

Assistive ICT – a game changer for Persons with Disabilities: BIF

White Paper released on 'Priorities for a COVID-19 World: ICT Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities in India'

New Delhi, 10th August 2020: Broadband India Forum (BIF), the leading independent Think-Tank and Policy Forum for Digital Communications in the country, today released a White Paper on the critical subject of '**Priorities for a COVID-19 World: ICT Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities in India**' during a special session of The Digital Dialogues, the signature digital platform hosted by BIF in association with BE. The paper was jointly released over the virtual session by **Dr. Malcolm Johnson, Deputy Secretary-General, ITU**, present as **Chief Guest** on the occasion; accompanied by **Shri J S Deepak, Former Ambassador to WTO & Former Secretary - Department of Telecommunications (DoT), Ministry of Communications**, as **Special Guest of Honour**; **Shri K Ramchand, Member (T), DoT** as **Guest of Honour**; with **Shri H K Mahajan, DDG (SR & E), DoT** and **Shri Vinay Thakur, Chief Operating Officer, National eGovernance Division, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY)** as eminent Guest Speakers. The session focused on acceleration of the implementation of the strategies put forth in the NDCP, so that 'Broadband for All' may become the vital tool to reach and uplift all Indians, including the Persons with Disabilities. All the speakers provided insightful and highly informative perspectives and suggestions on the critical subject.

BIF's overarching mission has always been to champion equal and non-discriminatory access to digital communications for all Indians, including Persons with Disabilities. **BIF's High-Level Specialist Committee on ICT for Inclusive Ability (for Persons with Disabilities) chaired by Dr. Nirmita Narasimhan**, focusses on driving greater ICT accessibility and inclusion in several areas of high-quality broadband and internet for all. **BIF has also worked closely with the TRAI and submitted elaborate inputs on ICT accessibility for Persons with Disabilities. During the formulation of the National Digital Communications Policy (NDCP) of 2018, BIF had submitted detailed inputs in this regard to the DoT.**

Persons with Disabilities comprise about one billion of the world's population and India has its own share of individuals living with varying levels of disability. Those with mobility issues, hearing, visual or speech impairment, mental disorders or more, are often dependent on caregivers. This is all the more relevant in the present Covid19 scenario, when restrictions on human interaction and assistance have left Persons with Disabilities isolated and vulnerable. **But assistive technology can be a game-changer.** In such critical scenarios, access to crucial information through government notifications and announcements, availing of essential rations and supplies, financial relief, medical resources, online educational opportunities, and assistance from caregivers can be facilitated through suitable digital platforms via quality broadband services. If device manufacturers offer cost-effective assistive technology, like smartphones designed with universal accessibility standards in mind, this will open up an entire universe of accessibility-related apps and programs for persons with disabilities which will benefit the elderly as well.

BIF President, Mr. TV Ramachandran, stated, "*At BIF, we attach great priority to contributions to the community through the enhancement of digitally inclusive solutions for Persons with Disabilities. Never before have we had a greater urgency for ICT Accessibility and NDCP execution than in the present, as the nation wages a fierce battle against the spread of the COVID-19 virus. We believe that ICT accessibility for*

persons with disabilities in India goes hand-in-hand with fast-tracking strategies in the NDCP 2018. The benefits of ICT accessibility and higher broadband penetration will reverberate through our society, even beyond the empowerment of persons with disabilities, older persons, and their caregivers."

While there are Acts, policies, and guidelines like the Guidelines for Government Websites (GIGW) 2009, the RPwD Act 2016, the Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction' (DiDRR) 2019, and apps which are a highly commendable start towards digital inclusion, however, during the present pandemic, compliance with these acts and regulations vary from state to state, and persons with disabilities may remain inconvenienced.

Dr. Nirmita Narasimhan, shared, *"Today, there is a demonstrated need for technology access and clear evidence of the distress, isolation, and inaccessibility which persons with disabilities face if technology is not accessible. Lack of accessibility adversely impacts not only persons with disabilities but also older people and their families and is therefore, a mainstream issue of big social import, that deserves the attention and concerted effort of stakeholders, the Government, industry, civil society, academia, service providers and the public at large."*

The White Paper: '**Priorities for a COVID-19 World: ICT Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities in India**' outlines a prioritized action-based plan towards greater digital inclusion. This is in line with the United Nations Secretary-General's 'Roadmap for Digital Cooperation' 2020, and the RPwD Act, 2016.

The key recommendations of the paper are as follows:

- 1. Integration and implementation of the DiDRR Guidelines within the Covid-19 response system**
- 2. Set up inter-ministerial steering committee to recommend and help implement accessibility measures within the Government and other stakeholders as recommended by TRAI**
- 3. Time-bound action plan to drive compliance with GIGW guidelines**
 - a. Identification and prioritisation of the key government and private websites and apps used to monitor and provide Covid-19 related relief and assistance and make them GIGW compliant
 - b. Engage Service providers and institutions involved in education, entertainment, shopping and healthcare to create accessible ICT infrastructure and offerings
 - c. Develop a timeline with action plan for GIGW 2.0 compatibility, with a longer-term initiative to monitor compliance of all government websites and apps
- 4. Adoption and notification of Telecom accessibility standards by TEC and inclusion in certification criteria for telecom devices and products manufactured/ procured/ sold in India**
- 5. Expedite the adoption and notification of accessible ICT procurement standard by MeitY**
- 6. Inclusion of ICT Accessibility in the Universal Service Charter:**
 - a. Universal Service charter be expanded to include persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups as beneficiaries, both in rural as well as urban areas
 - b. The assistance provided by the USOF may include assistive technologies, devices, content, skilling, and services required to make complete digital inclusion and empowerment of these groups possible

7. **Promote adoption of Assistive Technologies and accessibility to drive greater broadband adoption amongst persons with disabilities and promote digital inclusion in line with the NDCP's objectives [NDCP, 2018; Clause 1.4a(ii)]**
8. **Ensure accessibility of all Covid-related information being broadcast through media as per accessibility standards notified by MIB**
9. **Remove copyright barriers to accessible digital content through issuance of a gazetted notification that confirms permissibility of import and export of accessible-format books**

Executing these actions on priority will provide some much-needed relief for persons with disabilities, and offer a significant boost to the 'Digital India' and 'Make in India' missions - resulting in increased GDP and socio-economic growth all around. India will be well on her way to achieving 'Universal Connectivity for all' – a central goal of the United Nations Secretary-General's 'Roadmap for Digital Cooperation' 2020.

BIF believes that India has sufficient national and international legal commitments to mandate strict implementation of accessibility, and hopes that this White Paper will serve as a useful tool for policy makers and other stakeholders to address this issue and accord it the priority and mainstreaming that it deserves.

About Broadband India Forum

Broadband India Forum (BIF) functions as a policy forum and think-tank that works for the development & enhancement of the entire broadband ecosystem in a holistic, technology-neutral and service-neutral manner. BIF has established itself as a thought leader and a credible and effective voice, to help propel the nation to achieve the country's ambitious vision of creating a Digital India. To achieve this, BIF works to promote the rapid development of policies, so as to facilitate affordable and high-speed ubiquitous broadband throughout the country.

Formed in October 2015, BIF is a dedicated forum with participation from all stakeholders, including Technology Providers, Telecom Operators, Internet Service Providers, Value-Added Service Providers, Satellite Operators and service providers, MSOs, startups and professional entities, as well as seasoned Industry professionals who are familiar with different technologies, operations, regulations and policies.

For further information, please contact:

Kaustuv Sircar – kaustuv@broadbandindiaforum.com/+91-9999326911/+91-7003157047