

REPORT ON THE INDUSTRY-FOCUSED STAKEHOLDERS' ENGAGEMENT SESSION OF THE UNIVERSAL SERVICE PROVISION FUND (USPF) – 2025.

INTRODUCTION:

The Industry-focused Stakeholders' Engagement session, organized by the USPF in collaboration with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and co-sponsored by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), was held on March 13, 2025, at the Marriott Hotel Ikeja, Lagos. The session, themed ***“Fostering Connectivity and Access in Unserved and Underserved Communities: Collaborating for Sustainable Growth”***, aimed to strengthen collaboration among relevant stakeholders in the telecommunications sector to develop sustainable strategies for expanding connectivity and enhancing digital inclusion in Nigeria's underserved and unserved communities.

Prior to the event, the organizing committee developed questionnaires to gather and analyze responses from key stakeholder groups. These responses, covering key challenges, priorities, and collaboration opportunities, were intended to facilitate targeted discussions during the in-person event.

The event hosted over one hundred and twenty (120) attendees from within and outside the country, bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders, from policymakers to telecom industry leaders, from rural community representatives to technology enthusiasts, with one shared mission—to shape the future of universal service and access in Nigeria.

Structure of the Session

The session was structured into four (4) key segments to facilitate meaningful discussions and active participation. Each segment played a crucial role in ensuring a dynamic and engaging session, fostering meaningful contributions from all participants.

1. Preliminaries:

This segment consisted of introductory remarks, goodwill messages and a keynote address from key dignitaries and stakeholders. It set the tone for deliberations by highlighting the session's objectives and providing an overview of expected outcomes.

2. Context-Setting Presentations:

Expert presentations were delivered in this section to establish a foundation for the discussions and provide insights into the theme of the event, framing issues for deeper engagement.

3. Panel Discussion:

A moderated panel discussion followed, featuring subject matter experts and key stakeholders. The panelists shared their perspectives on the theme of the event, addressing critical issues and responding to questions from the audience. This segment encouraged interactive dialogue and knowledge exchange.

4. Break-out Session:

Finally, participants were divided into working groups to deliberate on responses to questionnaires distributed prior to the event. This segment allowed for focused discussions, collaborative problem-solving, and the generation of actionable recommendations.

COMMENCEMENT:

The session, anchored by Mr. Ayia Kigbari, Manager, Public Affairs Department, NCC and his co-compere, Ms. Miracle Opeyemi Ogunbowale, an International Development & Stakeholder Engagement Expert, commenced with the collective affirmation of the National Anthem, followed by the acknowledgement of key dignitaries and esteemed attendees.

In Attendance:

1. Key Dignitaries: The Honourable Minister and the Permanent Secretary of the Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy (FMCIDE).
2. Regulatory Leadership: Executive Vice Chairman (EVC), Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC).
3. Distinguished Host: Secretary USPF (SUSPF).
4. Co-hosts and Industry Experts: ITU and UK FCDO.
5. Regulatory Representatives: Professionals and high-ranking officials from NCC, Licensing and Authorization Department, Policy Competition and Economic Analysis Department, Technical Standards and Network Integrity Department; Zonal Controller of the Lagos State Zonal Office; Digital Economy Department; Funding and Subsidy Department of USPF, Infrastructure Projects (IP) Department of the USPF.
6. Mobile Network Operators (MNOs): Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and principal officials from MTN, Airtel, 9mobile and Glo.
7. Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs): Huawei Technologies Co. Limited, SK Technologies Limited and ZTE Limited.
8. Tower companies: IHS Towers Limited, Pan African Towers.
9. Connectivity Implementers of the USPF: Infratel Limited, QL Teknik Limited, Raeanna Limited, O'jive Network Solutions Limited, Hotspot Networks Limited, Skolak Resources Limited, Content Oasis Limited, Ice Pyramid Communications Limited, Fahmaiyaa Nigeria Limited, Kruggerbrent & Co. Nigeria Limited, etc.
10. Internet Service Providers: IPNX Limited.
11. ICT Commissioners: Representatives from states such as Adamawa, Niger, Nasarawa states etc.
12. Development Partners: Initiative for Digital Inclusion (IDI), Paradigm Initiative, Centre for Information, Technology and Development (CITAD).
13. Advocacy Groups: Association of Telecommunications Companies of Nigeria (ATCON).
14. Complementary Access Networks representatives.
15. Stakeholder Engagement Committee: Representatives from the Strategy and Corporate Performance Monitoring (SCPM) Department, Information Technology Projects (ITP) Department, Funding and Subsidy Department, Legal Services Department, Infrastructure Projects (IP) Department, and Corporate Services Department.

16. Support Staff: ITP and Internal Audit Departments, USPF and the Public Affairs Department, NCC.
17. Media: Channels Television, TVC News, Lagos Television (LTV), Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Radio Nigeria, News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), ThisDay Newspaper, Guardian Newspaper, The Punch Newspaper,, Daily Trust Newspaper, New Telegraph Newspaper, Vanguard Newspaper, Business Day Newspaper, Leadership Newspaper, Daily Sun Newspaper, The Nation Newspaper, Daily Post, Tech Economy, Business Metrics, The Cable, Premium Times.

SEGMENT ONE

PRELIMINARIES

Mr. Yomi Arowosafe, SUSPF proceeded to set the tone for the event with opening remarks underscoring the urgent need for collaboration and strategic partnerships to drive wide network connectivity coverage in underserved and unserved communities across Nigeria.

Next, Dr. Aminu Maida, EVC graciously greeted attendees in his welcome address and buttressed the points made by the SUSPF. He stated that the achievement of digital inclusion called for a multi-stakeholder collaboration where government agencies, mobile network operators, infrastructure providers, equipment manufacturers, development partners, and telecom trade groups must work closely together. Consequently, he urged all stakeholders to take decisive steps toward strengthening partnerships. He concluded by reiterating that attendees should take advantage of the session which provides a platform to discuss practical strategies to enhance connectivity projects.

In a series of goodwill messages, Engr. Farouk Yusuf Yabo, the Permanent Secretary, FMCIDE, Mr Ali Drissa Badiel, ITU Area representative for West Africa, Mr Dinesh Balsingh, MD/CEO, Airtel, and Mr Jay Stephen Ogor, MD/CEO of Racanna Limited, rendered heartfelt speeches applauding the USPF for its significant efforts so far in expanding access to affordable telecommunications services, bridging the connectivity gap, and promoting greater social equity and inclusion for all Nigerians. While stating that the session is timely due to connectivity gaps in the country, they reiterated the significance of strategic partnerships to build capacity, expand connectivity and guarantee long-term viability. Finally, they echoed their support for the USPF, expressing confidence that the session will foster meaningful dialogue to guide the development of bespoke strategies for enhancing connectivity in unserved and underserved areas.

Particularly, Mr. Ali Drissa Badiel, stated that effective collaboration is aligned with achieving the Global Digital Compact, an initiative proposed by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, in the framework for the Pact for the Future, discussed and adopted at the UN Summit of the Future in September 2024. The objective of that Compact is to ensure that digital technologies are used responsibly and for the benefit of all, while addressing the digital divide and fostering a safe and inclusive digital environment for all.

Dr. Bosun Tijani, HM, FMCIDE, concluded the speeches with his keynote address. He stated that despite the impactful progress made by Nigeria in expanding digital connectivity, millions, especially

in rural areas, still lack access to reliable internet. In this context, he acknowledged the USPF's key role in bridging this gap by implementing infrastructure initiatives. He added that the government is also driving major initiatives like Project BRIDGE (90,000km Fibre Optic Expansion), Project 774 (where every Local Government benefits from high-speed connectivity), the Universal Access Project (targeted at connecting 20 million Nigerians who currently have no access to digital services), 3MTT (3 Million Technical Talent aimed at building Nigeria's technical talent backbone to power Nigeria's digital economy), NBAN (Nigerian Broadband Alliance, a collaborative platform across government and private sector to accelerate broadband adoption) etc, to enhance broadband penetration and digital inclusion. While buttressing the points made by previous speakers, that achieving universal access requires strong partnerships, capacity building, community engagement, infrastructure optimization and sustainability, he concluded by calling for collective efforts capable of unlocking Nigeria's digital economy's full potential. The ultimate goal being the achievement of universal connectivity and digital literacy for all Nigerians by 2030.

KNOWLEDGE SESSION:

SEGMENT TWO

PRESENTATIONS

1. This segment began with a presentation from the SUSPF, delivering an overview of the enabling law, mandate, initiatives and impact of the USPF. The aim was to provide background information on the USPF and highlight the need for collaboration to drive sustainable digital inclusion efforts. He educated attendees as follows:
 - Through the strategic implementation of projects across the Six (6) geo-political zones, the USPF has achieved approximately 1259 Kilometers of Optic Fiber Cables, 682 Base Transceiver Stations (BTSSs), Bandwidth Aggregation connecting 3785 Institutions, and Rural Broadband across 72 communities, under Connectivity Programmes, with projections to implement satellite connectivity in all the geo-political zones.
 - Access Programmes, which focus on the provision of end-user devices to complement the ICT infrastructure established under Connectivity projects, have yielded over 2733 Computer Laboratories encompassing assistive technologies, computers and accessories, e-learning software, alternative power supply, internet connectivity, adequate training and technical support.
 - The USPF has created requisite network platforms and applications for digital literacy; bridging the digital divide in remote areas; promoting innovation and entrepreneurship; promoting ICT learning in institutions etc.
 - Despite these commendable achievements, the USPF encounters challenges such as paucity of funds, slow impact rate, low stakeholder buy-in, etc.
 - Flowing from the above, next steps considered by the USPF include innovative partnerships; improving capacity building for beneficiaries; re-scoping of USPF projects; exploring available opportunities for collaboration with OEMs to support usage of end-user devices in unserved and underserved communities; intensifying sensitization and awareness of USPF projects, etc.
 - He concluded by urging stakeholders to take action by addressing connectivity challenges, and passionately affirmed the USPF vision of achieving 1000 BTS in 2030.

2. The second presentation titled 'Universal Service Funds in Africa, Policy Reforms to Enhance Effectiveness,' was delivered by Mr. Kamal Bello Tamawa, Director, Spectrum and Industry Services, Sub-Saharan Africa, GSMA. His presentation focused on insights gained from Universal Service Funds (USFs) around the world, highlighting as follows:
 - The state of mobile internet connectivity in Africa progressed from 18% in 2016 to 27% in 2023, with a connectivity gap of 53% in Nigeria as of 2023.
 - The research spanned over 40 unique countries across Africa.
 - 70% of USPFs in Africa are typically managed by a unit within the National Regulatory Agency, only 18% have a separate USF agency, with 8% being managed by the Government Ministry.
 - 51 out of the 54 countries in Africa have established or plan to establish a USF.
 - Many USFs are susceptible to political interference resulting in underperformance.
 - USFs are primarily funded by the annual revenues of telecoms licensees, ranging from 0.2% in South Africa to 3.5% in Chad.
 - Mobile internet networks and connectivity to schools and hospitals are at the top infrastructure and non-infrastructure projects funded by USFs.
 - The scope of projects that could be funded by USFs is broad, which raises questions about the risk of spreading USF resources too thin, undermining the efforts to close connectivity gaps.
 - When asked whether there was a mechanism to assess the performance of disbursed funds, 78% of surveyed authorities responded affirmatively, while 22% indicated otherwise. In sharp contrast to the service providers' perspective, who majorly responded negatively (89%), while only 11% responded 'Yes'.
 - The importance of adopting best practices to improve performance and guarantee long-term USF plans cannot be over-emphasized.
3. The last presentation delivered by Mrs. Adeyinka Oluwa, Principal Manager, Funding and Subsidy Department, USPF, was an analysis of the responses to the questionnaires distributed to the various stakeholder groups prior to the event. Questions were administered to provide insights on partnerships and collaboration, capacity building, sustainability, challenges hampering the impact of USPF initiatives, challenges encountered during implementation of connectivity initiatives, and suggested metrics for measuring connectivity. Stakeholders' responses were grouped into the following:
 - Collaboration and Partnership.
 - Capacity Building.
 - Sustainability.
 - Challenges, highlighted as infrastructure issues, funding gaps, inflation, and regulatory challenges.

Key Takeaway from Segment Two:

USFs should:

1. Be open to benchmarking best practices from across the world.
2. Improve performance evaluation and monitoring.
3. Apply funds to non-infrastructure areas such as device subsidy and skills training.
4. Extend contributions to non-telcos (voluntary or mandated).

5. Consider an independent governance structure.
6. Explore Infrastructure sharing.
7. Liaise with appropriate authorities on Policy harmonization to tackle multiple regulations.
8. Encourage and promote the adoption of renewable energy through incentives.
9. Implement an evidence-based USF contribution rate.

Actionable Points from Segment Two

1. Set clear and measurable targets for the USF.
2. Prioritise stakeholder consultation.
3. Use a data-led approach to select USF projects.
4. Ensure regular performance monitoring and reporting.
5. Establish project costing system that accounts for overheads (OPEX).
6. Financial Strategies: Explore alternative funding mechanisms, blended finance models, incentives for high-cost regions, and extended subsidies.
7. Build capacity and develop skills within the USF.
8. Engage with local communities on the benefits of connectivity.
9. Deploy digital skills training within communities.
10. Deploy affordable devices.

DELIBERATIONS:

SEGMENT THREE

PANEL DISCUSSION

The Permanent Secretary, FMCIDE set the stage for the panel discussion by delivering a synopsis titled ‘*Exploring Sustainable Strategies for Expanding Connectivity through Stakeholder Collaboration in Nigeria's Telecommunications Sector*’. Riding on speeches and presentations delivered so far, he highlighted the importance of leveraging the strengths of the Government which must continue to provide an enabling environment through progressive policies, efficient spectrum allocation, and a regulatory framework that fosters innovation; Private Sector to bring the capital, technology, and expertise needed to deploy and maintain telecommunications infrastructure; Development Partners who can offer critical funding, technical support, and capacity-building initiatives that drive impactful results; and Local Communities whose buy-in and participation are essential for the success of any connectivity initiative. He urged the panel to focus on Public-Private Partnerships, Innovative Financing Models, Technology-Driven Approaches, Inclusive Business Models and Renewable Energy Solutions to explore sustainable strategies for expanding connectivity.

1. Setting the Stage

The panel discussion was moderated by Ms. Miracle Opeyemi Ogunbowale, and brought together esteemed panelists, including:

- I. Dr. Hammajam Ahmed Adamu, the Special Adviser on ICT, E-Governance, and Policy, Adamawa State Government.

- II. Dr Isa Usman. (Ph.D, M.Eng, B.Eng) Associate Director, Network Operations at GICL, subsidiary of IHS Towers Limited.
- III. Dr. Tola Yusuf. (PhD, Pfd, MBA, FICA, FIMC, FCE) Visionary Leader in Digital Transformation.
- IV. Mrs. Olufunke Monisola Alabi, General Manager, Business Intelligence and Customer Value Management, MTN Nigeria Communications.
- V. Mr. Ali Drissa Badiel, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Area Representative for West Africa.
- VI. Mr. Osondu C. Nwokoro, Director, Initiative for Digital Inclusion.

2. Key Discussion Points

The panelists provided insightful perspectives on the challenges and opportunities in expanding connectivity in Nigeria. Key themes included:

- I. Infrastructure Development and Optimization: The need for large-scale investments in connectivity solutions, as well as the importance of ensuring uptake of infrastructure deployed.
- II. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): The importance of collaboration between the government, telecom operators, equipment manufacturers and development agencies.
- III. Digital Literacy and Capacity Building: Ensuring that citizens, especially in rural areas, are equipped to leverage digital technologies.
- IV. Regulatory and Policy Interventions: The importance of developing government policies that foster an enabling environment for digital expansion.
- V. Community Engagement: The importance of developing targeted solutions adapted to meet community-specific needs, and the emphasis on community ownership of projects.
- VI. Sustainability: Exploring renewable energy solutions and innovative business models to ensure long-term connectivity solutions.

3. Questions and Notable Responses

Question One: What are the key barriers affecting connectivity in unserved and underserved areas?

Responses:

- I. Inadequate policies and institutional support, feeding into the need to work with NCC to facilitate appropriate policies and regulatory interventions such as licencing structures, frequency concessions etc. to enable deployment of connectivity in unserved and underserved areas.
- II. Infrastructure deficit, which necessitates the need for cheaper subsidy.
- III. The fact that most unserved and underserved communities are low income areas limits disposable income and reduces the adoption of deployed infrastructure in those areas.
- IV. Lack of economic viability in unserved and underserved areas results in low returns on investment, making companies reluctant to operate there.
- V. Lack of investment to incentivize service providers to deploy services;

- VI. Lack of alignment between stakeholders leading to fragmented efforts and isolated decision-making.
- VII. Political influence over site selection for deployment.
- VIII. Some Communities create challenges for the deployment of connectivity projects.
- IX. The fact that the viability of Operational Expenditure (OPEX) and Capital Expenditure (CAPEX) needs to be reassessed in light of recent price surges to incentivize service providers.

Question Two: How can collaboration be harnessed to improve connectivity?

Responses:

- I. Benchmark with NCC and ensure that Working Groups are established in USPF to ensure that connectivity challenges are identified and properly addressed, and to inform strategic stakeholder partnerships.
- II. Conduct a comprehensive risk assessment of both the demand-side and supply-side of digital inclusion to address barriers to the adoption of connectivity; and to enhance policy decisions.

Question Three: What is the role of community involvement/engagement in driving sustainability?

Response: Involving communities during the planning phase of projects not only establishes a sense of ownership, but establishes trust between the USPF and respective communities.

Question Four: What are the specific policies that States can implement to ensure rural connectivity?

Response: Interventions such as the removal of Right of Way (RoW) fees implemented by Adamawa State is aimed at encouraging connectivity. Additionally, Adamawa State is considering collaborative strategies with key stakeholders to expand connectivity, and explore the improvement of business cases to empower service providers to make returns on investment.

Question Five: What are the factors that contribute to key success stories in relation to long-term sustainability in unserved and underserved areas?

Responses:

- I. Innovative aggressive solutions.
- II. Ability to surmount bureaucracies.
- III. Unified vision across key stakeholders to collate resources and channel same towards a common goal.
- IV. The ability of CAPEX and OPEX to accommodate the three A's (accessibility, affordability and availability) of connectivity.
- V. Inclusion of local Chiefs and financial institutions in collaborative sessions.
- VI. Domestication of Radio Access Networks (RANs) to reduce dependence on foreign exchange.

Question Six: What are the factors that hinder Base Transceiver Station (BTS) deployment?

Responses:

- I. The high costs of building BTSs make them susceptible to political influence, as politicians who fund them often dictate deployment locations. This creates a scenario that lacks sustainable business case and long-term value.
- II. Prioritizing generic deployment over meeting targeted community needs.
- III. Lack of innovation.

Question Seven: What are the factors that hinder the uptake of BTS connectivity?

Responses:

- I. Low income equals no phones to access connectivity.
- II. Low literacy.
- III. Lack of awareness.

Question Eight: What are examples of innovative solutions or international practices that you believe will benefit USPF?

Response: The ITU Universal Financing Efficiency Toolkit which has several components provides connectivity, adoption, innovation and inclusion pillars that could provide useful guidance to the USPF. The USPF should consider creating incentives that will encourage its implementers to key into one or more of these pillars. Additionally, the Toolkit provides innovative financing models that will add value to the funding trajectory being explored by the USPF.

Question Nine: How can Civil Service Organisations (CSOs) drive awareness and adoption to ensure greater adoption of connectivity projects?

Responses:

- I. There are various CSOs on both global and national levels who can play different roles in awareness creation, such as monitoring the activities of governmental agencies regarding the implementation of rural connectivity, grass-root awareness etc.
- II. Advocate for the implementation of effective policies that enhance connectivity. An example of an ongoing advocacy is the development of policies in support of community networks.
- III. Educate the community on digital literacy and buy-in of projects.

Question Ten: What are the best approaches to implementing community-driven solutions to ensure sustainability?

Responses:

- I. CSOs can play a role in driving sensitization and education.
- II. Recommend and advocate for models that have been successful in other parts of the world, such as the Community Networks model which has been implemented successfully in some parts of Africa, South Asia and Latin America.
- III. Adopted and adapted models must be accompanied by incentives, licencing frameworks with reduced fees, free frequency, and subsidization of wholesale bandwidth capacity.

- IV. Consider the structure of respective communities before establishing community networks, as well as sensitizing the community to understand and buy into the project.
- V. Informatively, a business model that looks at how community networks can run sustainably in unserved and underserved areas, has been developed in Nigeria and is pending review.

Question Eleven: What steps can be employed by the government and private partners to drive meaningful connectivity in unserved and underserved areas?

Response: Explore Public-Private Partnerships to enable long-term sustainability.

Question Twelve: What immediate steps can the government, private partners and development partners take to drive meaningful connectivity progress?

Answer: Digital Literacy: Engage the community by educating them on how their products can reach a global audience and how local trade can expand beyond borders. Once they understand the benefits, revenue will follow, making expansion profitable for everyone involved.

Question Thirteen: What immediate next steps should the government take to expand connectivity?

Responses:

- I. The government should conduct a global benchmark and collaborate with the private sector to develop clear, comprehensive plans outlining achievable objectives and effective models for connectivity expansion.
- II. Develop strategies to boost the economy, this will enable communities to increase their disposable income, as well as afford returns on investments for companies.
- III. Increase value addition such as incentivising inclusion of innovative apps on phones.

4. Audience Engagement:

The panel discussion saw active participation from the audience as follows:

Mr. Tunji Alabi, MD/CEO, Infratel Limited, sought to know why connectivity is being prioritized over impact since connectivity in itself does not guarantee access to unserved and underserved communities. He recommended collaboration between USPF and its beneficiaries in providing services, focusing on innovative solutions that ensure targeted output and impact.

Mr. Patrick O. Patrick, COO, Baube Solutions Limited, suggested that striking a balance between the technical requirements of projects; political stakeholder interest; and community needs is critical.

Engr. Jude Odoh, MD/ CEO, O’jive Network Solutions Limited, recommended the need to prioritize and tackle community vandalism of telecoms infrastructure by engaging community pillars.

5. Conclusion and Key Recommendations from Segment Three:

The panel concluded with the following key recommendations:

1. Strengthen community engagement.
2. Collaboration with communities.
3. Engagement and advocacy, essential to achieve impactful connectivity.
4. Development of policies.
5. Explore alternative and innovative funding mechanisms.
6. Collaboration across key stakeholders.
7. Benchmark with NCC to establish Working Groups.
8. Incentivize investment in renewable energy solutions.
9. Aggressive and innovative solutions.
10. Rethink current models being implemented.

6. Actionable Points from Segment Three:

1. Community Engagement:
 - Educate communities before project deployment to understand and buy into projects;
 - Sensitize communities on the benefits of digital inclusion;
 - Equip communities with requisite digital skills to drive connectivity up-take.
2. Collaboration with communities:
 - Design projects with end-users in mind, i.e. drive technology according to the nomenclature of the community.
 - Involve communities in the planning phase of projects.
 - Encourage communities to take ownership of deployed projects.
 - Establish community networks models.
 - Consider the structure of respective communities before establishing community networks.
3. Engagement with key stakeholders:
 - Invite local chiefs and financial institutions to future engagement sessions.
4. Development of Policies:
 - Liaise with the FMCIDE and NCC to ensure that essential policies and regulatory interventions are established.
 - Identified policies include tax incentives for connectivity projects deployed in unserved and underserved areas; policies establishing community networks to include incentives, free frequencies, and subsidization of wholesale bandwidth capacity; and policies that incentivize the use of renewable energy solutions.
 - Collaborate with CSOs to drive the implementation of effective policies.

5. Exploring innovative funding mechanisms:
 - Review the Universal Service Financing Efficiency Toolkit to identify and implement key relevant components.
6. Collaboration across key stakeholders:
 - Develop comprehensive plans outlining achievable objectives and effective models for connectivity expansion, to inform effective engagement with relevant stakeholders.
 - Work with MNOs to detect access gaps, aimed at reducing generic deployment and meeting targeted needs.
 - Engage with politicians to ensure strategic and economically viable infrastructure placement.
7. Benchmark with NCC to establish Working Groups:
 - Establish Working Groups in USPF to study connectivity challenges that will inform targeted solutions.
8. Investment in renewable energy solutions:
 - Promote the usage of renewable energy in the implementation of USPF projects.

SEGMENT FOUR

In the final segment, attendees were divided into three (3) groups (A, B & C) to discuss the key strategies suggested by the various stakeholder groups in response to the questionnaires. The objective was to discuss the strategies and formulate actionable points. Following engaging and thought-provoking deliberations, the groups reached the following consensus:

GROUP A - FUNDING MECHANISM

1. **Strategy One:** Exploring diverse funding sources, including local and international sources.
Actionable Points:
 - Change focus from connectivity in itself (infrastructure-based) to connectivity as a means to an end (impact-based) to attract funding.
 - Explore local funding sources before moving into the international space.
 - Explore blended finance models that combine USPF resources with international funding.
 - Develop best marketing strategies to attract funding.
2. **Strategy Two:** Ensuring efficient use of resources:
Actionable Points:
 - Implement strict cost control measures and optimize resource allocation.
 - Create monitoring, control and evaluation frameworks to ensure the effective use of the resources.

- A percentage of funding should be tied to performance metrics such as network uptime, coverage, and user adoption.
- 3. **Strategy Three:** Providing additional incentives for high-cost areas.
Actionable Point:
 - Create comprehensive incentive packages.
- 4. **Strategy Four:** Introduce performance-based incentives to encourage efficient delivery.
- 5. **Strategy Five:** Introduce co-funding models.
Actionable Points:
 - Introduce varied solutions/frameworks to service high-priority areas such as USPF covering a higher percentage of costs in high-priority areas.
- 6. **Strategy Six:** Increase OPEX Subsidy:
Actionable Point:
 - Increase OPEX subsidy for up to 3 years for locations that are not commercially viable, hinged on KPIs/breakeven point.
- 7. **Strategy Seven:** Renewable energy adoption.
Actionable Point: Provide subsidies or incentives for renewable energy adoption such as solar etc.

GROUP B - PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

- 1. **Strategy One:** Implementing cost-sharing models and engaging in public-private partnerships (PPPs) to share financial burden:
Actionable Points:
 - Structure sharing model to be milestone-based, distributable between the USPF and key players in the industry such as MNOs, OEMs etc.
 - Engage with relevant authorities to review tax rates in line with current realities and implement tax incentives or holidays for service providers deploying projects in unserved and underserved areas, thereby alleviating financial burdens on private partners.
 - Develop clear frameworks for establishing PPPs to ensure transparency and accountability.
- 2. **Strategy Two:** Implementing frequent community engagement.
Actionable Point:
 - Institute impactful community awareness focusing on educating the community towards community ownership.
 - Support community-owned and operated networks to reduce costs and increase local ownership.

3. **Strategy Three:** Working with industry associations to advocate for connectivity reforms that facilitate faster deployment.

Actionable Points:

- Engage with advocacy groups through formal collaborations and roundtable discussions.
- Establish joint initiatives with advocacy groups, such as creating a steering committee that includes village heads, community representatives, and key stakeholders.
- Leverage Advocacy Networks to amplify public awareness, mobilize grassroots support with strategies such as communicating in their local languages, and provide evidence-based recommendations to policymakers, ensuring regulatory decisions that prioritize faster and more inclusive connectivity deployment.

4. **Strategy Four:** Implementing alternative energy solutions to ensure consistent power supply.

Actionable Points:

- Conduct comprehensive power audits of the BTS (active infrastructure) to ensure appropriate dimensioning of power consumption to mitigate power wastage.
- Migrate to systems that require minimal maintenance.

5. **Strategy Five:** Conducting environmental impact assessments to mitigate risks.

Actionable Points:

- Facilitate the enactment of the draft Regulations on e-waste prepared by the NCC to regulate e-waste management.
- Encourage key players in the industry to come up with strategies for e-waste.

6. **Strategy Six:** Harmonization and Policy formulation to ensure practicality and relevance.

Actionable Points:

- Engage key stakeholders across different government agencies to harmonize laws and tackle multiple regulations.
- Engage with key industry stakeholders to ensure a more flexible and innovation-friendly framework, through implementing crucial regulations and policies, and upgrading existing ones to reflect current technological, economic and social realities.
- Support the revision of the Type Approval Regulations by the NCC to accommodate emerging technologies that do not necessarily require equipment approval, ensuring a more flexible and innovation-friendly regulatory framework.

7. **Strategy Seven:** Partnering with international organizations to access technical expertise and funding.

Actionable Points:

- Identify strategic areas for collaboration by assessing connectivity gaps and infrastructure needs to detect where technical expertise and funding are required.
- Align priorities with their objectives such as digital transformation, broadband expansion etc.

- Request expert consultations, technical studies, or policy advisory services from these organizations.
 - Enroll USPF staff in ITU training programs and World Bank-funded capacity-building initiatives.
 - Apply for World Bank grants or ITU-sponsored funding opportunities for digital transformation projects.
 - Partner with telecom operators and advocacy groups to co-develop funding applications.
8. **Strategy Eight:** Encouraging infrastructure sharing among telecom operators to reduce costs and avoid duplication.
Actionable Point:
- Develop and implement an infrastructure-sharing model that aligns with companies' capacity and revenue, ensuring equitable access, cost efficiency, and sustainable network expansion.
9. **Strategy Nine:** Promoting open-access models for fibre-optic networks and towers.
Actionable Point:
- Support Policies such as Fiber to Tower/Dig Once policy (fiber-line sharing)
10. **Strategy Ten:** Partnering with device manufacturers to provide smartphones and routers.
Actionable Point:
- Establish partnerships with OEMs focused on rural roll-out of affordable devices with local content inclusion clauses.
11. **Strategy Eleven:** Maintaining strong relationships with the central government to streamline processes aimed at meaningful impact.
Actionable Point: Consider engaging politicians to own projects.

GROUP C - CAPACITY BUILDING

1. **Strategy One:** Community Engagement:
Actionable Points:
- Involve community leaders and stakeholders in the planning and implementation process of projects.
 - Promote project ownership by involving local rulers in the community.
 - Engage the media to sensitize the community in their dialect.
2. **Strategy Two:** Develop training programs to build local talent and skills:
Actionable Points:
- Identify a USPF connectivity champion in each community.
 - Obtain a list of scheduled events organized by respective communities and handshake on how to collaborate to promote awareness.

3. **Strategy Three:** Conduct awareness campaigns to educate communities about the benefits of connectivity.

Actionable Points:

- Obtain a list of scheduled events organized by respective communities and handshake on how to collaborate to promote awareness.
- Develop engagement on a case-by-case basis for targeted solutions and meaningful impact.

4. **Strategy Four:** Partner with NGOs and educational institutions to promote digital inclusion.

Actionable Point:

- Partner with OEMs to explore the provision of subsidized smartphones.

5. **Strategy Five:** Encourage community ownership and participation to ensure sustainability.

Actionable Points:

- Set up trainings for communities that can translate into income earning such as e-commerce and how to use social media for business.
- Even spread training across the country for tertiary, secondary and primary institutions, and train the trainers using instructors in their local dialect.
- Build digital lab centres domiciled in computer engineering departments across institutions, to facilitate the development of software and ICT equipment.
- Subsidized internet plans or PAYG options for low-income earners to facilitate social and digital inclusion.
- Explore within NCC on subsidized licensing and spectrum rate.
- Explore the provision of special tariff plans for unserved and underserved communities.

6. **Strategy Six:** Cyber Security and Privacy.

Actionable Point:

- Incorporate training on data privacy and cybersecurity in all awareness and sensitization campaigns.

7. **Strategy Seven:** Physical Security.

Actionable Point:

- Engage with community leaders on the provision of local security.

CLOSURE:

The session provided valuable insights into capacity building, collaboration and funding mechanisms, and fostered meaningful dialogue among stakeholders. Through presentations, panel discussions, and break-out sessions, participants examined the challenges, shared best practices, and proposed actionable solutions to enhance connectivity in unserved and underserved areas across the country.

A consensus emerged on the need to explore alternative sources of income, enhance collaboration, develop policies, engage communities and optimize infrastructure.

Key Resolutions were collated and delivered by Mrs. Somto Nwigwe, Principal Manager, Legal Services Department, USPF, as follows:

Communique:

1. Facilitate the development of policies and regulatory interventions to incentivize the deployment of infrastructure to unserved and underserved areas in Nigeria.
2. Explore Financial Strategies to include alternative funding mechanisms, blended finance models, incentives for high-cost regions, and extended subsidies.
3. Set clear and measurable targets for connectivity expansion.
4. Prioritise stakeholder consultation and engagement to achieve seamless collaboration across key players in the industry.
5. Benchmark with NCC to establish working groups within the USPF to address connectivity challenges and identify areas for collaboration.
6. Prioritize community engagement and education.
7. Ensure regular performance monitoring and reporting.
8. Build capacity and develop skills within USPF.
9. Rebrand itself to align with USFs around the world.
10. Re-think the current project models of the USPF.

Next Steps:

1. Community Engagement and Capacity Building:

- Conduct pre-deployment education and awareness campaigns.
- Equip communities with requisite digital skills to drive connectivity uptake.
- Involve local leaders and communities in project planning and ownership.
- Develop community networks tailored to local needs.
- Partner with NGOs and educational institutions to drive digital inclusion.
- Identify community-based connectivity champions for sustained engagement.
- Engage with community leaders on the provision of local security.
- Train instructors in local dialects to ensure effective knowledge transfer.
- Incorporate training on data privacy and cybersecurity in all awareness and sensitization campaigns.

2. Collaboration with communities:

- Build strategic partnerships with communities;
- Establish community networks.

3. Engagement with key stakeholders: Expand the range of participant groups in future sessions to ensure broader representation and inclusivity.

4. Liaise with FMCIDE and NCC to facilitate the development and upgrade of Laws and Policies to reflect current economic and technological realities: Identified interventions include:

- Tax incentives;
- Policies that incentivize the use of renewable energy solutions;

- Intervention on subsidized licensing and spectrum rate;
 - Facilitate E-waste Regulation;
 - Policies that promote open-access models for fibre-optic networks and towers.
 - Comprehensive regulatory intervention package that will include tax breaks, custom duties waivers, reduction on regulatory fees etc.
 - Frameworks for community networks.
5. Explore innovative funding mechanisms:
- Examine the Universal Service Financing Efficiency Toolkit to identify and implement key relevant components.
 - Partnering with international organizations to access funding.
 - Explore local funding sources before moving into the international space.
 - Serve as a focal point to consolidate local funding for rural connectivity to maximize value.
6. Collaboration across key stakeholders:
- Develop comprehensive plans outlining achievable objectives and effective models for connectivity expansion, to inform effective engagement with relevant stakeholders.
 - Work with MNOs to detect access gaps, aimed at reducing generic deployment and meeting targeted needs.
 - Engage with politicians to ensure strategic and economically viable infrastructure placement.
 - Partnering with device manufacturers to provide smartphones and routers.
 - Implement infrastructure-sharing models amongst service providers.
 - Collaborate with CSOs to drive the implementation of effective policies.
 - Leverage Advocacy Networks to amplify public awareness, mobilize grassroots support with strategies such as communicating in their local languages, and provide evidence-based recommendations to policymakers, ensuring regulatory decisions that prioritize faster and more inclusive connectivity deployment.
 - Establish joint initiatives with advocacy groups, such as creating steering committees that includes village heads, community representatives, and key stakeholders to ensure inclusive decision-making and effective implementation of connectivity projects.
 - Identify strategic areas for collaboration with international organizations by assessing connectivity gaps and infrastructure needs to detect where technical expertise and funding are required.
 - Explore PPPs.
7. Re-think current project and implementation models:
- Structure resource/finance sharing model to be milestone-based, distributable between the USPF and key players in the industry such as MNOs, OEMs etc.
 - Develop clear frameworks for establishing PPPs to ensure transparency and accountability.
 - Increase OPEX subsidy for up to 3 years for locations that are not commercially viable. This should be hinged on KPIs/breakeven points.

- Incorporate the usage of renewable energy in the implementation of all USPF projects.
 - Introduce diverse co-funding models tailored to different community categories, including frameworks that entail covering a higher percentage of costs in high-priority areas, by USPF.
 - Introduce performance-based incentives to encourage efficient delivery.
 - Implement strict cost control measures to optimize resource allocation, set Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure the impact of the injected resources.
 - Create monitoring, control and evaluation frameworks to ensure the effective use of the resources.
 - Ensure effective distribution of the available technology or infrastructure to positively impact the various communities and cities.
 - Build digital lab centres domiciled in Computer Engineering Departments in institutions, to facilitate the development of software and ICT equipment.
 - Develop PAYG or subsidized internet plans for low-income earners.
 - Provide income-generating digital training (e-commerce, social media marketing).
8. Benchmark with NCC and establish Working Groups in USPF to study connectivity challenges that will inform targeted solutions.
9. Benchmark with USF best practices, the USPF should:
- Rebrand itself to attract funding and technical expertise.
 - Set clear and measurable targets for itself.
 - Use a data-led approach to select projects.
 - Build capacity and develop skills within the USPF.

Vote Of Thanks:

The Chairman, Stakeholder Engagement Committee, Mr Cliff-Eribo Azibanato, HSCPM Department, USPF, expressed gratitude to the event's co-hosts, ITU and UK FCDO, as well as all stakeholders for their invaluable contributions and active engagement before and during the event, adding that all insights and collaboration gathered will be instrumental in shaping the future of sustainable connectivity solutions for unserved and underserved communities. He concluded by reaffirming USPF's commitment to sustained partnerships with key stakeholders in pursuit of the shared vision of expanding universal access and bridging the digital divide.

Departure:

As the event came to a close, participants expressed appreciation for the insightful discussions and networking opportunities. Attendees gradually departed, reaffirming their commitment to continued collaboration in advancing universal access initiatives. The organizing committee ensured a smooth departure process, with final exchanges of goodwill.