A Connectivity-Enabled Development Surge for Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions

What would be a Connectivity-Enabled Development Surge (CEDS) for Afghanistan?
The CEDS would be a coordinated, simultaneous scale-up of proven initiatives that leverage electronic connectivity to facilitate development and build goodwill in Afghanistan.

What is the concept in more detail?
The CEDS would rapidly expand the use of electronic connectivity, via mobile phones and the Internet, in order to improve the lives and prospects of the people of Afghanistan. Experience in Afghanistan and other developing countries shows that connectivity can enhance economic and social development, circumvent security challenges, improve health care, enable people-to-people diplomacy, generate goodwill, and improve political stability. Existing connectivity initiatives in Afghanistan have captured some of this potential, but much more could be done. The CEDS would aim to capture a much higher level of benefits, through coordinated, simultaneous scale-up of proven connectivity initiatives, together with rapid prototyping of new initiatives followed by scale-up of those that work well.

Who would be involved?
Many public and private actors would be directly involved in implementing the CEDS, through diverse partnerships. These actors would include Afghan government agencies, NGOs large and small, telecom companies and many other businesses, international and foreign government agencies, hospitals and clinics, universities and schools, agricultural extension centers, and social and business entrepreneurs. Funding, investment, and mentoring for the CEDS would come from a variety of actors including development banks, governments, corporations, foundations, and individuals.

Would any one initiative or actor be critical to the success of the CEDS?
No. The more initiatives and organizations that are involved, the better the outcome. For example, there are several initiatives to develop e-learning centers. If one such initiative fails, others could replace them. Also, the CEDS is envisioned as functioning on a loosely-coupled network model, without central direction. Nevertheless, coordination of efforts would be essential, and could be achieved as described later in these FAQs.

What are some examples of existing connectivity initiatives?
There is currently no catalogue or coordinating mechanism for relevant initiatives. Thus, no one knows the full range of initiatives and their accomplishments. From the diverse and growing array of connectivity-related initiatives in Afghanistan, consider four examples:

- The telecom company Roshan offers a mobile banking service (M-Paisa) and a commodity price service (Malomat) through mobile phones, accessible by Short Message Service (SMS) or Interactive Voice Response (IVR).
- The MIT-affiliated Fab Lab in Jalalabad utilizes low-cost, long-distance WiFi to extend its Internet access to hospitals and other organizations in its locality.
- The NGOs CharityHelp International (CHI) and Afghan Child Education and Care Organization (AFCECO) operate a child-sponsorship program in which connectivity enables relationships between Afghan children, and their communities, and sponsors worldwide.
- The NGO Bpeace uses connectivity to link business entrepreneurs in Afghanistan and other conflict-affected countries, especially women, with volunteer business professionals in the United States, and elsewhere, who mentor and support the entrepreneurs.

Why is a connectivity-enabled surge appropriate now?
Several trends are coalescing that would make an immediate surge both feasible and productive. Afghanistan is experiencing rapid growth in mobile connectivity, so that there are now more than 13 million mobile phone subscriptions in a country of 29 million people.   Valuable services such as M-Paisa are becoming available through mobile phones. Broadband connectivity is increasingly available, and is sought after. A revived education system has produced a cohort of younger Afghans who can use connectivity productively, who seek it out, and from whom would come the entrepreneurs and managers needed to make a connectivity surge a largely indigenous enterprise. Across the country there is hunger for development and stability, and there is growing recognition that connectivity offers a cost-effective, insufficiently-explored pathway to these goals. At the same time, trends in technology and information

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services are rapidly improving connectivity-related capabilities while reducing their costs. Taken together, these social and technical trends are multiplicative, offering the potential for rapid, positive social change through a coordinated surge.

How would the CEDS be viewed by the Afghan people?

What trends in technology and information services are significant for the CEDS?
Computers and other connectivity instruments, both fixed and mobile, are becoming progressively cheaper and more capable. Through initiatives by NGOs such as Inveneo, computer systems with low electricity consumption are becoming available in developing countries. This feature, combined with descending prices for photovoltaic (PV) power systems, allows broadband-capable community connectivity centers to function in remote villages that lack access to an electricity grid. The cost of Internet access can be reduced by sharing a broadband link with a number of facilities via a local wireless network. The effective capacity of a broadband link can be increased by using a caching server, which can also be preloaded with software tools, educational material, and information resources. As an example of the information resources that now exist, the University of Iowa's WiderNet project makes available a vast digital library mounted on a portable hard drive, which functions as an "Internet in a box" for users with limited or no broadband access.

How would the CEDS be viewed by the Afghan people?
People across Afghanistan are already using mobile phones for many purposes. Computers are increasingly available and popular. Thus, there is reason to believe that Afghans will welcome new connectivity-related services that meet their needs. One aspect of the CEDS would be a process to engage citizens in two ways – to identify their needs, and to make them aware of new connectivity services. A potential mode of engagement would be to have televised competitions where entrepreneurs would be compared according to their abilities to use new connectivity-related technologies and services. The winners would talk about how they use the new tools and how they have benefited from them. Their experience would inform and inspire viewers to act similarly.

How would the diverse initiatives within the CEDS be coordinated?
The CEDS is envisioned as functioning on a loosely-coupled network model, without central direction. Within this flexible framework, numerous initiatives would proceed, with varying levels of achievement. Yet, coordination of efforts would be essential, to ensure that the surge is cost-effective and consistent with high-level objectives of development and stability. Achieving this coordination would require appropriate policies and a consensus-based strategy. A key element of the strategy would be a rich flow of information about connectivity-related initiatives, especially their declared objectives and their actual performance. From this information, customers, funders, investors and mentors would decide where to allocate their support within the array of connectivity initiatives. Effective functioning of this performance-based, market-place approach would require the development of standardized metrics of performance, reliable monitoring of initiatives according to those metrics, and credible reporting of the findings.

What would be the first step in catalyzing a connectivity-enabled surge?
The first step toward a CEDS would be to implement a **strategic engagement and planning process**. This process would engage a wide range of stakeholders and experts, from Afghanistan and other countries. Engaged stakeholders would include organizations that could provide funding, investment, and mentoring. The process would itself involve extensive use of connectivity. It would begin by identifying and cataloguing connectivity-related initiatives in Afghanistan, including existing initiatives and those near to implementation. Then, stakeholder representatives and experts would be convened to develop consensus on performance metrics, examine scenarios for the CEDS, review policy and strategic options, and develop consensus on a strategic plan for implementing the surge. Performance monitoring and reporting would be a key aspect of that plan. A follow-up process would review progress in implementing the plan, and would recommend changes to the plan as needed.

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