



February 22, 2016

Reference: Proposed changes to the Universal Service Fund in the ECTEL Member States

In response to the consultative document on proposed changes to the Universal Service Fund in the ECTEL Member States, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) wishes to draw notice to the potential for USFs to assist with funding for the deployment of telecommunications infrastructure that can be used to provide timely warnings to the public in the event of an impending disaster, such as a hurricane or tsunami.

ECLAC has done extensive research in the field of information and communications technology for disaster risk management in the Caribbean. This has included recent interviews with officials of national disaster agencies in various countries, including Saint Lucia, on the topic of how telecommunications companies can provide better support to disaster responders, and the public, in preparing for and responding to disaster. One of the issues that was noted is that the use of mobile phones as a medium for the propagation of public disaster warnings has the potential to save lives and reduce financial losses, but that the current infrastructure to support these warning systems is not always up to the task.

Some systems that relay messages via SMS text do exist in Caribbean countries, but have technical limitations that frustrate the timely delivery of warnings and are not able to provide messages targeted to all phones in a given geographical area. There are other technologies, such as Cell Broadcasting, which address these issues, but telecommunications companies have not widely deployed them, due in large part to consideration of cost. For more information on these technologies, you may refer to Chapter III of ECLAC's 2013 study on *Information and communications technology for disaster risk management in the Caribbean*, available at <http://repositorio.cepal.org/handle/11362/36735>.

As systems for disaster warning should be considered to be a public benefit, it is a reasonable use of public funding to these ends. A Universal Service Fund is an appropriate mechanism to provide such funding, as mobile phone-based warnings can be made available to everyone who has a phone. For those that do not have mobile phones, means such as sirens and loudspeakers could potentially be used to communicate warning messages; these too could potentially be implemented through the expansion of telecommunications infrastructure.

To that end, ECLAC suggests that Chapter 1 of the *Recommendations* document explicitly note the value of telecommunications to public safety, especially in the event of a disaster. Moreover, ECLAC suggest that recommendation iii be amended to read "ECTEL recommends that the scope of the USF is to ensure that all citizens and public institutions are afforded the opportunity to provide and receive information, knowledge and services via ICTs that will improve efficiency, productivity, **public safety** and **the** safety of our economies via publicly tendered projects." If these changes are adopted, they may one day help to provide appropriate justification for the inclusion of public disaster warning projects as part of the portfolio of initiatives for Universal Service Funds.