



World Bank Supports Kosovo in Extending Internet in Rural Areas

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Unleashing development opportunities in rural Kosovo requires access to communication infrastructure and information. In this vein, the World Bank and the Ministry of Economic Development of Kosovo have officially launched the first phase of a grant-financed technical assistance project entitled "Innovative and Green Growth for Rural Areas of Kosovo", aimed at providing an analytical foundation for the extension of broadband Internet infrastructure to currently underserved rural municipalities of Kosovo, creating a sustainable platform for innovative and green growth. It is those rural municipalities in Kosovo with the highest concentration of poor households (the part of the population which is below 40 percent of income in Kosovo) who are also suffering from a lack of reliable and affordable broadband Internet infrastructure. According to government estimates, 43 percent of rural households are currently unconnected to the broadband, and one-third of these households-without an all-inclusive intervention-are unlikely to be connected to the network anytime soon. To this end, the conducted activity is directly aligned with the Kosovo Information Communication Technology sector strategy "The Electronic Communication Sector Policy - Digital Agenda for Kosova 2013-2020", which establishes coverage and broadband Internet speed goals that must be achieved at the per-capita and household level. In particular, this activity will result in:
- A broadband market study, analyzing the current broadband demand and forecast on a municipality level for 2015-2020;
- A technical analysis of existing broadband infrastructure, dimensioning, and an assessment of infrastructure deployment initiatives for universalization of broadband access, including an accompanying sensitivity analysis;
- A financial analysis that will estimate the deployment investment and operating costs for each part of the network per type of technology; and
- A set of recommendations concerning the viability of private-public partnerships as a way to address low connectivity in the selected underserved municipalities.
"Low availability of broadband connectivity holds back not only development of the local telecom and Information Technology sector, but also the arrival of multiple benefits associated with Information Communication Technologies and ICT-enabled green growth, such as regional economic integration, online employment generation, development of smart infrastructure, and optimization of public service delivery through e-services," said Agim Kukaj, the Head of Post, Telecommunications, Information and Communication Technology Department of the Ministry of Economic Development of Kosovo. "What is also important to note is that in contrast to the European Union, Kosovo has a significantly higher share of rural and youth population: the majority of our population is rural and over one-third is 18 years old or younger. It is evident that by extending broadband Internet to the rural areas, the government will unfold new opportunities-in particular, for the youth-which tends to be more technologically savvy than other age groups. These opportunities will entail job creation through ICTs and skills development, both of which are essential for increasing the countrys competitiveness." The underserved rural municipalities either have isolated settlements and low population density or are located in mountainous terrain. The experience of over more than a decade of worldwide internet access infrastructure rollout proves that the deployment costs of setting up broadband connections in such challenging geographical areas are multiple times those in urban areas. Even if such deployment does take place, the cost of the broadband service is usually not affordable for the rural, often relatively poorer population. Without well-crafted government interventions in rural areas, which include the use of public funds, the universality of broadband service cannot be achieved.
"The Government of Kosovo took an important step in identifying where exactly the connectivity access gaps lie and how best to address them from technological and financial perspectives," added Natalija Gelvanovska, Senior Information Communication Technology Policy Specialist at the World Bank. "Across developing countries, telecommunications data on rural broadband availability is neither systematically collected, nor analyzed by any government. Because of these white spots, it is often challenging to determine precise broadband coverage, dynamics of the coverage and pricing development, and, most importantly, to understand how to bridge the connectivity gaps leveraging private and public funding. A proper analysis of access infrastructure gaps is, therefore, instrumental in designing the right type of policies and action plans for the benefit of the unconnected population. We are happy to bring to Kosovo the best international practices in telecom and ICT from the region (the EU) and recognized global leaders such as, for instance, Korea." This activity is financed through the Korea Green Growth Trust Fund until end-December 2015, and is the second World Bank technical assistance to Kosovo in the telecommunications sector. The first technical assistance, "Facilitation of Efficient Infrastructure Sharing", launched on January 5, 2015, is dedicated to the commercialization of fiber optic assets owned by the electricity utility KOSTT J.S.C. for the possible benefit of Internet Service Providers without their own broadband infrastructure, as well as the population that is currently underserved with access to high-speed connectivity.
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