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Reflection of COVID-19 Initiatives in the SA-ME-NA Region in Implementing the Broadband Commission's Agenda for Action

The availability of advanced digital communication infrastructure and advanced digital services is integral to preparedness for embracing a sustainable future. Likewise, building a sustainable 5G ecosystem, in which Telecom Operators have a significant role to play, is critical for driving digital transformation in a given economy, and for meeting national socio-economic transformation objectives.

SAMENA Council, in one of its recently conducted 5G-focused industry capacity-building exercises held in Bahrain, emphasized on regional 5G implementation. This included spotlights on technology use-cases for the terrestrial and satellite industry in the 5G space, IoT applications, and financing models to aid 5G investments and network implementation. Further, open discussions were held that steered toward understanding the future of 5G connectivity, collaboration, and regulation. In collaboration with the telecommunication regulatory authority of Bahrain (TRA-Bahrain), efforts were made on exchanging insights on key IoT trends and use-cases that are made possible with 5G network deployments and to draw focus on the role that Operators can and should exercise in leading the way in 5G-enabled IoT applications and digital services in regional as well as specific local country contexts.

As a matter of priority, and in line with the near-to-medium term agenda items recently defined by the Commission to accelerate and implement digital cooperation and digital strategies and policies, SAMENA Council has drawn the attention of regional regulatory authorities to the implementation of agile and flexible regulatory measures to support an inclusive and competitive digital environment and foster the roll out of 5G networks. Despite uncertainty surrounding 5G use-cases and adequate business models, and long before 5G networks were actually tested in the combat against COVID-19, SAMENA Council had emphasized in its region that 5G networks can help deliver public services, such as telemedicine and real-time data exchanges to contain widespread diseases, and contribute to better resource management in urban and rural areas, including energy and traffic management, as well as water and crop management. The fifth-generation broadband networks can contribute to improvements in healthcare, the delivery of

education, and so much more, and thereby contribute to the fulfillment of the globally agreed Sustainable Development agenda -- which is of immense importance to Operators, Regulators, and Policy-makers alike.

In the wake of COVID-19, and in accordance with the Agenda for Action defined by the Commission, a leading example among Operators, which demonstrated prescience and reacted to ensuing challenges posed by the pandemic, includes stc Group of Saudi Arabia, which have formally switched on 5G networks. Eng. Nasser Al Nasser, stc Group CEO, in his detailed thought-leadership piece developed with SAMENA Council, drew parallels between what stc carried out during COVID-19 and the imperatives identified by the Commission in the wake of the pandemic, demonstrating that digital infrastructure and the private sector's readiness are fundamental to succeeding in the digital world post COVID-19.

When the Saudi government started enacting precautions, including lockdown and social distancing, stc saw an immediate 1000% surge in education portals traffic, 177% increase in visits to health portals, and 70% increase in mobile app downloads. Social media visits also grew by 73%, video-gaming activity surged by 171%, and TV content consumption grew by 41%. stc elevated its network's capacity to maximum levels by distributing traffic, and by providing urgent support to the government and businesses. The Operator then started the rollout of direct targeting messaging and efforts step by step. To encourage households to stay at home, stc made all its services accessible via mystc mobile app; introduced the eSIM service for the first time in Saudi Arabia; offered 50% discount on optical fibers services; and accelerated the delivery of its products four-fold. stc Group also provided free access to education and health platforms; and doubled the data capacity for a large segment of its customers without extra fees. On the awareness raising front, stc sent over 2.5 billion awareness messages (SMS) in 10 languages to millions of citizens and residents prompting them to follow safety procedures during the pandemic. The company also sponsored the Immunity Forum (Manaah), the first virtual forum region wide to offer coronavirus awareness. stc continues to engage actively with the society to complement government's efforts, and to fulfill the objectives set forth as global imperatives.

In accordance with the proposed immediate actions for impact identified by the UN Broadband Commission with respect to the need to achieve resilient and secure connectivity, ensure affordable access, and to promote safe use of online services for informed and educated societies, SAMENA Council is bringing together leaders with expertise and driving thought leadership in the area of accelerated digital cooperation building toward achieving mass-scale adoption of 5G in the SA-ME-NA region. To this effect, SAMENA Council, in collaboration with private sector entities, including stc Group, is organizing its annual leaders' congregation, with the agenda specifically focusing on cross-industry engagement on the accelerated developing of 5G and allied technologies. This may help accelerate implementation of streamlined actions and partnerships to promote the expansion of broadband connectivity, digital services and digital inclusiveness to unconnected communities and populations still lacking access.

While, in some ways, COVID-19 has drastically slowed down our progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are significantly dependent on the utilization of ICTs, the increased focus on the fulfillment of SDGs and the need to accelerate progress has risen, dramatically. The ICT Industry is playing its role in harnessing the power of ICTs to help mitigate the huge social costs that the world is now incurring due to the current health situation, worldwide. Given our globalization-driven world and highly interconnected and much interdependent lifestyles, pandemics of the modern era are much more powerful, speedier, and hold much larger damage footprints, both physically and psychologically. Thus, to no surprise, ICT infrastructure has emerged among the most important reliability pillars for the society, with 5G technologies allowing for various applications to be deployed swiftly, using high bandwidths, supporting massive connections, and providing low-latency in data transmission for real-time services.

As the Commission marks its tenth anniversary in 2020, its sustained advocacy efforts will bear fruit across the world, including in the SA-ME-NA region, where SAMENA Council is fully engaged with Operators and Regulators. With ten years remaining before the target year of 2030 for the SDGs, and five years before the 2025 Broadband Commission Advocacy Targets, much action is needed, and SAMENA Council is fully committed to continue contributing to the fulfillment of these target both as an industry association as well as an Operator representative group.