OPINION 5: Use of telecommunications/ICTs in COVID-19 and future pandemic and epidemic preparedness and response

The sixth World Telecommunication/ICT Policy Forum (Geneva, 2021),

recalling

a)   Resolution 74/270 of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on "Global solidarity to fight the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)", which calls on the United Nations system "*to work with all relevant actors to mobilize a coordinated global response to the pandemic and its adverse social, economic and financial impact on all societies*";

b)   UNGA Resolution 74/306 on "Comprehensive and coordinated response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic";

c)   UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages", as well as SDG 9 "Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation", and SDG 11 "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;

d)   Article 40 of the ITU Constitution on the "Priority of Telecommunications Concerning Safety of Life";

e)   Chapter VII of the ITU Radio Regulations on "Distress and safety communications" and Article 5 of the International Telecommunication Regulations on the "Safety of Life and Priority of Telecommunications";

f)   Resolution 136 (Rev. Dubai, 2018) of the Plenipotentiary Conference on "The use of telecommunications/information and communication technologies for humanitarian assistance and for monitoring and management in emergency and disaster situations, including health-related emergencies, for early warning, prevention, mitigation and relief";

g)   Resolution 202 (Busan, 2014) of the Plenipotentiary Conference on "Using information and communication technologies to break the chain of health-related emergencies such as Ebola virus transmission";

h)   Subparagraph 'c' of paragraph 20 of WSIS Action Line C7 (Electronic Environmental Protection) of the Geneva Plan of Action, which calls for the establishment of "*monitoring systems, using ICTs,*

to forecast and monitor the impact of natural and man-made disasters, particularly in developing countries, LDCs and small economies",

bearing in mind

a) the importance of telecommunication/ information and communication technologies (ICT) networks, and their resiliency and scalability, in face of the COVID-19 pandemic, and their role in helping get more people online in this time of crisis, as well as, the gaps and needs for further developing connectivity;

b) the significant potential of telecommunication/ICT services and technologies and new and emerging technologies, such as AI, IoT, 5G, Big Data, OTTs, that facilitate telecommunications/ICTs, can improve the response to emergencies caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as other pandemics and epidemics and improving the effectiveness of their prevention and mitigation;

c) the tragic events around the world related to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, which clearly show the need to expand affordable access to high-quality, sustainable and inclusive telecommunications/ICTs;

d) the importance of access to relevant information about pandemics and epidemics to assist public safety, and support the work of health and disaster relief agencies and organizations;

e) the need to promote digital inclusion, to ensure that everyone has access to telecommunications/ICTs and to maintain continuity of everyday social, educational and economic interactions and leaving no one excluded by using telecommunications/ICTs;

f) affordable and effective telecommunications/ICTs are needed to minimize risks to human life and health, meet the urgent needs of the population for information and communication, support humanitarian assistance, and support economic responses for sustainable and inclusive recovery;

g) the need to foster digital literacy and skills for all regardless of their age, gender, ability or location to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in and to support the continuity of information society provided by telecommunications/ICTs,

recognising

a) that substantial digital divides exist within and among countries and regions, and that many regions lack affordable access to telecommunications/ICTs;

b) the critical role that governments, the private sector, civil society, the technical community and other stakeholders play in enabling affordable connectivity for all and the benefits of stakeholders working collaboratively together to this end;

c) that relevant international organizations play a key role in convening stakeholders, supporting and facilitating sharing of best practices for the development of affordable connectivity and supporting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts;

d) that ITU, as the UN specialized agency for telecommunications/ICTs, plays a leading role in the implementation of relevant WSIS action lines and their outcomes and, through them, the achievement of the SDGs;

e) the ongoing work in ITU related to new and emerging technologies that facilitate telecommunication/ICT services and technologies, ITU recommendations, particularly those that promote efficient use of telecommunication/ICT systems and technologies, as well as other relevant best practices, which may support response and recovery efforts;

3/4
WTPF-21/12-E

f)   the ITU's efforts to gather best practices on how governments and stakeholders worked collaboratively to ensure connectivity during COVID-19 and how these lessons can be applied both to future pandemics or future efforts to promote connectivity and digital inclusion;

g)   the ITU's initiatives in response to the COVID-19 pandemic brought together stakeholders including ITU Members, partners and several UN agencies in areas as diverse and critical as resiliency, accessibility, e-education, digital skills and digital cooperation, including:

   i)   the creation of the Global Network Resiliency Platform (#REG4COVID);

   ii)   the launch of new guidelines on emergency telecommunications, child online protection, and on making digital information, services and products accessible to all people;

   iii)   strengthening of partnerships such as between ITU and WHO, the ITU-UNICEF GIGA initiative to connect every school to the Internet, or the ITU-ILO initiative to boost decent jobs and enhance digital skills for the youth in Africa's digital economy;

   iv)   webinar series on Digital Cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic;

h)   the vital importance of providing innovative tools to improve lives and accelerate sustainable development in many areas, including responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, *is of the view*

expanding affordable access and connectivity to telecommunications/ICTs and new and emerging digital technologies, and advancing other related aspects such as digital inclusion and skills, will continue to play a critical role in helping to mitigate and manage the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as future pandemics and epidemics,

   invites Member States

1   to cooperate and offer assistance and support activities related to the use of new and emerging telecommunications/ICTs services and technologies by citizens, organizations, and, if possible, other countries, especially developing countries[1], and to support, in collaboration with WHO and other UN organizations and stakeholders, sectors related to telecommunications/ICTs in order to help mitigate the effects of COVID-19 as well as future pandemics and epidemics and support the provision of humanitarian assistance and health services;

2   to consider how stakeholders, including telecommunications/ICTs providers, may contribute to supporting, if possible, jobs, especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and to continue educational processes and initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic, and mitigating its adverse social and economic consequences;

3   to assist in the implementation of projects and programs, including in the international arena, that enable deployment and use of telecommunications/ICTs as a support tool in responding to the consequences of the COVID 19 pandemic;

4   to consider appropriate actions in the telecommunications/ICTs sector aimed at reducing the severity and number of emergency situations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and aimed at alleviating its consequences, such as providing local communities with connectivity and information, especially in local languages, to help preserve human life;

---

[1]   These include the least developed countries, small island developing states, landlocked developing countries and countries with economies in transition.

5   to take an active role in developing and disseminating standards, guidelines and best practices in cooperation with other stakeholders for the use of telecommunications/ICTs in response to the COVID-19 and future pandemics;

6   to identify and share best practices, lessons learned, and effective measures, particularly in the areas noted in *invites Member States 1-5* above, for possible use in response to and preparation for potential future pandemics and epidemics,

> *invites the Secretary-General*

to continue to reinforce the ITU's efforts, within its remit and in partnership with the WHO and other agencies and organisations, in collaboration with stakeholders to strengthen the resilience of telecommunication/ICT networks and services to meet the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and increase pandemic preparedness and response.

_____