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**Contribution by the People’s Republic of China**

Recommendations to Include the ICTs for Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) into the Strategic Goals of ITU Strategic Plan for 2024-2027

Background

On July 15, 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the COVID-19 pandemic continued to constitute a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).[[1]](#footnote-1) Judging from the WHO's declarations, PHEICs are occurring more frequently since the beginning of the 21st century, and their spread and impact are expanding from regional to global, causing huge impacts on global population and economic development. Today, telecommunications and ICTs are offering new tools for mankind to respond to public health emergencies and are indispensable core inputs for the global and national economy and the well-being of all societies. They have played a significant part in both the emergency response and recovery phases of public health emergencies, and are showing great potentials for development.[[2]](#footnote-2) The ITU is the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies (ICTs). It allocates global radio spectrum and satellite orbits, develops the technical standards that ensure networks and technologies seamlessly interconnect, and strives to improve access to ICTs to underserved communities worldwide.[[3]](#footnote-3) By leveraging its strengths during the pandemic, the ITU has become an important force in ensuring the resilience and connectivity of the world. It launched the Global Network Resiliency Platform (#REG4COVID) in March 2020 to assist national policy-makers, regulators and industry stakeholders in responding to the increasing pressures on global networks during the COVID-19 crisis, and published the *ITU Guidelines for National Emergency Telecommunication Plans* for the development and implementation of national emergency telecommunication plans (NETPs) and any other tailored contingency plans, which cover infectious diseases by disaster type.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Internationally, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* in 2015, which sets such goals as "ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages" "build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation" and "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable".[[5]](#footnote-5) The 20th Edition of ITU GSR (GSR-20) proposed the creation of an adaptive, resilient, collaborative and fit-for-purpose regulatory ecosystem to build back better, drive digital transformation for all, and respond to the challenges of digital transformation in the aftermath of global crises and beyond.[[6]](#footnote-6) The outcome of the GSR is the *Best Practice Guidelines: The gold standard for digital regulation*. One of the proposed reforms is to upgrade national emergency plans: creation and implementation of effective emergency plans provides for better preparedness for and decision-making during crises. Bilateral, regional and international cooperation is required to ensure business and public service continuity and underpin national recovery efforts. Policymakers should ensure that these plans, if they do not already do so, address health emergencies as well as physical disasters.[[7]](#footnote-7)

From the perspective of member states, countries all place a high priority on the important role of ICTs in preventing and controlling public health emergencies. Many countries have already used communication records and data to track the dynamics of the pandemic, trace the history of exposure to the virus, locate virus transmission paths, and predict the developments of the pandemic. During the 2014 Outbreak of Ebola in multiple countries in West Africa, Orange Telecom in Senegal supplied anonymous voice and SMS messages extracted from 150,000 cell phones to Flowminder, a Swedish nonprofit organization, which used the information to map population movements in the region, locate local outbreak areas, predict the spread of the virus, and provide first-hand information for the rational distribution of medical supplies and the optimal routing of aids. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) obtained location information from mobile operators for users calling the Ebola helpline and commissioned Esri, a mapping software company, to use this location information and population survey data to create a visualized map, which clearly shows the location and migration path of people infected with the virus, helping the government mobilize more medical resources to assist residents in the area.[[8]](#footnote-8) In 2020, the Indian government developed a mobile app called "Aarogya Setu", which uses the Bluetooth to automatically track contacts and conduct location-based COVID-19 statistics.[[9]](#footnote-9) China launched the "Communication Big Data Travel Card" during the pandemic, which allows individuals to check their domestic and international itineraries for the past 14 days, and explores the use of communication big data to create a new generation of models for the monitoring, prevention and control of communicable diseases.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Analysis

The ITU Strategic Plan is a strategic document developed in accordance with the Constitution and the Convention of the Union and is an important document that will guide the activities of the Union for a four-year period. The goals identified in Resolution 71 (Rev. Dubai, 2018) on the ITU strategic plan for 2020-2023 do not yet clearly show the latest developments and impact of ICTs for PHEIC, and it is recommended to include this into the Plan for the next four years and take it into consideration.

Proposal

In summary, it is recommended that the ITU add the ICTs for PHEIC into its medium- and long-term strategic plan for consideration. The specific recommendations are as follows:

* Consider including make better use of ICTs to help prevent, control, and recover from PHEICs in the Strategic Goals of the ITU Strategic Plan for 2024-2027.
* Promote the collection and compilation of best practices in the use of ICTs to respond to PHEICs from countries and regions on the #REG4COVID platform, and regularly publish the "toolkits" of best practices or related studies.

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1. ###### According to International Health Regulations, the term “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” is defined as “an extraordinary event which is determined, as provided in these regulations; (1) to constitute a public health risk to other States through the international spread of disease; and (2) to potentially require a coordinated international response”. Since the entry into force of the International Health Regulations (IHR), WHO declared six public health emergencies of international concern (PHEICs) till now, with the first five being 2009 H1N1, 2014 polio, 2014 Ebola in West Africa, 2016 Zika, and 2019 Ebola in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In addition, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 was the first Public Health Emergency of International Concern in the 21st century.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See ITU Discussion Paper: *Pandemic in the Internet Age: communications industry responses*, https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Conferences/GSR/2020/Documents/ITU\_COVID-19\_and\_Telecom-ICT.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. # See About International Telecommunication Union (ITU): https://www.itu.int/zh/about/Pages/default.aspx

   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. # See *ITU Guidelines for national emergency telecommunication plans*, https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Emergency-Telecommunications/Pages/Publications/Guidelines-for-NETPs.aspx

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Target 3.3 of the UNGA Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: "By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases"; Target 9.1: “Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, including regional and trans-border infrastructure, to support economic development and human well-being, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all”; Target 11.5: “By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations”, https://www.un.org/zh/documents/treaty/files/A-RES-70-1.shtml. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *The regulatory wheel of change: Regulation for digital transformation*, https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Conferences/GSR/2020/Documents/Final\_Chairmans-Report\_GSR-20\_C.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Global Symposium for Regulators (GSR) 2020 Best Practice Guidelines: The gold standard for digital regulation*, https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Conferences/GSR/2020/Documents/GSR-20\_Best-Practice-Guidelines\_Final\_C.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See BBC NEWS, *Ebola: Can big data analytics help contain its spread?*, 15 October 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/business-29617831. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See the official website of Aarogya Setu, https://www.aarogyasetu.gov.in/faq/. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See the official website of Communication Big Data Itinerary Card, https://xc.caict.ac.cn/help.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)