, appraisal, and approval processes. The Managing Director of Ipsum Technologies recommended that USFs develop user-friendly guidelines and webpages to guide PWDs through the funding grant process. This would also increase transparency and awareness around project proposals.

4. Closing remarks

33. The Associate Programme Management Officer of ECLAC Caribbean gave a vote of thanks, expressing appreciation to the participants for their substantial contributions to the expert group meeting. She emphasised that ideas, suggestions and recommendations advanced during the meeting will be meaningfully incorporated in the revised study. She ended by urging Member States to grasp the opportunities to implement the study's recommendations and encouraged all stakeholders to continue to work together to better utilize USFs and promote access to technology for persons with disabilities in the region.

Annex I**List of participants**

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Annex II

Agenda

0930-0940

1. Welcome remarks and introduction

Diane Quarless, Chief, Economic Commission for Latin America and The Caribbean (ECLAC), subregional headquarters for the Caribbean

Amelia Bleeker, Associate Programme Management Officer, Caribbean Knowledge Management Centre (CKMC), ECLAC

0940 – 1015

2. Overview and presentation of the study

Amelia Bleeker, Associate Programme Management Officer, CKMC, ECLAC

1015-1145

3. Plenary discussion on presentation and study

Amelia Bleeker, Associate Programme Management Officer, CKMC, ECLAC

Representatives of persons with disabilities and organizations for persons with disabilities

Representatives of universal service funds (USFs)

Representatives of telecommunications government departments and regulatory bodies

Representatives of the Caribbean Telecommunications Union (CTU), Eastern Caribbean Telecommunications Authority (ECTEL) and other regional telecommunications organizations

1145-1200

4. Closure of the meeting

Amelia Bleeker, Associate Programme Management Officer, CKMC, ECLAC



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