

Universal & Public Access

AFFORDABILITY REPORT 2020 THEMATIC BRIEF



Several countries around the globe have **Universal Service & Access Funds (USAFs)** or similar pooled funds. These funds support collective efforts to extend connectivity to underserved communities and market segments where private access is not commercially viable. USAFs can be politically contentious, as poorly-run USAFs have accrued millions in fee collection without properly and transparently implementing projects. However these funds are crucial in ensuring connectivity to many, particularly those in rural communities and for underserved communities.

Together with USAFs, governments also invest in **public access** solutions, typically by engaging public institutions like libraries, community centres, and other open spaces where free or low-cost Wi-Fi can be offered.



Rwanda



Rwanda's [Digital Ambassadors Programme](#), with 50% representation for women, addresses the challenges of digital literacy in an aim to unlock the transformative powers of technology for all.



Colombia



[Public access solutions and subsidised access for low-income households](#) have been at the core of Colombia's successful digital revolution and its *Vive Digital* strategies.



Indonesia



The USAF-backed investment project, Palapa Ring, has [improved mobile internet user experiences across the Indonesian archipelago](#).



Namibia



In a context where the Namibian government holds a stake in both major mobile network operators, the country has so far deferred on establishing a Universal Service & Access Fund, despite [the legal foundation for one existing since 2009](#).



Guatemala



Guatemala's USAF, Fondotel, is an example of a regional trend where these institutions are [strictly limited to telephony and have limited to no capacity to support the universal service obligation for internet services](#) in the country.



Viet Nam



A lack of transparency around the USAF has led to [a reduction of the contribution rate by half](#). Recent proposals have suggested [divesting its universal service obligation to support e-government service](#) development rather than subsidised access.

A commitment to public access solutions have been a cornerstone to the success of Asian-Pacific countries in reaching affordability.

The Affordability Report evaluates governments on how well their USAFs deliver on this universal service mission. It focuses on two aspects: its institutional focus on underserved communities and its capacity to offer subsidies for low-income users to afford internet services. In addition, we evaluate the government's commitment to public access solutions (within and outwith the USAF). Transparency is crucial to high scores in this policy cluster.

As in [previous years](#), a government's commitment to public access remains the strongest correlation with the affordability of data of all fourteen policy scores we measure. Many of the leading countries in the Affordability Drivers Index, especially across the Asia-Pacific region, have excelled through their public access strategies. Thailand's [Net Pracharat programme](#) helped close the urban-rural digital divide in the country. The government-backed [Palapa Ring project](#) in Indonesia [improved 4G connectivity](#) across the country.

Other countries have had recent and promising success in the development of their USAFs. The recently-established USAF in Cambodia has supported the construction of [new 3G and 4G coverage across the country](#). Just before publication of the 2020 Affordability Report, the [Brazilian Senate passed new laws governing its USAF](#), expanding its mandate to cover mobile telephony and internet services for the first time.

POLICY LEADERBOARD		(/10)
1st	Indonesia	8.5
2nd	Malaysia	8.0
3rd	Colombia	8.0
4th	Thailand	8.0
5th	Rwanda	7.7
6th	Costa Rica	7.3
7th	Argentina	7.3

A4AI's Policy Recommendations —

- 1 Establish and utilise Universal Service & Access Funds that focus on underserved communities and subsidising access for low-income users, especially women, and the barriers like device affordability.
- 2 Support public access solutions, including community networking, to provide a diversity of internet access points for individuals.
- 3 Engage other ministries – such as education and health –, private sector stakeholders, and civil society in USAF governance to increase transparency and social accountability.