

Meaningful Connectivity — a new standard to measure internet access

We need to change how we measure access

Internet access is a necessity in today's digital economy. The UN has called it a [human right](#). To help make this right a reality for everyone, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) includes a [target for universal internet access](#). The UN-UNESCO led Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development followed with [clear targets for getting people online](#).

The current definition measures who has access by including anyone who has used the internet from any device in the past three months. By this measure, at the end of 2018, [51.2% of the world was online](#), according to the ITU.

The trouble with this definition is that it lumps all internet users together. Someone who uses WhatsApp on a 2.5G mobile connection once a month is considered the same as another who runs a business from her home using a super-fast fiber broadband connection.

That's why the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) has developed "Meaningful Connectivity" as a new global standard that measures not only if someone has accessed the internet, but the quality of connection they have.

We know that to make a real difference in people's lives, internet access needs to be of a sufficient standard. If policymakers focus only on improving the single metric of basic connectivity, efforts to improve internet access and use for all will fall short and the digital divide will continue to widen.

"Meaningful Connectivity" provides a framework for differentiating levels internet access so that decision makers are better able to enact policy that helps people connect to an internet that is useful and empowering.

Defining "Meaningful Connectivity"

A useful and empowering internet experience starts with access to the open internet.

Network shutdowns and limitations on device ownership, or artificial limitations like limits on data usage or excessive censorship, curb the internet's ability to drive economic growth and human development. But mere access to the open internet is not enough — a meaningful connection is also necessary.

What makes a connection meaningful?

- 1. The right speed:** Users need [sufficient download speeds](#) to access multimedia and other applications that make up a full internet experience.
- 2. An adequate device:** Users must be able to both produce and consume content online. [Mobile only access](#) is not the same as access via a laptop or desktop, because a full physical keyboard is [better suited](#) to content creation and productivity.
- 3. Enough data:** Lack of data should not stand in the way of individuals fully using the internet based applications they consider important.
- 4. Frequent connection:** If a user can only connect to the internet every so often, it is less likely to be a meaningful tool for them.

These technical measurements highlight the kinds of challenges policymakers will face on the road to universal access and the improvements required to achieve meaningful connectivity for all.

Measuring meaningful connectivity

To measure progress against the specific minimum targets, the different components of the framework will require different data collection approaches.

1. **Download speeds:** We will calculate median download speeds over a given time period for both mobile and fixed connections within a given country, as we did in our [2018 Improving Broadband Quality of Service](#) report.
 - *Minimum target: Connectivity with a least X Mbps download speed.*
2. **Device type:** We will use surveys to assess the types of devices that an individual person uses to connect to the internet (whether these devices are owned, shared, or public).
 - *Minimum target: Connectivity with at least one device that has a full keyboard.*
3. **Sufficient data:** We will use surveys to assess how much data an individual person purchases and uses within a given time period. This will include data that is purchased for mobile and home use as well as data that is not purchased, such as free WiFi.
 - *Minimum target: Connects using at least X GB per month.*
4. **Frequency of connection:** We will use surveys to ask individuals how often they connect to the internet.
 - *Minimum target: Connects to the internet at least X times over X period.*

To measure progress against the specific minimum targets, the different components of the framework will require different data collection approaches.

As we continue to develop this measurement framework, we will also look to find sustainable alternatives to face to face household surveys, such as mobile phone based surveys.

Next steps

Now that the framework is in place, we must set the minimum targets for each component.

To do this, we will conduct primary research in Colombia, Ghana, Indonesia, and Uganda between September and October 2019. We will use nationally representative household surveys, focus group discussions, and other qualitative approaches. Together, these methods will allow us to test each of the components and determine appropriate targets.

We plan to publish the results of this research in early 2020. Before that, we will conduct consultations to gather feedback on the proposed minimum thresholds. When published, we will share the specific targets for this standard on meaningful connectivity and the evidence supporting their use and inclusion by policymakers everywhere.

As with the [‘1 for 2’ affordability target](#), the socio-economic context will vary from country to country. The meaningful connectivity targets will set a minimum standard — but we encourage policymakers to be more ambitious where possible.

We’ll use this new measurement of internet access in our work around the globe and encourage others to do the same to improve access and affordability alike. Ultimately, our ambition is to develop a standard that can complement existing measures of internet use and guide policy makers towards the actions needed to achieve the targets of meaningful connectivity. We expect to collaborate and work through partnerships with governments, international organizations, and research institutions to realize this ambition.