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## PRESS RELEASE

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad.

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### INTERNET FOR ALL

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), Islamabad hosted a webinar titled 'Internet for all' on 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 2021.

The speakers include M. Ali Ibrahim, Head of Marketing and communication, Mobilink Microfinance Bank Limited with Zouhair Khalid, Member of Prime Minister's Task Force on IT & Telecom, Former President & CEO, Mobilink, MD Mobile for Development GSMA along Pervez Iftikhar, ICT Consultant and Saad Muzaffar Waraich, GCTIO, Operations, PTCL. The session was moderated by Dr. Nadeem ul Haque, Vice-Chancellor, PIDE.

Mr. Zouhair Khalid, set the record straight by identifying internet as a necessity and not a luxury. While identifying the issues, he further added that the non-availability of internet took Pakistan at the verge of being handicapped during the initial days of Pandemic. Mr. Zouhair further added that the internet providers need to have a new approach to availability and affordability of the internet.

Mr. Pervez Iftikhar expressed that Internet was supposed to be the biggest force in overcoming the class divide in our society, yet It was used to create more divide as it is perceived as a luxury. Another reason is the non-availability of internet in major sectors of the country. We are behind India, Bangladesh and Nepal in almost all of the Telecommunication Index and the major reason for this situation is that internet wide spread depends on two things Optical Fiber cable and Spectrum. Spectrum is released by the government, then operators place bid on it and the highest bidder gets it. But in Pakistan, only a minimal amount of Spectrum is released that too on floor price and not on bidding price, which creates scarcity in the telecom industry thus resulting in increased spectrum price.

Mohammad Ali Ibrahim mentioned that one good thing that came out of this Pandemic is the fact that it jolted the digital medium and forced masses to take new routes which includes distant learning, Online banking etc. Ibrahim added that the country saw a 30 percent increase in digital payments.

Mr. Saad Waraich explained that distant learning, was different for an A class family and completely opposite for a family that is residing in far flung areas. He also stressed that Internet should be treated as a provider and not a generator. One of the main reason for the non-availability of internet in far flung areas is the high tax rates for right of way (ROW), the telcos have to pay for the license registration, ROW and other direct / indirect taxes that makes it economically difficult for them to spread the internet network. Mr. Waraich added that inconsistent policies by the government has made it almost impossible for the telcos to grow and spread internet connectivity, availability and affordability.

In ending notes, the panel stressed that the 2021 telecommunication policies should be consistent, taxes for ROW should be decreased. Universal Service Fund should be taken in consideration to provide internet for all.

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*Forwarded for the favor of publication in your esteemed newspaper / transmission.*

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