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| **Council 2021 Virtual consultation of councillors, 8-18 June 2021** | A picture containing text, clipart  Description automatically generated |
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| **Agenda item: PL 3.3** | **Document C21/74-E** |
| **7 April 2021** |
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| Report by the Secretary-General | |
| IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE FUNCTIONING AND ACTIVITIES OF ITU | |

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| Summary  This document summarizes a preliminary analysis of the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on some areas of activity and functioning of ITU, presenting available facts, underlining the lessons learned, and highlighting some aspects that may be considered for the future.  Action required  The Council is invited to **consider** the document.  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  References  Documents [VC/13](https://www.itu.int/md/S20-CLVC-C-0013/en), [VC/13(Rev.1)](https://www.itu.int/md/S20-CLVC-C-0013/en), [C21/70](https://www.itu.int/md/S21-CL-C-0070/en), [C21/68](https://www.itu.int/md/S21-CL-C-0068/en), [C21/29](https://www.itu.int/md/S21-CL-C-0029/en), [C20/53](https://www.itu.int/md/S20-CL-C-0053/en), [C21/7](https://www.itu.int/md/S21-CL-C-0007/en), [C21/50](https://www.itu.int/md/S21-CL-C-0050/en) |

## 1. Introduction

1.1. 11 March 2021 marked one year since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic. The pandemic has had a huge impact on the functioning and activities of most organizations in the short run, possibly expanding to the medium-and even long-term. The timely implementation of specific mitigation measures in ITU premises has been successful in avoiding transmission within ITU. With the start of the lockdown on 20 March 2020 ITU staff have normally worked from home and meetings have been virtual. Detailed impact assessments will be crucial for designing a recovery strategy, affecting the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of the Union. As the world recovers from and adjusts to the new normal created by the COVID-19 pandemic, ITU is also mobilizing around the United Nations' call to build back better.

1.2. This document aims to make a preliminary analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the activities and functioning of ITU, presenting facts, underlining the lessons learned, and bringing the attention to some aspects that may be considered in the short- and medium-term to make ITU a more modern, resilient, and sustainable organization while continuing to provide a high quality of services to its membership. Following the guidance of the ITU Council on the different aspects addressed in this document, and others that may be related, a further analysis will be made so as to identify ways to adapt to the new normal and improve ITU’s efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability.

## 2. Impact of COVID-19 on ITU World Conferences, Meetings and Events

* 1. The organization of conferences, assemblies, and events is one of the areas most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as they had to be held virtually or postponed. Since March 2020, many meetings planned by ITU have been held virtually, including the Radio Regulation Board (RRB), Advisory Groups of the three Sectors, Study Groups, and Working parties. Some of the major ITU events, such as the WSIS Forum, AI for Good Global Summit, Global Symposium for Regulators (GSR), ITU Digital World, were postponed but held virtually throughout the year while WTSA-20 was postponed to 2022 and WTDC-21 may also be postponed to 2022.
  2. Two Virtual Consultations of Councillors (VCCs) were organized in 2020, in lieu of the 2020 session of the Council. After consultation with Council Member States on holding a possible virtual meeting of the Council in 2021, it was agreed that the virtual consultation should not be considered as a session of the Council, should be of a non-decisional nature, and should be considered as a consultation by correspondence, organized consistent with Rule 3.1 of the Rules of Procedure of Council.
  3. The total number of virtual events amounted to 288 with 42,055 registered participants in 2020. This was an increase of 107% in events and 93% in participants compared to 2019 and contributed to the improved inclusiveness in the work of the Union (for example, WRS-20, WSIS Forum 2020, AI for Good Global Summit and GSR were attended by up to 4-times more participants than the physical format). In total this amounted to over 9,700 virtual sessions with nearly 340,000 attendees. *Zoom* accounted for over 4,700 virtual sessions (48%) with over 190,000 attendees (56%), and the remaining were shared between *Interprefy*, *GoToMeeting* and *MyMeetings,* whilst *Teams* was mainly used for internal ITU meetings.
  4. The conference management service has been able to respond to the growing number of requests for virtual events and meetings. Electronic events support has increased over 100% during 2020, which includes the technical support to delegates and participants for access, registration, accreditation, operation and other technical assistance (provided in different time zones). ITU’s quick use of in-house expertise to adapt tools and processes to the new digital reality was recognized by the Geneva Internet Platform and DiploFoundation at the 6th Geneva Engage Awards, where ITU won the ‘Online meetings and participation’ category.
  5. Most of the meetings organized virtually were very much appreciated by the participants and ran smoothly by the ITU Secretariat. **The lessons learned** include that virtual meetings have proved to be more inclusive than physical ones and often had more participants than the same meetings previously held physically.
* In many cases, the organization of virtual meetings has a higher degree of flexibility, can be more easily organized and at shorter notice. Higher participation may be attributed to the fact that attendance for online meetings has no travel costs associated with it. Virtual meetings also have a much smaller environmental footprint when considering delegate, staff and interpreter flights, freight, waste, water, and energy consumption in the context of physical events.
* However, there is a risk of saturating audiences, and membership in particular, when events on similar topics are scheduled close in time to each other. Consequently, there is a need for more detailed planning and coordination in order to achieve the desired impact and avoid webinar fatigue.
  1. The **constraints or challenges** include limited bandwidth (for audio and video), poor transmission quality, or other connection capabilities by some participants. Also, in certain meetings, including Study Group meetings, there was an agreement on the decision-making process, while in others, such as the VCCs, provisional outcomes on a subject had to be followed by formal approval by correspondence as per rule 3.2 of the Rules of Procedure of the Council.
* Overall, the support and the participation in virtual meetings required new skills and functions for the ITU staff (helping moderators, delegates, Chairs, and Secretaries, to connect to platforms and assist during the virtual meetings) and for participants. The usage of different platforms for different meetings has created problems in the access and usage.
* It was also a challenge to adjust to reduced meeting time per day and to manage a lack of timeslots that are fully convenient for all time zones. ITU used the timeslots 12:00 -15:00 or 13:00 -16:00 CEST with very good results on using efficiently the time for the meetings (very few or short breaks etc.) but it poses a particular burden on certain regions.
* Reduced interpretation time per day but with the same cost (where available) was also experienced. While it is not always possible to provide interpretation, captioning has proven a useful low-cost tool to assist non-English speaking participants, as well as persons with hearing impairments.
  1. Taking into consideration the above, the following is proposed to be considered by the Council.
* Considering the success of virtual meetings organized in 2020-2021, encouraging virtual or hybrid formats for certain events and meetings in the post-COVID time may be considered by the Councillors, resulting in efficiencies and reduced environmental impacts mainly linked to international travel in line with ITU’s mandate and role as a front runner in using ICTs for sustainable development. At the same time, the methods used to take decisions in 2020 and/or 2021 could be assessed and alternative decision-making processes appropriate for different situations may be considered in particular for hybrid events where physical participants currently enjoy greater rights than remote participants.

**3. Impact of COVID-19 on ITU Working Methods, Working Space and Sustainability**

3.1. As the COVID-19 pandemic raised an array of concerns in terms of social distancing in the Office, many organizations were forced to introduce working from home in their work environment from one day to the next. This may have led to a significant change in the perception of the office's role in the context of their professional activities. It has also contributed to a substantial rethinking in many organizations and has anchored remote working as a useful or even desirable form of work. Most of the ITU staff (>90%) also works remotely since March 2020 which had a strong impact on the way ITU staff delivered their services.

* Almost all missions abroad have been cancelled since April 2020. This resulted in unspent appropriations on travel and led to significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Emissions from ITU mission flights decreased by 85% from 1898 tons CO2 in 2019 to 267 tons CO2 in 2020.
* Teleworking supported the further transition to electronic workflows, allowing ITU to move closer to becoming a paperless organization. One measure taken to encourage maintaining paper free processes upon return to the office was the decommissioning of the pneumatic tube in early 2021.
* A ‘Return to office (RTO)’ plan was developed. Alongside the plan, all premises of the Union were prepared with the equipment and procedures to fulfil the rules during the crises. More information can be found at the following address: <https://itu-office-presence-covid19.eu>.
* ITU has been working on space mitigation measures following the UN recommendation for maintaining social distancing of 2 meters in office spaces. Larger spaces would be required for conferences in the future or conferences may have to consider limiting the number of participants physically present, due to social distancing regulations.
* New staff support services were introduced including medical and psychological support, promotion of informal virtual social events with other colleagues, senior and elected officials, virtual parties at the end of the year and for special occasions.
* COVID-19 also highlighted the need for internal communications to be structured. To compensate to some extent for the lack of networking on the premises, ITU introduced ‘ITU Connections’, a newsletter by staff for staff. This has been made possible through the Council approval of an ITU staff resource dedicated to internal and external communications in support of the new ITU Headquarters project.

3.2. It is expected that extensive teleworking and the use of virtual meetings may continue into 2022 and beyond, when staff will need to relocate in connection with the new building project. As the COVID-19 crisis represented an additional degree of complexity, ITU selected a consulting company, *Drees & Sommer (D&S)*, to support the development and implementation of the Staff working Conditions Strategy and Implementation Plan for the new building (more details can be found in document [C21/29](https://www.itu.int/md/S21-CL-C-0029/en)). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications regarding the future ITU work environment will be analyzed at an early stage of the project.

3.3. Widespread teleworking may remain a long-term feature of the future work environment, catalyzed by the experiences made with teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, ITU staff members may benefit from enhanced productivity and gain in time by no longer commuting to work and more control over one’s time. On the other hand, there are increasing reports of some staff members feeling they are “always on”, which tends to blur work and home life into one. In addition, some staff members struggle with unsuitable facilities in their home.

* Staff working remotely may develop new routines in terms of time management, which could create rigidities during the Return to Office. The same principle could apply with wellbeing habits while working from home and their possible transposition of these habits to the office.
* With most staff working remotely, the support services had to be managed remotely, and this will need further development during 2021 and beyond. This should include: a virtual help desk; digital processes, collaboration tools, and digital signature/approval mechanisms; electronic records and information management support systems and process; online workplace booking system to facilitate unassigned desk policy; and ITU infrastructures supporting teleworking, considering the substantial increase in virtual events and meetings, both internally and externally.
* Other emerging issues may be related to, for example: time zone support for virtual events through overtime work; physical and/or psychological impact of teleworking (stress, isolation, anxiety, health); work-life balance; gender inequality in teleworking (harms women more than men); obsolete staff functions, requiring new trainings; postponed leaves; etc. Necessary guidelines to allow for more flexibility in the choice of working hours and arrangements could be developed.

3.4. Taking into consideration the above-mentioned, the points below are proposed to be considered by the Council:

* How to translate the learnings on new ways of work and travel modalities from the COVID-19 pandemic into a longer-term emission reductions strategy instead of bouncing back to pre-COVID levels of GHG emissions including by reducing emissions from flights.
* The Guidelines of the High-Level Commission on Management (HLCM) of the United Nations on: a) Model policy of Flexible Working Arrangements and b) Operationalization of the Senior Leadership Commitments more flexible ways of contracts and working in the new normal, in line with the UN system strategy on the future of work ([CEB/2019/1/Add.2](https://unsceb.org/topics/future-work)).
* The prioritization of the ITU digital transformation initiative and adoption of a digital transformation strategy to be included in, and aligned with, the ITU Strategic Plan.
* The working conditions aligned with the perspectives of Gender and Accessibility.

## Impact of COVID-19 on ITU’s Financial position and Membership

* 1. In 2020, despite the situation related to COVID-19, ITU did not experience any significant decrease in the assessed contributions from Members States, Sector Members, Associates and Academia. As of December 31, 2020, the collection rate of contributions remained high: 95% in line with previous years.
  2. COVID-19 has generated savings during the implementation of the 2020 budget. Since all official missions and physical conferences were cancelled, these savings were mainly in travel costs; fellowships; equipment purchases; cleaning; electricity; and meetings. It should be noted that the savings achieved offset the decline in revenues, mainly from the sale of publications. The postponement of the ITU Telecom World 2020 event in Viet Nam also impacted on cost recovery revenues. It should also be noted that there were expenses that were not foreseen in the 2020 budget. These unplanned expenses include COVID-19 costs, decisions and resolutions with financial implications after WRC-19, contribution to UNSMIS health insurance, etc. As of 31 December 2020, COVID-19’s expenses amount to CHF1,532,000 (details in Annex 1).
  3. Despite the challenges of COVID and the global economic slowdown, and some resulting consolidation in the industry, ITU membership remained stable in 2020, and even grew slightly. ITU membership reached 925 entities, including almost 100 new members. The strongest growth in industry membership came through ITU-T. Leading academia specializing in emerging topics also joined ITU, attracted by new activities. Furthermore, new reduced fees for SMEs were introduced in 2020, as per PP Resolution 209 (Dubai, 2018), attracting more than 20 companies in the first year. That said, a significant number of memberships were at risk at the end of 2020, with almost 100 suspended or frozen for non-payment of fees, with another 16 denunciations announced in 2020 to take effect in 2021. Every effort is being made to maintain existing members, including those at risk, while attracting new members in 2021.
  4. The quality and extensive support for the members have secured the revenues of the Union. **The lessons learned** include the diversification of the tools to communicate externally on the ITU activities and to contact possible new members. For example, while the sponsorships of the events have seen a decrease in the first period, the packages offered together with the increasing audience stimulated sponsors to come back.
  5. Taking into consideration the above-mentioned, the following points are proposed to be considered by the Council:
* The financial support for the projects or programmes that facilitate the communication with the existing and potential members of the Union, such as My ITU, ITU website, unified platform for meetings, and dedicated platform for approval of decisions by correspondence.
* The financial support for making ITU meetings and events more accessible, making ITU a champion on accessibility.

1. **ITU’s Strategic role in the new normal**
   1. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the critical role of ICTs for continued functioning of societies but has also brought to the forefront the startling digital inequalities between and within countries. Bound by the powerful belief that technology can be a source of good for everyone, ITU Members have stepped up and engaged in activities that have proven essential in saving lives and keeping economies going.
   2. ITU has been helping countries to fully utilize digital technologies to respond to and recover from COVID-19, and to build preparedness for similar future global emergencies. Now more than ever, the world needs to be able to rely on ICTs and ITU's leadership in promoting universal, secure, reliable, and affordable connectivity.
   3. Many international organizations also learned about the importance of ICTs in a situation of crisis and tried to get mandate for ICT coordination related with their area of responsibility. The crisis helped the competition to grow in the international environment regarding the coordination of different projects on connectivity or financing the connectivity. There are initiatives within the ecosystem that create parallel tracks with ITU’s mandate on connectivity and digital services delivery at the same time creating opportunities to strengthen ITU’s role in the ICT environment.
   4. Based on the strengths of ITU with technical expertise and experience in ICTs, the Union needs to clarify its critical roles towards enhancing ICTs to achieve the sustainable development. **The lessons learned** include that it is very important to communicate very well about the services, products, and initiatives that ITU can provide, their importance, and the added value that ITU brings with these services. Improving existing capabilities/skills in ITU and the acquisitions of the skills and expertise needed to operate and face the challenges in the new normal will be essential, especially in the international coordination environment. Having a “One ITU” approach when addressing the new challenges, providing services to the membership and communicating is fundamental to continue to position the organization and its mandate.
   5. Taking into consideration the above-mentioned, the points below are proposed to be considered by the Council:

* Invite Member States to share the expectations in the post-COVID world and how ITU can best deliver against those expectations.
* Developing a long-term vision about the role of ITU in the post-COVID world and given the framework of the development of the new ITU strategic plan for 2024 – 2027, inviting ITU membership to actively participate in the open process to co-create the new strategies for the Union.

Annex 1

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| **COVID-19 2020 related expenses** | |
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|  | **Actual 2020** |
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| Medical advisor full time + psychologist | 169 |
| Infrared cameras and other equipment | 130 |
| Supplies (Masks, hydroalcoholic gel, …) | 108 |
| Software (security) | 21 |
| Mobile phones (purchase) | 125 |
| Mobile phones (subscriptions) | 190 |
| IT peripherals (laptops, screens, etc.) | 317 |
| Additional support for teleworking | 111 |
| Licenses for virtual conferences, meetings, etc. | 117 |
| Support (moderators and other support) for meetings | 199 |
| Others | 45 |
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| **TOTAL** | **1.532** |