

Speech on AR2020: Launch of the Telecommunications Commission of Solomon Islands Annual Report, 2020, 15 July 2021, HPH Honiara

The Interim Commissioner
Telecommunications Commission of Solomon Islands

Salutation

[...]

Good morning and thank you all for choosing to have Breakfast with us!

Honorable Peter Shanel Aqovaka, thank you sincerely for honoring our invitation to officiate the launch of the 2020 Annual Report. Your attendance is important because it demonstrates your support for collaboration between key actors in the sector, albeit within the boundaries set down in statute, thus **balancing competition between service providers, and independence and impartiality of the Regulator**. Thank you sincerely.

Ladies and gentlemen, it would be an understatement for me to say that the role of Interim Commissioner has been a challenge. Many of you who are here today know the challenges all too well. But I inherit an established organization that has had very experienced leadership over the last decade, under a highly skilled team of individuals with substantial knowledge in the sector. I join the team with the view to providing leadership that will allow new perspectives and fresh ideas on how we can better Regulate the industry.

The last few months have been a sharp learning curve. The technical structures around the law, regulations, licensing, telecom systems, spectrum, cable capacity, minutes, data, SMS etc., and how these reach our citizens are immense. And understanding how all these come together as telecommunications, has given me a greater appreciation for the industry, and a deep sense of respect and admiration for those of you who ensure that Solomon Islanders remain connected to each other and to the world. I commend all of you whose responsibility it has been to keep these vital lines of communication going.

Telecommunications is a public good, because the benefits of communication (whether voice or fast internet services) significantly enhance the lives of our people, enable learning from around the globe, allow communication with family and friends abroad, and keep us connected even within the shores of our proud nation.

Acknowledging contributors to the Annual Report

As a sector, we are only as strong as the industry. And so I want to take this time to acknowledge each one of you, including Arthur Yen and Solomon Telekom the dominant operator in Solomon Islands, and also Arvind Autar and Bemobile as primary competitor in as far as telephony and GSMC are concerned. We look to you to set the benchmark and standards, as service providers. We also acknowledge the space that Antony Ferris and Satsol has in the market as perhaps the second leading internet service provider. At the same time we welcome all the newer players, including some of the more recent entrants, Wilson Leguvaka and Pacific Vaizeds, Dr Patrick Toito'ona and Solkonet and Sebastian Ilala and Solitech.

As a Commission, we are only as good as our last Annual Report, and so I want to thank the Evaluation Committee on their guidance over my transition into this role, the Commission staff for their commitment to this new set-up, the Economics Association of Solomon Islands for partnering with us this Annual Report, and all the stakeholders that have contributed to its content.

It would be remiss of me not to express my gratitude to the PS and officials in the Ministry of Communication for your continued willingness to consult and consider our submissions on various matters to date; and to the Australian High Commission and The New Zealand High Commission for the technical assistance you have agreed provide us, without hesitation.

Report on the Annual Report

And now to the Annual Report. Honorable Minister, you were correct in alluding to the challenges involved in putting this Annual Report together. It almost did not happen for obvious reasons – namely the difficulty in pulling together data that had NOT been updated during the pandemic, compiling a qualitative analysis that would not be a regurgitation of past reports, and pulling together a team of understudies in the sudden absence of the top 3 senior managers of the Commission over the last decade.

To provide a very brief overview:

1. The Report opens with the Chairman, Mr. George Gray (Public Solicitor) provides the Foreword, a new but important feature wherein he sets the context for the Commission to remain “mission critical” during the global pandemic. Mr Gray together with Dr Luke Forau and Mr Ricky Fuoo have been an integral to the confidence I continue to develop in this role. I am grateful for those strong remarks.
2. I am privileged to then provide an overview of the changes in the Commission over the past year which have included the change in Commissioner as the Honorable Minister has said, but also noting key statistics.
3. **Key statistics and Market Analysis** were reviewed in **Parts 2-3** respectively, and to sum up:
 - a. I reiterate my thoughts from page 11 of the report - COVID-19 pandemic has brought us an anomaly of **4% higher broadband internet penetration, 7% higher mobile penetration** with **49,207 fewer mobile subscribers** resulting in a **14% reduction in revenues** and Average Revenue Per User (ARPU) as an industry.
 - b. Interestingly in 2020 though the total mobile subscribers contracted by the figure above, the **mobile internet subscriber’s subset grew by 3%** and those who have internet according to the price per Mb enjoy a **69% price reduction since February 2019**. Further, **the price reduction and the CS2 cable have resulted in a 110% increase in mobile data usage**.
 - c. These indicators show an industry poised to bounce back with reducing prices and innovative services once the economic turmoil subsides, with strong cable capacity and satellite backup for internet and strong mobile penetration (59%) and coverage set at %.
4. **Part 4 details International Capacity**, and we again welcome the new Coral Sea Submarine Cable (CS2) operational in 2020 in collaboration with the Australian Government support.
5. **Part 5 Key Activities 2020**, and we note key activities across 2020 and 2021 as:

- a. Establishment of the SI-IXP whereby consultations have been conducted on a domestic internet exchange. What this does is it allows for domestic internet traffic to remain in the Solomon Islands for much quicker sharing of local data without having to go all the way out to the internet. At the same time it allows a single point where cache servers can be installed in Solomon Islands again to enable the saving of usually searched information locally to reduce the time it takes to go out of country and return. The cost of such a system is relatively small and we are looking at implementing this by early 2022.
- b. We noted the proposal to register SIM-cards. An amendment to introduce this law will require changes to the Telecommunications legislation and we are working with the Ministry on advancing this.

6. **In Part 6 we go through the statutory reporting requirements**, before ending with a statement of cash and receipts for the year.

All things considered, 2020 has been an eventful year for the Commission, but it is shaping up to be an even better year in 2021 and 2022. We have undertaken key internal reforms so as to ensure we are agile and fit for purpose, and continue to ensure our steps are well considered.

I think we can all take a moment to also appreciate our fellow Solomon Islanders, our clients, our subscribers, our citizens, for continually pushing the boundaries, and pressing each one of us to do our best to serve them. Their resilience in this pandemic has been exemplary and we look forward to much greater uplift in the sector once the economy bounces back fully.

With those short words I do hope you enjoy reading through the findings of our 2020 Annual Report and by all means download a copy as this will be available from our website **www.tcsi.org.sb**. We look forward to meeting with you all much more over the next year and reporting even more key achievements in the 2021.

Thank you!

Good morning!

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