

### REGIONAL FREE ROAMING LAUNCH- 16<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 2019

#### Details:

On 16<sup>th</sup> December 2017, the Ministers in charge of Telecommunications and ICT adopted the free regional roaming Regulation in Abuja, Nigeria. This historic event laid the foundation for an improved likelihood of the ordinary ECOWAS citizens, and brought remarkable contributions to the regional integration process, as we move from ECOWAS of States to ECOWAS of people.

The ECOWAS free roaming Regulation is similar to:

-  Africa Telecommunications Union (ATU) on “Mobile Roaming in Africa”;
-  International Telecommunications Union (ITU) Mobile Roaming (IMR) consultation; and
-  European Union (EU) initiatives on mobile roaming.

Prior to the adoption of the ECOWAS free roaming initiative in Abuja, Nigeria, Regulators of Burkina Faso, Cote D'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and Sierra Leone met on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2016 in Abidjan to adopt the “Abidjan Protocol” for the implementation of a regional free roaming services.

Following several planning meetings in Dakar, Conakry and Lomé on the implementation of free roaming services (voice, SMS and data), seven (7) Francophone countries namely, Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Cote D'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Benin and Togo, implemented free roaming initiative based the Abidjan Protocol in early 2018.

From 28<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> March 2019, the Council of Ministers in charge of Telecommunications and ICT met to discuss a wide range of issues among others, which include the following:

- i. learn from the achievements and issues encountered in the implementation of the Abidjan Protocol on roaming;
- ii. collect and validate the tariff ceilings of each member state;
- iii. constitute a facilitation group for the implementation of the ECOWAS regulation on roaming; and
- iv. adopt a revised Action Plan.

On 26<sup>th</sup> April 2019, the Director General of the National Telecommunications Commission (NATCOM), **Mr. Maxwell Hingha Massaquoi** signed on behalf of the Government of Sierra Leone, a Memorandum of Understanding with other Mano River Union (MRU) member countries for the actualization of the regional free roaming (One Area Network) initiative based on the principles of collective responsibility and best practices.

The principal objective of the regional free roaming initiative is to establish a single ICT market in West Africa. It also aims at setting up harmonized legal and tariff framework for roaming services on public mobile communications networks within ECOWAS Member States.

The regional free roaming services will apply to all mobile communications service operators and providers established in all ECOWAS Member States and apply to all mobile communications services originating and terminating traffic in any ECOWAS Member State, regardless of its nature. However, the regional free roaming initiative does not apply to private mobile communications services (e.g. police, military etc.) and non-terrestrial networks.

The benefits of the regional free roaming are numerous. Firstly, it establishes an appropriate legal framework to reduce or eliminate roaming charges within the sub-region, thereby leading to digital ubiquity. Secondly, it creates integrated ICT market in Member States. Thirdly, it serves as a tool for borderless communication and regional integration that can significantly improve the daily lives of citizens who move within the sub-region. Fourthly, it strengthens cohabitation and promotion of a common field of telecommunications and ICT services, in line with vision of SMART Africa. Lastly, it facilitates the mobility of inhabitants with ICTs.

The regional free roaming initiative is anchored on provision of quality services including voice, data, short message services (SMS) and emergency roaming access, tariffs/charges, and revenue sharing between visited and home networks.

Under the free roaming initiative Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) will reasonably provide services based on objective, transparent and non-discriminatory conditions and will provide access to all network elements and associated facilities, relevant services, and software and information systems necessary for the provision of roaming services to customers.

In addition, MNOs will enter into roaming arrangements (operators to conclude roaming agreements) with all operators in other member states in order to optimize roaming services.

Furthermore, Operators will provide access to voice, SMS and data roaming services to roaming subscribers while user authentication services shall be free of charge and shall not entail any direct charges to customers.

Roaming customers shall access emergency numbers of the visited country and receive emergency alerts under the same conditions as subscribers in the visited country. In addition, calls to emergency numbers and emergency alerts shall be free of charge for the roaming customer, as well as the facility to transfer free of charge calls and other electronic communications to emergency numbers under the free roaming regulation.

In the process of providing free roaming services, Operators are required to handover free of charge all calls and other electronic communications to emergency numbers under the free roaming regulation. Similarly, Operators of the visited country shall deliver automatically and immediately at no cost, by an SMS, email or pop-up window on the mobile device, basic personalized information on the roaming tariff applied once the customer makes or receives calls, SMS or uses data services in the member state visited. Equally, Operators shall inform roaming users of harmonized roaming rates for voice calls, SMS and data services while roaming within the region, as well as the roaming rates for their network.

The tariff chargeable on the regional free roaming is initially predicated on the Abidjan Protocol given its successful implementation in seven (7) member states but this charging system will be in compliance with ECOWAS Regulation in a couple of months after the commercial launch of the services in the country. The major difference between the ECOWAS Regulations and the Abidjan Protocol is the duration of receipt of free calls and SMS in a month.

The tariff conditions applicable to the Abidjan Protocol on regional free roaming are detailed as follows:

- the tariff for free roaming calls for subscribers travelling in the free roaming countries shall not exceed the highest tariff for international calls from the visited country to other countries in the ECOWAS region;
- the tariff for free roaming SMS for customers shall not exceed the highest tariff for international SMS from visited country to other countries in the region;
- the tariff for free roaming calls originating from the visited network and terminating on any network of visited country shall not exceed the highest tariff for local calls of the visited country;
- the tariff for free roaming SMS originating from the visited network and terminating on any network of the visited country shall not exceed the highest tariff for local SMS of the visited country;
- receiving roaming calls & SMS shall be free of charge within a maximum period of thirty (30) consecutive days or three hundred (300) minutes, whichever comes first, in one of the free roaming country in the ECOWAS region;
- an operator shall charge free roaming data services not exceeding the highest megabyte rate in the visited country;
- receiving and listening to a voice message while roaming shall be free of charge; and
- calls to emergency numbers and emergency alerts shall be free of charge for the roaming customers.

Under the regional free roaming initiative, MNOs shall share revenue on 60% and 40% basis for visited network and home network respectively. The revenue sharing conditions are as follows:

- i. roaming revenue for international and local voice calls & SMS shall be shared on 60% and 40% basis for visited and home networks respectively;
- ii. the visited network operator will receive a revenue not exceeding 60% of the retail price for free international and local roaming calls & SMS originating from the visited network;
- iii. the visited network operator will receive a revenue not exceeding 80% of retail price free for roaming data services originating from the visited network; and
- iv. incoming international voice calls and SMS originating by free roaming customers from free roaming countries in the ECOWAS region shall not attract any surcharge or tax levied by the recipient country.

As a sequel to the signing of MOU by the Director General of the National Telecommunications Commission (NATCOM) on 26<sup>th</sup> April 2019, the Commission rigorously embarked on the implementation of the regional free roaming initiative, where significant progress has been made including the following:

1. conducted sensitization on free roaming at the borders of Liberia & Guinea;
2. organized a meeting with Telecoms Operators in Freetown on free roaming implementation;
3. forwarded a letter of accession to the free roaming implementation in July 2019 to the Director General, ARPT, Guinea, based the Abidjan Protocol;
4. set up a National Committee on free roaming, with representatives drawn from the Ministry of Information and Communications, NATCOM, Mobile Operators, Consumer Protection Society, Civil Society and other Stakeholders;
5. collected tariffs from Operators and determined national tariff ceilings for local & international voice calls and SMS;
6. officially submitted national tariff ceilings for ECOWAS Member States and Sierra Leone to the ECOWAS Commission and to the Director General, ARPT, Guinea for the attention of Regulators in free roaming countries (tables 1&2 depict the tariff ceilings);
7. some Operators in free roaming countries have opened roaming services with MNOs in Sierra Leone;
8. some Operators have commenced signing free roaming agreements at group levels with MNOs in Sierra Leone to firm-up free roaming agreements; and
9. MNOs in Sierra Leone have commenced configuration of free roaming parameters on their MSCs, HLR, IN and billing platforms.

**Table1: Tariff Ceilings for Regional Free Roaming in the ECOWAS Region**

**International Outgoing Tariffs**

No.	Country	Orange's Tariff (Le.)	Africell's Tariff (Le.)	Qcell's Tariff (Le.)	Sierratel's Tariff (Le.)	ECOWAS Tariff Ceilings
1	Guinea	4,000	5,500	2,063	2,280	<b>5,500</b>
2	Burkina Faso	4,000	4,600	2,063	1,980	<b>4,600</b>
3	Senegal	3,000	5,100	3,250	2,580	<b>5,100</b>
4	Togo	4,000	4,300	2,063	1,980	<b>4300</b>
5	Benin	4,000	5,900	2,063	1,980	<b>5900</b>
6	Ivory Coast	4,000	4,800	2,063	2,280	<b>4,800</b>
7	Mali	4,000	4,800	2,063	1,980	<b>4,800</b>
8	The Gambia	6,000	6,000	2,063	2,280	<b>6,000</b>
9	Ghana	3,000	3,500	2,063	2,580	<b>3,500</b>
10	Liberia	4,000	8,200	2,063	2,580	<b>8200</b>
11	Nigeria	1,500	1,500	2,063	960	<b>2,063</b>
12	Niger	3,000	3,500	2,063	1,980	<b>3,500</b>
13	Cape Verde	3,000	3,100	2,063	1,980	<b>3,100</b>
14	Guinea Bissau	6,000	7,300	2,063	3,120	<b>7,300</b>
<b>Local Off-net Tariffs</b>		650	650	650	650	<b>650</b>
<b>International SMS</b>		300	300	300	300	<b>300</b>
<b>Local SMS</b>		135	135	135	135	<b>135</b>

Country	SIERRA LEONE
<b>Selected Option</b>	<b>Tariff Ceilings</b>
<b>Local Call Rate</b>	650
<b>Call Rate to Country of the Zone (including country of Origin /min)</b>	5,900
<b>Local SMS Tariff</b>	135
<b>SMS Tariff to a Country in the Zone</b>	300
<b>Reception of Call (volume and duration)</b>	The first 300 minutes are free within the limit of 30 consecutive days of stay
<b>The Benefits of Free Roaming</b>	After the exhaustion of 30 days and return to the country of origin

**Table 2: National Tariff Ceilings for Regional Free Roaming**

**NB: The Rates are in Leones  
1USD= 9,316.37 SLL**

In pursuit of accomplishing the free roaming initiative in Sierra Leone, the National Committee on free roaming is set to urge the MNOs to finalize configuration of roaming parameters, as well as commence testing free roaming services for initial welcome text messages and tariffs chargeable for services. These tests will be conducted in any of the free roaming countries in an effort to launch the free roaming services in Sierra Leone on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2019.