WHY SHOULD WE NOT RUSH FOR 5G?

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The prevailing Covid-19 situation has revealed how internet access has become a basic necessity of our life. As per stats available on PTA website, there are 100 Million 3G/4G subscribers in the country and 103 Million broadband subscribers. These are quite encouraging numbers but a lot more needs to be done to extend internet coverage to all especially to unserved and underserved and most deprived areas of the country.

All mobile operators working in the country have rolled out their network infrastructure to maximum limits and again as per PTA stats we have achieved 84% of the cellular Teledensity. Therefore, two prime and immediate goals of the government and the concerned institutions are proposed: to achieve hundred percent Teledensity and to ensure hundred percent 3G/4G coverage on all installed cell sites. Mobile operators do have their own motives to immediately catch on to latest developing technologies but it is the regulators and government's role to make sure that things are being implemented in the best interest of both mobile operators and the people of Pakistan.

Challenges Regarding 5G:

Indeed 5G is the technology to which we have to switch ultimately in future but we shouldn't rush for that as currently even the developed countries are not fully ready for this and are facing great challenges regarding its deployment. To mention a few there has to be massive changes in current allocated spectrum, deployment of small cells due to higher frequency bands against 5G will be requiring massive deployment of new cell sites and last but not least smooth and easy availability of cheap 5G capable handsets in the country. So there is a long road to travel to reach 5G for a country like Pakistan.

Way Forward:

Therefore instead of joining the race with developed countries to achieve 5G deployment goal our all energies should be focused on taking leverage of already deployed telecom infrastructure to extend internet reach to general populace. We have 46,950 cell sites in the country collectively installed by all CMOs and out of these 3G is deployed on about 42000 sites i.e. 3G is deployed on almost 90% sites which is quite a good number. However when we analyze subscribers data we see there only 100 million 3G/4G subscribers against 184 million total subscribers i.e. 54%. So a considerable amount of high intensity effort is needed in order to tap into this high potential of remaining 84 million subscribers to bring them into the mainstream and help them access the benefits of high speed internet. This will enable the government to realize its dream of internet for all in minimum possible time.

Policy Recommendations:

There are certain actions and initiatives which need to be taken by the government to make above all happen in minimum possible time.

- Government needs to lower duties on the import of smart phones and also new policies and initiatives need to be introduced to encourage local manufacturing and assembling of these smart phones as it could significantly lower the prices.
- Facilitating and expediting existing and new fiber deployments as these are inevitable to carry high data traffics associated with 3G/4G.
- Extending CMOs presence to remote and unserved areas through forums like universal Service Fund USF and other community support programs.
- Persuading mobile operators to have lower 3G/4G tariffs in poor and deprived areas.
- 3G was launched in Pakistan in year 2014 however in AJ&K and Gilgit Baltistan it remained unavailable till 2020. So government needs to remove hurdles in 3G spectrum allocation to all operators in AJ&K and Gilgit Baltistan to have a healthy competition and speedy rollout of 3G/4G services.
- We have more than 85000 km of optical fiber network for national connectivity so we must take advantage of this huge network by offering new licenses to the operators in FTTH (Fiber to the Home) and GPON (Gigabit Passive Optical Network) domains.
- And last but not least expediting work on dams and other under progress power generation projects so CMOs have lower maintenance cost on cell sites.