



Guideline on Access, Connectivity, and Affordability of Telecommunications Services in The West Africa Region

WATRA Working Group on Consumer
Access and Experience

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1 GENERAL CONDITIONS

1.1 Context

In a context of accelerated digital transformation, access to reliable, quality, and affordable telecommunications services is a major issue for the economic and social development of the states of the West African region.

However, disparities persist in terms of coverage, service quality, and affordability, particularly between urban and rural areas. These challenges require harmonized approaches tailored to local realities.

To this end, the National Regulatory Authorities (NRAs), meeting within the West Africa Telecommunications Regulators Association (WATRA), have developed these guidelines to promote equitable access, strengthen competition, and foster digital inclusion across all Member States.

1.2 Terminology

In this document, unless otherwise specified, the following terms have the following meanings:

“Access” means any provision of infrastructure, passive or active, resources, hardware or software, or services, to enable the beneficiary to operate an electronic communications network or to provide electronic communications services, including associated services;

“Connectivity”: the ability of networks to ensure reliable, continuous, and high-quality communication between users;

“Affordability of services”: the level of cost of telecommunications services that is compatible with the purchasing power of the population.

“Consumer”: any natural person who acquires telecom goods and services for end use;

“NRA”: refers to National Regulatory Authority;

"Digital inclusion": equitable access to digital services for all population groups;

"Digital infrastructure": all the equipment and networks enabling the provision of telecommunications services;

"Interoperability": the ability of systems and services to work together seamlessly;

"Oligopoly": a market structure characterized by a limited number of dominant operators, likely to restrict competition and influence prices and the quality of services;

"Artificial intelligence (AI)": a set of technologies that enable computer systems to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence, such as learning, analysis, and decision-making;

"Internet of Things (IoT)": a network of connected physical objects capable of collecting and exchanging data via telecommunications infrastructures;

"OTT (Over-The-Top) services": digital services provided via the Internet without direct control by network operators, such as messaging, streaming, or communication applications;

"Infrastructure operator" means any person establishing electronic communications infrastructure for the purpose of leasing capacity to the State, licensed or authorized operators, and service providers.

1.3 Goals

a) Main objective

These guidelines work to establish a harmonized framework to improve access, connectivity, and affordability of telecommunications services in the West African region.

b) Specific objectives

National Regulatory Authorities (NRAs), through the implementation of these guidelines, also aim to:

- improve consumer access to affordable and reliable services;
- enhance the quality of the user experience;
- to promote healthy and fair competition;
- to ensure transparency of offers and prices;
- to promote digital inclusion and accessibility for all;

- strengthen consumer protection;
- to encourage innovation and the development of digital infrastructure.

1.4 Methodology

Based on the experience of Member States, these guidelines are part of an approach to capitalizing on best practices and trends in access, connectivity, and affordability of telecommunications services.

As such, they are developed on the basis of:

- experiences of member states;
- practices within National Regulatory Authorities (NRAs);
- work of the working group on consumer access and experience.

1.5 Provisions

National Regulatory Authorities (NRAs) are tasked with ensuring the application of legislation and regulations relating to electronic communications, while promoting fair access, quality, and affordability of services for consumers.

In this capacity, they are notably responsible for:

- ensure that all citizens have access to electronic communications services at affordable rates, including in rural areas;
- demand transparency from operators regarding offers, prices, and contractual conditions;
- monitor the quality of service and network coverage of operators in order to protect consumers and ensure market efficiency;
- to supervise the granting and enforcement of operators' access and interconnection rights in a non-discriminatory and transparent manner;
- ensure that operators identify users and retain data in accordance with the provisions of the law on the protection of personal data;
- to guarantee the application of legal and regulatory provisions, to exercise regulatory prerogatives to maintain a competitive and fair market, and to protect consumers;

- integrate universal access and digital inclusion into regional and national strategies, in order to reduce the digital divide and promote access to services for all consumers;
- etc.

2 Strategic axes

2.1 Improving consumer access to affordable and reliable telecommunications services in West Africa

We must create the conditions for healthy and fair competition by:

- break up oligopolies to promote healthy and fair competition;
- separate infrastructure operators from service operators in order to ensure market neutrality and fairness;
- implement asymmetric regulation on the wholesale market to balance the forces between players;
- create and develop Internet exchange points to improve regional efficiency and connectivity;
- to support the right of consumers to initiate collective actions (class actions) to defend their interests;
- inform consumers about their rights and the practical ways to exercise them effectively;
- to ensure the electrification of towns and villages in order to facilitate access to telecommunications services;
- Establish partnerships with universal access services to guarantee services in quantity and quality, at affordable prices.

2.2 Improve the overall quality of the consumer experience in terms of service availability, affordability, and customer support in the sub-region

In this sense, it would be necessary to:

- to listen to the consumer in order to understand their needs and expectations.
- ensure that consumer information on network coverage and quality of operators is improved.
- to ensure transparency in operators' offers.
- to ensure price transparency in operators' offers.

- create a telecommunications mediator;
- support consumer associations so that they can act as telecom mediators;
- inform consumers about their rights, and the practical ways in which they can exercise them.

2.3 Identify and address consumer-related issues, including affordability, service quality, availability, and digital inclusion.

To achieve this, it would be advisable to:

- Conduct market segment surveys to understand problems, needs, and expectations; **"See: LD on questionnaires."**
- collect complaints received from operators and consumer associations;
- develop a greener digital infrastructure;
- analyze collected data;
- develop new strategies.

3 Recommended Mechanisms

These mechanisms can be structured around various multidimensional aspects, including:

1. On the political front

Promote co-regulation between NRAs, strengthen coordination with other authorities (BCEAO, CDP, etc.), and promote regulatory and governance modernization.

2. From an economic standpoint

Stimulate investment in 5G and fiber, implement incentives for infrastructure sharing, and encourage infrastructure development.

3. On a social level

Reducing inequalities, improving access to services and price transparency, but also ensuring digital inclusion.

4. From a technological standpoint :

Deploy 5G, encourage innovation (IoT, fintech, OTT), strengthen cybersecurity and local R&D, and finally promote innovation and cybersecurity.

5. From an environmental perspective

Integrate energy efficiency into network deployment, promote resilient and sustainable infrastructure, and support sustainable development.

6. From a legal standpoint:

Revise our texts to integrate AI, IoT, and OTT, strengthen quality controls and coverage obligations and finally, modernize the regulatory framework.

➤ On regulatory modernization

The current framework is inadequate for addressing new digital services. We are facing a legal vacuum that is hindering innovation. Emerging

technologies are transforming regulation, but we lack appropriate regulatory tools.

➤ **On participatory governance**

Consumer protection associations must be at the heart of the decisions. They will be officially involved in the consultation processes.

Co-regulation with other authorities is essential to address cross-cutting issues such as cybersecurity.

➤ **On innovation and competition**

Free experimentation without risking compliance is not supported within the regulatory framework, which is essential for the fintech ecosystem.

Interoperability must be guaranteed by NRAs; this is the condition for fair and healthy competition.

4 Conclusion

These guidelines establish a harmonized framework to strengthen access, connectivity, and affordability of telecommunications services in West Africa. They emphasize the central role of National Regulatory Authorities (NRAs) in promoting fair competition, consumer protection, and digital inclusion.

The implementation of these mechanisms will:

- to reduce disparities in access and improve the quality of services for all;
- to support innovation and experimentation within a secure regulatory framework;
- to ensure participatory governance involving consumer associations and stakeholders;
- to promote sustainable, resilient, and efficient digital infrastructures.

Ultimately, these guidelines constitute a strategic tool to guide regional policies, coordinate NRA initiatives, and strengthen consumer confidence in the telecommunications ecosystem.

5 Revision

These guidelines may be periodically revised by the Assembly of Telecommunications Regulators of West Africa (ARTAO/WATRA) to take account of technological, economic, and regulatory developments in the sector.

6 Annexes

SECTOR	RECOMMENDED ACTIONS
Policy	• Define a regional macro-strategy for digital development. • Harmonization and co-regulation between member RNAs in the western zone.
Economic	• Develop an ecosystem that creates value and jobs. • Share infrastructure to reduce costs.
Sociocultural	• Ensure digital inclusion in rural areas for young people and women. • Communicate more with young innovators and develop a digital culture.
Technological	• Establish observatories on emerging issues (AI, drones, telemedicine). • Develop geographic information systems to plan and monitor the sharing of infrastructure.
Environmental	• Plan the deployment of infrastructure to avoid urban disorder and preserve the environment.
Legal	• Harmonize legislation on data protection and cybersecurity. • Establish a clear legal framework for digital finance in conjunction with the BCEAO.

Reference: WATRA/WG/CAE/2026/004

- Meeting minutes: Ouagadougou, Burkina, March 30th – April 02, 2026

Contributions of consumer associations : ASUTIC, CICODEV, ...