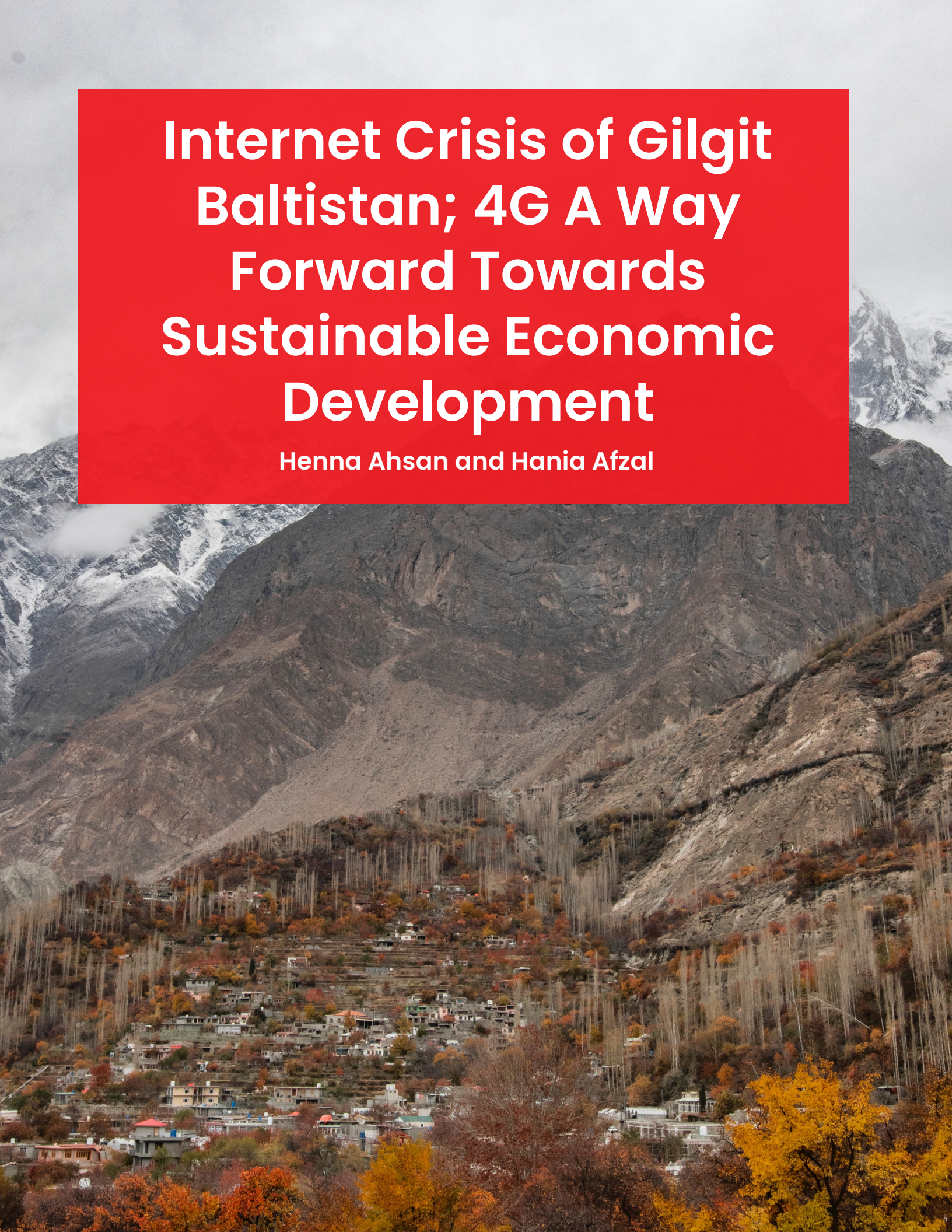


Internet Crisis of Gilgit Baltistan; 4G A Way Forward Towards Sustainable Economic Development

Henna Ahsan and Hania Afzal



A few days ago, Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, inaugurated commencement of several telecom projects in Gilgit Baltistan (GB) worth millions of dollars. All these projects are to be implemented under the umbrella of Ministry of Information Technology and Telecom (MoITT) spearheaded by SCO (Special Communications Organization) which is an armed forces entity providing telecom services in AJ&K and GB for many decades. Among these very important projects one project named GPON aims to provide high speed internet connections to domestic and commercial users in GB. GPON which stands for Gigabit Passive Optical Network is a latest technology replacing conventional copper connections and truly withstands the definition of broadband. This technology makes use of optical fiber to deliver internet speeds of 8MB, 12MB, and 25MB and even more which is far higher than speeds which were being provided by conventional copper cable networks. Currently this technology is being deployed only in major cities of Pakistan like RWP-ISB, Lahore and Karachi by existing broadband players like PTCL, Nayatel and Transworld. Along with providing high speed internet this technology will also provide an IP phone to every premises and an IP TV connection as well.

It is very refreshing news that people of Gilgit Baltistan are also going to have this latest broadband technology soon. However the serious question which needs to be answered is whether the poor people of GB will be able to take benefit of this important investment and the simple Yes or No answer to this is very difficult as it depends on some important leadership decisions. If we look at different packages and rates charged by above service providers, we see that average monthly rate of 8MB connection is Rs 2572- and first-time installation charges range around Rs. 3700 which include the deployment of a Wi-Fi router, a smart TV box and may be a new phone set as well.

When COVID-19 hit Pakistan and online education system was adopted, students faced severe issues of internet speed and connectivity. The students of GB blocked the Karakorum highway in protest to register their complaint against ICT facility as most of GB didn't had the internet facility. Student demanded that private sector should be provided with the opportunity to provide at least the 4G services so that students might be able to save their future

Amjad Hussain, a student of QAU mentioned in his interview that majority of students who had come back to GB because of hostel and university closure doesn't have any access to internet and therefore unable to attend their classes.

Sabir Hussain, another faculty member at GC University Faisalabad mentioned that he had to displace upon closure of university for delivering the online lectures to the students.

Another faculty member who doesn't want to show his identity informed that there are more than hundreds of students who demands to halt the online education system due to poor or non-availability of internet.

A student Afridi and his friends tried to resolve the issue of internet on their own for which they do trekking of almost two hours daily to reach a small mountain top for taking their online classes by risking their lives.

Service Provider	Internet Package	Monthly Charges	First time Installcation Charges
PTCL	15MB	Rs 2819	Rs 5000
Nayatel	15MB	Rs 2399	Rs 11000
Transworld	20MB*	Rs 2500	Rs 5000

Source: Service provider's websites.

So, looking at the above details it seems that paying that much amount or even some more (as the above charges does not include Smart TV and phone bill charges) may be a real challenge for the poor people of Gilgit Baltistan. As SCO is not purely a private Ltd company intended to make profits so some new, out of the box initiatives need to be taken to make people take real benefit of this extremely useful technology. As a first step SCO needs to provide connections to all the people coming in access of this technology free of cost for certain months so people could feel the usefulness of this service. Secondly monthly charges needs to be reduced to minimum at least for low data rate connections, let's say for 8MB or 10MB and higher amounts may be charged for people demanding high levels of data speeds and from commercial users. Moreover first time installation charges, which include deployment of some costly equipment, may not be completely waved off but these may be recovered from customers in maximum possible installments.

Already students of Gilgit Baltistan has suffered a lot against their education due to educational institutes closure on account of COVID 19 restrictions and who knows how long this affliction may prolong. So this high speed internet facility would prove to be a great relief for the students. Also it will take tourism in these beautiful areas to a new level with high dividends. Further providing high speed internet in these areas for all will create new job opportunities like e commerce and work from home job opportunities for both males and females. In this new era of Globalization internet has become a necessity so it should be provided at low costs or on installments plan so as to provide coverage to the marginalized segments of GB. Providing the "Internet for All" will help generate economic opportunities as well as education facility to the people of GB and will ultimately contribute towards the sustainable economic development.



CONTACT US

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE)
P.O. Box. 1091, Islamabad, 44000, Pakistan.

Tel: +92-51-9248051
Fax: +92-51-9248065