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# FEEDBACK ON ICASA DRAFT BROADBAND ROADMAP

## Introduction:

Much of this comprehensive 183 page document is of a highly technical nature and beyond the field of expertise of this portfolio group, as it deals with aspects such as spectrum, frequency, communications protocols and the like. We will therefore restrict ourselves to the potential impact on blind and visually impaired persons.

## Analysis:

The South African context is characterised by salient geographical and socio-economic characteristics, impacting on the deployment of mobile communications infrastructure, which underpin the effective availability of existing and emerging technologies. For blind and visually impaired South Africans, the reliable and affordable availability of these technologies hold the promise of realising their potential as engaged citizens: While many of these benefits have already been realised by urban and/or educated blind South Africans, there is a gap existing for those of us who may be limited by the paucity of mobile broadband services where we live, or the cost thereof. It is highly encouraging to note that the envisaged improvements in infrastructure will negate rural isolation, and increasingly provide affordable hardware devices, leveraged by the creativity and drive of developers and users alike, will lead to a marked equalisation in the opportunities available to rural blind people, increasing their ability to engage with the digital world in highly rewarding ways

Engaging with the digital world is facilitated by media-rich experiences, which enable users to interact with technology in ways which mimic human interactions. Graphical user interfaces have been the norm for some decades. Lately, and of particular interest to blind people who may not be IT-literate, , voice-driven input systems as exemplified by the Google and Apple voice assistants, have become increasingly popular and robust in their functionality. These systems require reliable high-bandwidth data connections to work well.

Mobile communications can help to negate the barriers caused by vast geographical distances. For blind people, accessing safe and reliable transport can pose a significant barrier, and the exciting possibilities for effective tele-commuting for work or education could offer an as yet untapped array of opportunities for engagement in learning and work on an unprecedented scale.

## To put this in practical terms:

- On account of severe transport challenges blind persons find it difficult to do shopping, visit libraries and the like and are therefore far more reliant on on-line shopping and library services, however these facilities are often restricted by the high cost of data and connectivity and the lack of data coverage.
- For the same reasons blind persons are often precluded from participating in committees or other important structures, whereas it would be made feasible through applications such as Skype, Zoom or WhatsApp if there was a good, reliable, affordable, wide coverage telecommunications network.

- Due to time and financial restrictions it is often not practicable to have documents such as study material converted into braille or other accessible formats, while material is often available electronically on-line and could easily be obtained were it not for the above-mentioned restrictions.
- Important electronic material such as audio books often consists of very large files which require fast, reliable, cost-effective and available data network in order that blind users can access such material wherever they are and whenever it is required.
- Many of the most useful mobile apps developed specifically for blind persons, rely heavily on data usage and it is that factor which currently precludes their use to many who could benefit greatly from them.

## Conclusion:

We appeal strongly that the factors sketched above be kept in consideration in the further development and roll-out of the broadband roadmap and that ICASA engages with the blindness sector on an ongoing basis to ensure that these persons are not left behind in this rapidly developing environment to ensure that blind persons are included to the fullest extent.

The ICT Portfolio of the Advocacy and Information Committee of Blind SA