RETOOLING THE UNIVERSAL SERVICE PROVISION FUND

A POLICY BRIEF

CENTRE FOR INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT

MacArthur Foundation

RETOOLING

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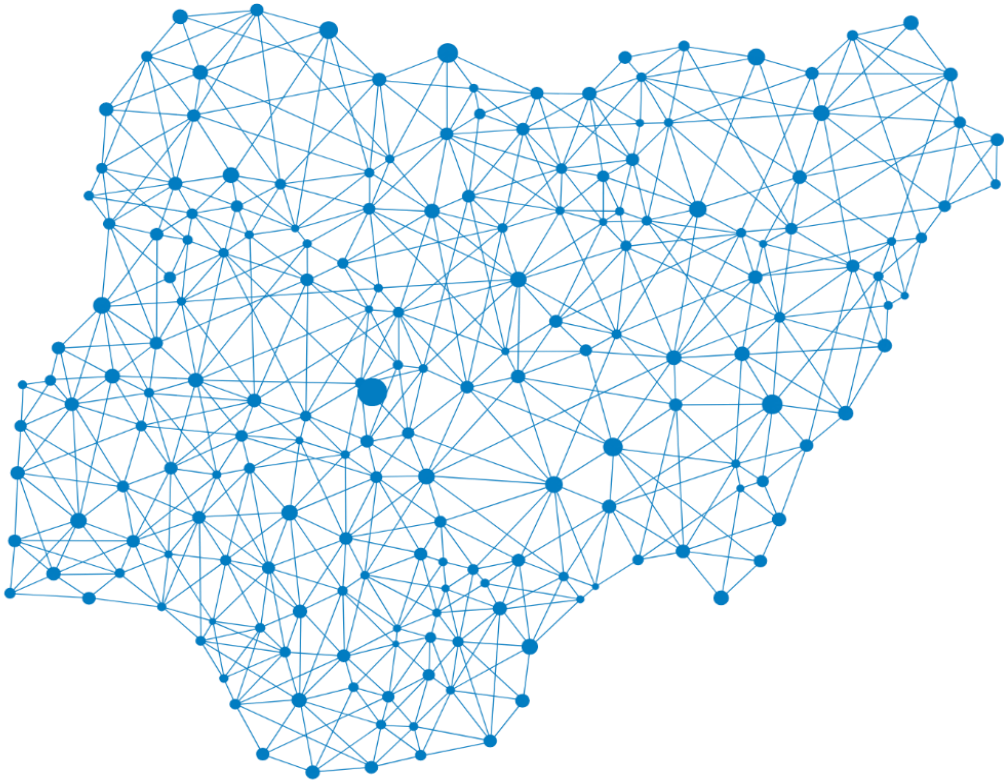

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This Policy Brief came out of the community reporting component of the **Mobilizing and Catalyzing Citizens Voice for Accountable Election and Governance in Nigeria** project supported by the MacArthur Foundation. The overarching strategy of the project whose stated purpose is "to strengthen accountability, anti-corruption, and social inclusion leading up to the 2023 general elections and beyond in Nigeria" is about creating and amplifying voice, especially relying on media, both conventional and online. Of course, the conventional itself has also gone online. For this reason, voice activation and amplification require citizens to access the digital space. It was in the context that we were led to understand that many Nigerians are living in what officially are designated as unserved and underserved areas, having no access to digital space because of lack of connectivity. The Universal Service Provision Fund (USPF) was established to coordinate government efforts in addressing this connectivity challenge. We thought it was important to look at its operations and performance from the perspectives of promoting voice inclusion as well as accountability.

We thank the Foundation for the generous grant that not only allowed for the critical research to be undertaken on the operations and performance of the USPF but also for the publication of the resulting Policy Brief, whose objective is to drive the advocacy for greater fidelity with the mandates of the USPF as well as accountability to the public in form of value for money in its impact,

We thank all those who contributed in the community reporting programme of the project which furnished the raw materials upon which this policy brief was developed. We also thank the Project Team at CITAD as well as the wider CITAD's family for their various contributions to both the project and to the making of the policy brief.

INTRODUCTION

Like many developing countries, the cyberspace in Nigeria is characterized by multi-layered digital divide. It manifest as the unequal access to and use of digital technologies by the different genders, age groups, geographies, urban/rural inequality, etc. Global cables have their landing in Lagos, making Lagos as the most highly connected city in the country and as you go further inwards away from Lagos, capacity decreases with the extreme north being the most poorly connected. For instance, access of fibre networks within 5 kilometers of the population currently stands at an average of approximately 39% reach, with a high of 85% in Lagos State and a low of 12% in Jigawa State[1]

The Universal Service Provision Fund (USPF) has indicated that as of 2022, there were 97 clusters of what it termed as 'underserved and unserved' communities which are digitally excluded. It estimates that these clusters have a combine population of about 27.91million people[2]. However, the number of unconnected Nigerians is much more than the number of people who live within the referred clusters of excluded.

Statistics from the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC) shows that there are about 132,907,001 internet connections in the country by September 2024[3], much of which is based on 3G. Broadband penetration stands at about 41.56% by September 2024[4]. Indeed, the National Broadband Plan says about 4G coverage in Nigeria: "In particular 4G coverage is only available in major cities and state capitals with less than 40% coverage of the population as at Q4, 2019"[5]

Many people are unconnected not just because of infrastructure constrains but because they cannot afford connectivity and digital goods. Since we do not manufacture ICT goods in the country, naturally, these come with high prices especially as the value of the national currency keeps depreciating in comparison to the dollar. Cost of connectivity is also high not only because infrastructure is inadequate but also because payment for bandwidth is in dollar to outside suppliers. The National Broadband Plan says about affordability: "The challenge with this affordability benchmark in Nigeria's context is, given high income disparities, the median monthly income of N19,460 ($54) is much lower than

[1] Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy, 2020: Nigerian National Broadband Plan 2020 – 2025, Abuja, page 20

[2] https://www.uspf.gov.ng/clusters-of-ict-gap

[3] https://ncc.gov.ng/statistics-reports/industry-overview

[4] https://ncc.gov.ng/statistics-reports/industry-overview

[5] Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy, 2020: Nigerian National Broadband Plan 2020 – 2025, Abuja, page 20

average income levels of N60,000 ($167) per month. Thus, internet bundles at these price points remain largely unaffordable for the majority of Nigerians"[6]

In line with the global best practice, the government in 2006 set up the Universal Service Provision Fund (USFP) with a mandate to help promote digital inclusion in the country.

THE CONCEPT OF UNIVERSAL SERVICE FUND

In the early days of telecommunication, telephone was restricted to the rich but this slowly began to change, especially with introduction of digital technology. It was this sort of attitude that made a former Nigerian Minister of Communications to say that 'telephone was not for the poor" in responding to a journalist question about what his ministry was doing to make telephone services more affordable in the country.

The push to universal access to telecommunication services was not one borne originally out of humanitarian concerns but largely because government and private sector (which had taken over the provision of telecommunication services from government monopolies) saw that universal access was both profitable and socially desirable. This was later to be consolidated when the distinction between telecommunication and access to internet collapsed and the United Nations issued its clarion call that "no one should be left behind digitally".

Historically, two factors limited access to and benefit of telecommunication/internet. These are infrastructure limitation and the poor economic situation of many people. These correspond to what have come to be known as availability and affordability. Availability refers to the situation in which infrastructure is within the reach of people and they should not have to put additional efforts to extend it while affordability is the ability of people to be able to pay for services and of access without injuring or sacrificing other critical needs such as food, education, shelter or health. While availability is determined by the level of infrastructure of telecommunication in a given geography, which is outside the control of the users, affordability is relative and dependent on the individual level of income. As it is relative, affordability can change with time and can also be easily adjusted by pricing or subsidies to the service providers.

The concept of universal service access fund came as state-directed corporate social responsibility focused on collecting tax from telecommunication license holders to be used to provide access to people who for one reason or the other could not access telecommunication/internet service or subsidize services, or those who are poor and cannot afford to pay for market value of the services. Since often, the reason infrastructure does not reach certain communities is that providers estimate these areas as not profitable either because the people are too poor to generate enough traffic that could

[6] Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy, 2020: Nigerian National Broadband Plan 2020 – 2025, Abuja, page 27

lead to return on business or their population is too sparse, which also means they cannot generate adequate tele-traffic. Sometimes, it is also due to the fact that the communities could be in hard to reach areas, necessitating an additional expenditure over and above the normal. In this case, government could provide subsidy to providers to extend infrastructure to unserved communities. Where the key challenge is affordability, it can provide subsidy for providers to reduce prices of their services. In reality, a mixed range of strategies are used to address the twin problems of affordability and availability.

Although a few countries have had long experience of operating universal service fund, the concept of universal service provision fund received additional momentum from two related developments. One of the outcomes of the World Submit of the Information Society (WSIS) was the agreement to create the Digital Solidarity Fund which was to be funded a 2% profit of public procurement contracts. The decision to establish this at global level made a number of countries that did not have their local Universal Service Access Fund to establish one. The other development was a continuing commitment by the UN, especially through the ITU and the Internet Governance Forum, to push for strategies to bridge the digital divide, urging more governments to implement universal service provision commitment. Nigeria's commitment to universal service access came in between the two rounds of the WSIS in 2003, although the actual establishment of the Fund could have to wait until three years later.

THE UNIVERSAL SERVICE PROVISION FUND (USFP)

The USPF derives its existence and mandate from the Nigerian Communication Act of , No 19 of 2003 which provides for the establishment of the USPF with the mandate in pursuance of section 112 (1) of the act which provides that the Commission, that is the NCC, shall "consider, design and determine a system which shall promote the widespread availability and usage of network services and applications services throughout Nigeria by encouraging the installation of network facilities and the provision for network services and applications services to institutions and in unserved, underserved areas or for underserved groups within the community ("Universal Service Provision" (USP). The specific function of the USPF as provided in section 118 (1) are[7]:

(a) receiving applications for loans and grants from eligible persons such as community-based communications operators;

(b) reviewing the applications in paragraph (a) of this sub-section and making recommendations to the USP Board as to which applications should be funded;

(c) liaising with other departments of the Commission in processing licenses for funded applications;

[7] Nigerian Communication Act (CAP N97, LFN 2004)

(d) providing loan recipients and grantees with technical and managerial assistance, such as resolution of equipment vendor issues and setting up of billing systems;

(e) evaluation of project performance and effecting such actions as may be necessary to ensure that loan recipients and grantees meet objectives for network expansion and provision of service;

(f) enforcing standards for quality of service in rural and underserved areas set by the USP Board;

(g) collecting USP assessments and loan repayments and paying such loan repayments into the USP Fund;

(h) evaluating the effectiveness of the USP in meeting policy goals as set by Government and USP Board;

(i) facilitating collaboration between activities that are funded by the USP Fund and other infrastructure and development efforts; and

(j) liaising between USP Board and USP Fund Managers that will be appointed pursuant to section 119 of this Act

To carry out its mandate the act provides that it should be funded as follows:

(a) such monies as may be specifically appropriated to the USP Fund from time to time by the National Assembly;

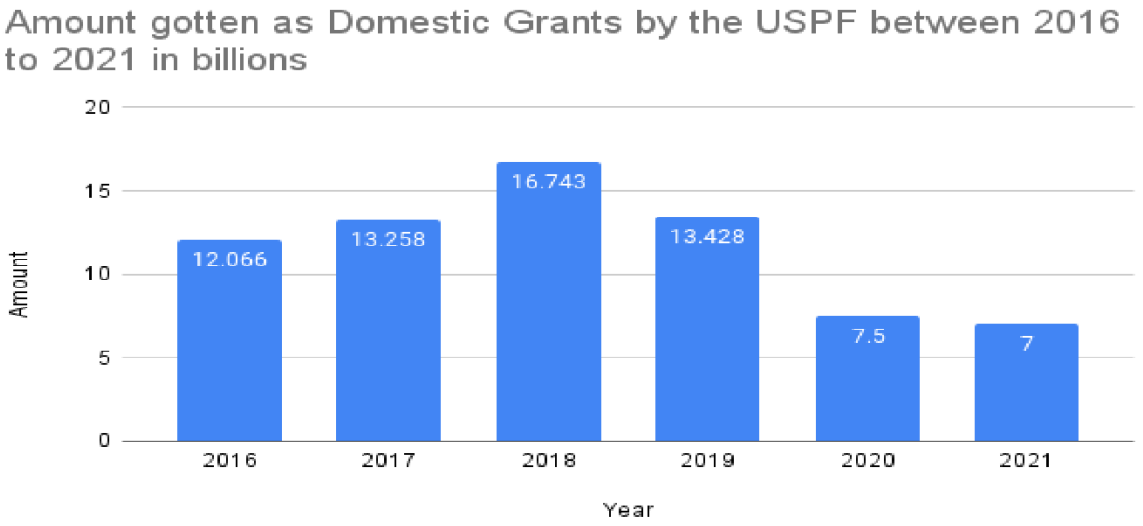
(b) contributions from the Commission based on a portion of the annual levies paid to the Commission by licensees; and

(c) gifts, loans, aids, and such other assets that may from time to time specifically accrue to the USP Fund.

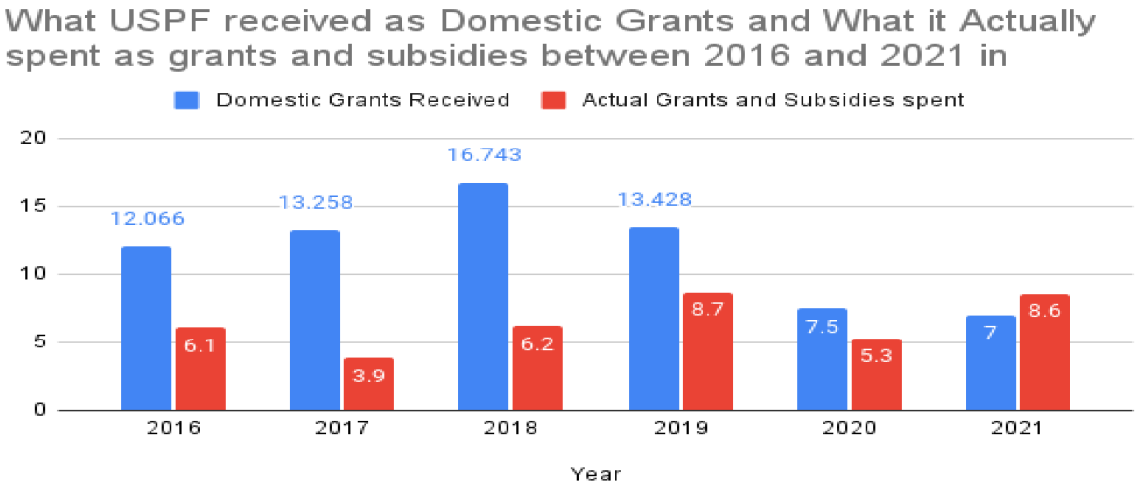
The USPF is institutionally domiciled within the NCC but its Board is chaired by the Minister of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy.

FUNDING OF THE USPF

The USPF has been funded mainly from the license tax charged all telecommunication license holders in the country. Between 2016 and 2021, it received the sum of N69.995 billion as domestic grants. Table 1 shows the amount of grants it received per year between the period.



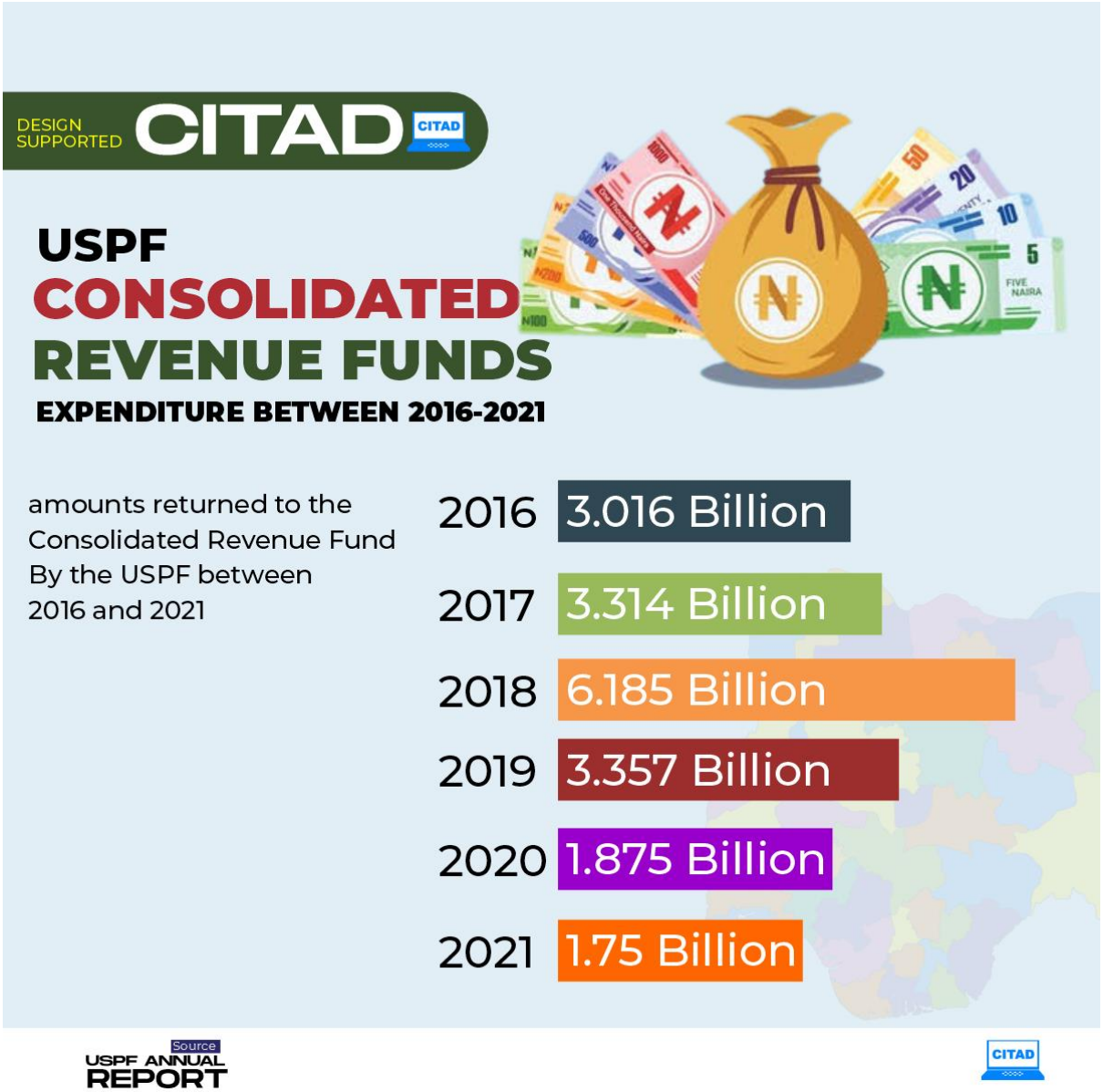
Between 2016 and 2021, the USPF spent the sum of N5.399 billion on its personnel cost. The personnel cost grew considerably between 2016 and 2021, rising from N806 million to N1.281 billion in 2021.



Source: BudgetIT[8]

[8] BudgetIT, undated, Universal Service Provision Fund Operational and Fund Management Desk Analysis

In spite of the large number of areas that the USPF has defined as either unserved or underserved, yearly the USPF has been remitting back funds to the consolidated revenue fund as utilized. For instance, between 2016 and 2021, USPF returned the sum of N19.497 billion to the Consolidated Revenue Fund coffers of the federal government. The yearly return to the consolidated revenue is illustrated in the picture below .



THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE USPF

The USPF has now existed for close to two decades. During this period, it has executed many projects and interventions across the country. The projects are classified into the following:

1. Connectivity Programme
2. Accelerated Mobile Phone Expansion (BTS)
3. BAP - Bandwidth Aggregation Project
4. Campus Connect Project
5. RUBI - Rural Broadband Initiative
6. CRC - Community Resource Centres
7. DNC - Digital Nigeria Centers
8. E-Accessibility Project
9. E-Health Project
10. Information Resource Centres (E-Library)
11. Local Applications/Content Deployment
12. TIDC- Tertiary Institution Digital Centers

The table 2 summarizes the number of the various projects it executed across the country.

S/N	Project/Intervention	Total Number
1.	Community Resource Centres	93
2.	Digital Nigeria Centres	2,301
3.	e-Accessibility Centres	96
4.	e-Health Centres	33
5.	e-Library	89
6.	Local Content Development Centres	387
7.	Tertiary Institution Digital Centres	229
8.	Rural Broadband Initiatives	72
9.	Bandwidth Aggregation Project	

Compiled from USPF website (www.uspf.gov.ng)

Ideally, these interventions should impact positively in addressing connectivity gaps in the country. However, in spite of the fact that among it is key principle, the USPF has defined its geographical coverage as “USPF programmes and projects shall be developed in all states of the federation in order to provide ICT access and connectivity to unserved”, much of the its intervention goes to the areas that are already served. Much of it also does not directly address the issue of the digital divide but rather promotes access particularly to digital facilities and connectivity for students, who are based in urban areas.

FINDINGS

CITAD conducted a survey on some of the facilities and initiatives the USPF has developed across the country. The survey covered the states of Kano, Jigawa, Bauchi, Nassarawa and the FCT. The survey was not meant to be an exhaustive assessment but a pilot sample to provide some insights about the effectiveness of the strategies the agency deployed in its interventions. We summarized our key findings below:

1. Schools visited face challenges of internet, non-functionality of some of the computers and lack of electricity for optimal use of the facilities.

2. Some centres face challenges of insecurity and vandalism. One of the centres that was vandalized is Abubakar Tatari Ali Polytechnics centre, while at Government Secondary School Gwammaja in Kano State some of the computers provided are damaged and schools do not have the capacity to either maintain or upgrade the systems.

3. Most of the computers which were donated had become non-functional, thus not in use as of the time of this report.

4. Non or underutilization of the computers donated by the USPF in some of the schools.

5. Of the different School Knowledge Centres visited across states in the country, none of the places had signposts detailing the names of the contractors who got the contracts, a development that may raise questions on contract transparency.

6. Abandonment of project equipment by USPF shows that while fund were spent to purchase these equipment, the USPF may have failed to ensure prudence and accountability in its management of the projects, questioning judicious use of public funds especially for continual attainment of the purpose for which these funds were set up.

7. Lack of community ownership: In most of the communities the centres built the community people failed to take ownership of the centres, hence, led to the underutilization and in some cases vandalization of the centres.

8. In some of the places we visited some of the centres have been hijacked by individuals and deny community members access to the centre unless if they offer monetary incentives, this include Dukku centre in Gombe State and Azare centre in Bauchi State.

The key issues we found can be summarized as follows:

- Majority of the Digital Nigeria Centres are not functioning. for example, the centres at Government Girls College (Special School), Bauchi, Bauchi State, Government Secondary School (GSS), Fantai, Jigawa State

- Majority of the Digital Nigeria Centres do not have access to internet. This is due to inability or capacity of schools to pay for bandwidth subscription at the expiration of the free period

- A large number of both the Digital Nigeria Centres and Community Resource Centres are not functioning.

- All the e-Accessibility Centres in Bauchi, Jigawa and Kano are not functioning

- Most of the RUBI sites were not functioning. For example, while Abaji is listed as one of the beneficiaries of the RUBI, there was no network service in the community

- Many of the Digital Nigeria Centres and Community Resource Centres have been vandalized and the computers carted aware

- There is deviation from the geographical area of interest of the USPF which are underserved and unserved communities to rolling out initiatives and interventions in served areas

- There is also deviation from the goal of addressing connectivity gaps to areas of promoting increased access to interface devices, which in itself is good but it misses the fundamental objective of the fund.

CHALLENGES

In the execution of these projects, the USPF opted to provide subsidy for private sector players to deploy in areas that are either unserved or underserved. In some however, it was outright procurement in which USPF awarded contracts to private players to set up these facilities. There was not much involvement of the communities either in generating demand or in the deployment and management of these facilities. Consequently, when the contractor leaves, and no one in particular was responsible for the management of the facilities, they become cannibalized and vandalized as we have seen in a number of sites. Examples of vandalized sites include: Abubakar Tatari Ali Polytechnics centre in Bauchi State and Government Secondary School Gwammaja in Kano State

Another problem of the strategies adapted is that although in theory these facilities are supposed to be sited in underserved and unserved communities, most are site in urban centres. For example, nearly 70% of the Bandwidth Aggregation Project are in urban centres, about the same percentage could be said for the digital Nigeria centres, the e-libraries, e-health and e-accessibility projects. Of course, for the Tertiary Institution Digital Centres is understanding since most of the tertiary institutions are in urban centres,

With respect to schools, three major interventions made them unsustainable. One is that schools are not able to provide for power to run the centres, thus they remained unused for long periods. The second is that the use of satellite subscription is not sustainable since when the first payment expires, the schools are not able to pay for renewal so they get cut off. The third is that since communities are not involved in the design, deployment and management of the facilities, they do not have the capacity and the resources to maintain these systems.

It is interesting that although the law establishing the agency says the USPF can give loans and grants to communities desiring to set up their connectivity, or even acquire license for community projects, this has not been implemented. Instead, connectivity is conceived as a one-off subscription to a bandwidth provider. This has made it impossible for community networks, as community self-response and self-managed response to connectivity gaps, to geminate and be sustained.

The mandate of the USPF as stipulated in the Nigerian Communications Act 2003, Part IV, Section 112 is to "promote the widespread availability and usage of network services and applications services throughout Nigeria by encouraging the installation of network facilities and the provision for network services and applications services to institutions and in unserved, underserved areas or for underserved groups within the community." In line with this, the focus of the USPF should be addressing the lack of connectivity and poor affordability in unserved and underserved communities. However, there appears to be more attention on providing digital facilities and connectivity for educational institutions in served areas than in addressing the lack of connectivity in underserved areas. This can

be seen in the plethora of initiatives all targeting various levels of the education sector. While this in itself is not bad and in fact is useful. However, against the broader aspiration of bridging the digital divide, this tends to farther widened the gap, especially between urban and rural areas since most education institutions, which benefit more from the USPF interventions, are located in urban areas. The other side of this is that it also widens the gap in terms of access to education between urban and rural communities. In this case, unwittingly, the strategies and initiatives of the USPF have the implication of widening the development divide between urban and rural areas and thus widening inequalities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The USPF should create monitoring strategies to ensure that projects achieve their expected ends. It can create a subunit of the fund focused on following utilisation of executed projects that will allow a framework for adequate communications and ensuring that these projects achieve their expected ends.

2. Solar power should also be deployed by the USPF to cushion the issue of absence of electricity in locations where projects are erected as well as eliminate the recurring problems of lack of fund to buy diesel or petrol to fire generators.

3. There is need for feasibility studies to be carried out by the fund before grants were issued, especially in respect to needs to ensure projects success. For instance, the USPF focuses most of its projects on schools, yet these schools lament the absence of electricity or internet to run school knowledge centres.

4. Awareness creation among the project beneficiaries about the importance of the projects and community members for taking ownership and proper utilization.

5. There is need for the USPF to support community networks initiatives in the underserved communities in the country as this will help in bridging the gap in network accessibility and difficulties these communities are facing in terms of network access.

6. The USPF should revert to its original mandate of bridging the digital divide and focusing on initiatives and interventions that could be sustainable in the long term and also contribute directly to addressing the various dimensions of the digital divide.

7. The law establishing of the USPF, should be reviewed to provide commitment to community centred connectivity, including clear provisions recognizing and supporting community networks as a third tier of infrastructure rollout.

8. Tracking and monitoring of utilization of the Fund with a view to ensuring both accountability and in producing the desired result of promoting digital inclusion.

9. The strategies of the Fund should be refocused to support community led telecommunication infrastructure deployment to address gaps that the private sector is not able to fill.

10. Creating clear means of coordination and collaboration with both non-federal state-actors (such as state government agencies) and non-state actors such as civil society organizations, cooperative movements, etc.

11. There is the need to review the law of establishing the USPF to make its board more representative of stakeholders in the digital eco system and also make its work more transparent and accessible to the communities for which it is intended in the first instance.

12. The USPF should not be keen just to carry out projects but also have monitoring strategies to ensure that projects achieve their expected ends. For instance, a subunit of the fund should focused on following utilisation of executed projects, thiswill allow a framework for adequate communications and ensuring that these projects achieve their expected ends.

13. While budgeting for projects or releasing grants, the USPF should factor in ancillary projects or equipment that would help ensure functionality of projects. For instance, delivering computers to a rural community but failing to provide a source of power to ensure functionality of the computers (especially when it could understand challenges faced by grantees or beneficiaries of projects) may render such a project a “fancy decoration of halls with computers”. These computers may end up failing to be used or become obsolete in no time. Solar power should also be deployed by the USPF to cushion the issue of absence of electricity in locations where projects were erected.

14. For projects transparency, the USPF should consider ensuring that at each location where it carried out projects, a well functional signpost be erected or a signage be put; publication of some of these details as part of its reports (annual or periodical), including name of contractors will help contract accountability.

15. The USPF should invest more in the training of beneficiaries of their projects. Some of the issues discovered on field is the absence of expertise in the management of the projects executed by the USPF.

16. Community members where projects are being implemented should be carried along from the design to the execution of the projects to ensure community ownership.

CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR CHANGING STRATEGIES

Over 20 years since its entablement, it is time for a critical review of the operations and performance of the USPF with a view to teasing out the gains of the period and how these can be sustained, the lessons learn to inform future planning and interventions and the challenges encountered and how they could be mitigated against the future.

In addition to the review and reflection, there is also the need to tweak the law establishing the USPF to reflect the recent developments relation to strategies for addressing the digital divide in the country. There is the need to make it more effective, more consultative and leverage on the existing programmes to add meal to its work.

This is particularly important given that new developments have come on board of recent which are influencing the direction of addressing digital divide. One of these is that over the years, community centred connectivity has become a veritable tool for successful bridging of is digital divide across the globe. Robust models and experiences can be found in Kenya, South African, Uganda and several other African countries. The experienced from those countries will provide lessons to learn from.

One of the challenges of public intervention at community in the country has been the problem of sustainability, this is particularly more acute in the telecommunication sector because target communities are poor and generally also lacking the necessary skills to manage. When USPF was formed, it had no access to community experiences in connectivity issues. However, now there are several points from which to learn a couple of lessons

Community centred connectivity initiatives that are bottom up in contradiction with the usual top down approach has greater potential to ensure sustainability given that they are community initiatives, mobilizing community commitments and leveraging other eco systems.

There is need to clarify on the mandate of the USPF: is it to contribute to provision of connectivity for underserved and unserved communities or is it to promote access and use in certain critical sectors such as education and healthcare?

The USPF should be ran professionally and t it should be insulated from political influence. As it is now, although the USPF is domiciled in the NCC which has a supervisory role on it, the Chairman of the Board of the USPF is the Minister under whose supervision the NCC comes. This create problem in the USPF as it is under the supervision of two different Offices with unequal powers. Either it is made independent of NCC and be supervised by the Minister or it should remain domiciled in NCC and the Minister should not be the chairman of the board since already the NCC is under the Minister.

Civil society organizations should engage in sustained advocacy to get the USPF to function as an effective and efficient bridging mechanism for the various dimensions of the digital divide. Private sector players should recognize the value in community centre connectivity providers as last mile providers that will add value to their businesses by injecting suppressed tele-traffic into their networks as well as delivering blocked tele=traffic into underserved and unserved communities. Finally, government at all level should up to their responsibility of recognizing that connectivity is now a right as it is the means for accessing and enjoying other fundamental human rights. The Federal Gove4rment has set up an ambitious target of reducing unconnected Nigerians in rural areas from 61% to less than 20% by 2027[9]. This target cannot be achieved without a change in mindset and a corresponding respond to policy making that will mainstream community-centred connectivity provision in the nigeran digital landscape.

[9] Ministry of Communications, Innovation & Digital Economy , 2023: Accelerating our Collective Prosperity through Technical Efficiency A Strategic Plan for the Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation & Digital Economy

About CITAD

Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD), is non-profit and on- governmental organization that focuses on the use of technology for the promotionof good governance, human rights, education , peace building and development in general. With its head Office in Kano, it has other Offices in Federal Capital Territory, and three other Offices in Bauchi State. CITAD's vision is a knowledge-based and self-reliant democratic society. Its' mission is to empower citizens for a just and knowledge-based society that is anchored on sustainable and balanced development using ICTs, Capacity Building, Research and partnership. It was established as a single project (Computer Literacy Project) in 1996 but was expanded in 2000 to include other projects. Now it incorporates six different thematic units.

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