

HUMAN RIGHTS

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Which Is the First Nation to Make Internet Access a Right

By [Mirva Lempiainen](#) | August 8, 2011

HELSINKI -- Finland may function virtually in the dark during the long winter months, but it is the first country in the world to see the light in ensuring that Internet access becomes a basic right for its citizens. Finland was the first country to enshrine broadband Internet access into our bill of rights,” Suvi Linden, Finland’s special envoy for the Broadband Commission for Digital Development, said in an interview with The InterDependent.

As a minister of communications last year, Linden introduced the bill with the communications ministry passed with “a very large margin of support,” she said.

Part of the goal was to keep Internet access affordable to all Finns and to avoid creating a second class of citizens that is cyberilliterate and estranged from modern society. More than 85 percent of Finns now have access to the Internet, placing the country among the world’s Top 10 most wired nations.

The Broadband Commission, a collaboration between the International Telecommunication Union, a UN agency, and Unesco, began last year with the support of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. It aims to promote broadband connections around the world and showcase the economic and social benefits of reliable Internet access through its reports.

The commission is chaired by President Paul Kagame of Rwanda and the Mexican billionaire, Carlos Slim Helu. Among its 54 commissioners are international politicians and well-known entrepreneurs, like Sir Richard Branson, the founder of the Virgin Group.

Since June 2010, Internet service providers in Finland have been required to ensure that each household - no matter how remotely located - has access to a broadband connection that is at least one megabit a second. Finland’s population density is about 40 people per square mile, the third lowest in Europe. Some Finns live nearly alone on islands, while others live far from civilization in the woods of Lapland.

By law, operators are generally not allowed to charge more than 30 to 40 euros (\$43 to \$58) a month for a broadband connection. In bigger cities with more competition, as in Helsinki, people can get unlimited one-megabit a second Internet access for as low as 14 euros (\$20) a month.



Eskinder Debebe/UN Photo

Finland has made Internet access a human right. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon visited the country in July. Here, a stop at a church on Seili Island, home of the Archipelago Research Institute. Next to Ban is Tarja Halonen, Finland's president.

The government's next goal is to provide an Internet speed of 100 megabits a second to all interested households by 2015. But in the meantime, the ministry wants to hear from anyone who still doesn't have access to the one megabit per second connection that is now protected by law.

"This is a great thing from the viewpoint of the citizens, but the government's motivation for passing the law was also partly selfish," Linden, the special envoy, said, explaining that now more public services can be offered online at lower costs.

It is already possible, for example, to reserve day-care services, doctor appointments and library books online in Finland. Some 85 percent of people use online banking services. In the future, Linden sees the Internet playing a big role in elder care, allowing older people to live at home longer.

"Finland is the fastest aging country in the OECD," she said, referring to the 34 countries that make up the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, an international economic group in Paris.

With reliable Internet access in older people's homes, the elderly can be in constant contact to health care providers instead of waiting for their weekly visits to the doctors' offices.

“Family members will also be able to check up on their older parents via the Internet, to make sure they haven’t tripped or fallen at home,” Linden said. “This adds security.”

Louis Zacharilla, a founder of the Intelligent Community Forum, a think tank, said that Finland has demonstrated that Internet access is “essential to human endeavor,” and access to it as important as access to the electrical grid.

“I hope other governments will be picking up on this,” Zacharilla said, particularly developing countries that connects them to the global economy.”

Earlier this summer in New York, the Intelligent Community Forum gave Linden an award for her dedication to expanding access to broadband Internet. In her award speech Linden stressed the value of online access in developing countries.

“How can we reach the Millennium Development Goals?” she asked the audience. “In my opinion, mobile connections are the solution,” since they open doors to financial development.

“The future will rely on broadband enabled platforms,” she said.

Linden also said that mobile Internet availability can help people living in rural areas in developing countries connect with the rest of the world by allowing them to get health care information online, check on market prices and to access weather reports.

To some extent, mobile phone services have already transformed regions. More than 80 percent of the world’s nations have used mobile phones to support health activities in their country, according to a World Health Organization report released in June. The report was produced with the support of the mHealth Alliance and United Nations Foundation research and advocacy campaign.



Suvi Linden, Finland's special envoy for the Broadband Commission for Digital Development, and Louis Zacharilla, a founder of the Internet Community Forum, a think tank.

Linden said she would like to see Internet access treated as a human right. Expanding broadband links worldwide is one of the commission's aims by 2015, the deadline for reaching the Millennium Development Goals.

To enable more people to reap benefits from the Web, the commission gives practical advice to governments on how to work with the private sector to increase Internet access.

One effort is the "B more" campaign, which highlights the benefits of broadband through videos and posters like improved access to education and new ways to save energy.

In June, a report by a United Nations special rapporteur said that disconnecting people from the Internet, which happened across the Middle East and North Africa during the protests this spring - is a human rights violation and against international law.

Frank La Rue's report took issue with countries restricting Internet use at "times of social unrest, or anniversaries of politically or historically significant events." It also objected to new laws in England and France that ban repeat copyright violators from going online.

The report, delivered to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, stressed that interactive sites like Facebook and Twitter can play a big part in creating more equal and just societies by mobilizing people.

"As such, facilitating access to the Internet for all individuals, with as little restriction to online content as possible, should be a priority for all States," La Rue wrote.

It is not expensive to expand broadband connections. Linden said that Finland's achievements in information technology did not cost the government more money. Regulating the markets so that telecommunication operators invest in the field has helped to limit expenses.

She has been surprised, she said, by the attention Finland's groundbreaking law has attracted globally.

"It's an honor to both Finland and myself."

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