



Joint Webinars On “Digital Cooperation during COVID19 and beyond”

Webinar #1: Connectivity – Situation Assessment

09:30-11:00 New York/15:30-17:00 Geneva, 15 April Wednesday

[Summary]

On 15 April, the UN and ITU launched a Joint Webinar series, “Digital Cooperation During COVID-19 and Beyond.” The first webinar presented a situational assessment of connectivity during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. About 300 participants joined from all corners of the world, with the intention of building a community to share actionable ideas, initiatives and possible solutions, to accelerate the discussion of the Expert Roundtables to follow-up on the recommendations of the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation ([hyperlink](#)).

Welcoming participants to the webinar, Mr Fabrizio Hochschild, Under Secretary-General and Special Advisor of the UN on Digital Cooperation, observed that “the pandemic has vindicated the utility of digital technologies” in ways never before possible. People have been able to keep working, studying, entertained and connected to family and friends, thanks to digital technologies.

However, digital technologies also have a ‘shadow side’, as their benefits depend on people actually being connected. Enhanced digitization risks creating greater and deeper inequalities for the unconnected. And in terms of managing digital resources, different countries have adopted very different approaches to content moderation – ranging from ‘laissez faire’ to intrusive content moderation. Public health information spread via digital means has been tremendously helpful and saved lives, but there has also been misinformation.

Mr Hochschild cited various issues, including infrastructure security, data protection and the use of private information by public authorities for legitimate public health purposes. Many issues, including connectivity, do not have quick solutions, and are addressed in the follow-up to the Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation. Mr Hochschild expressed his hope that this webinar series will find short-term measures to address the difficulties highlighted by the pandemic, ahead of the UN Secretary-General’s new roadmap on Digital Cooperation.

In her opening remarks, Ms Doreen Bogdan-Martin, Director of ITU’s Telecommunication Development Bureau, observed how the dramatic events of the past few weeks have shown that connectivity has never been so important. Digital technologies are ensuring that people’s lives continue as normally as possible, and are playing an absolutely crucial role in helping health workers save lives, and supporting international medical research in the urgent search for a vaccine.



ITU estimates that 3.6 billion people remain unconnected to the Internet. And research indicates that, of those currently counted as ‘connected’, many still lack devices and speed of service that would make this connectivity *meaningful*. In addition, the COVID-19 crisis is causing traffic levels to surge, changing usage patterns and even challenging our definition of ‘sufficient’ connectivity. Ms Bogdan concluded that “COVID-19 is a wake-up call on the importance of getting – and keeping – the world connected. It is a wake-up call as to why we need to dramatically accelerate efforts to bring people online.”

The need to get people connected was also underlined by Mr Vint Cerf, Senior Google executive and Internet pioneer. In his view, access to the Internet and ICTs have to be affordable, reliable, safe, accessible, useful, sustainable and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). If we try to do something in a hurry, it may not be sustainable, and we will have wasted a substantial amount of effort. He has initiated a project on digital inclusion describing where the Internet is available, unavailable, at which speed and cost. However, the data provided by ISPs and countries is still not sufficiently precise.

Mr Chris Fabian, Principal Advisor, Innovation of UNICEF and co-moderator of the webinar, saw both opportunities and drawbacks in the current situation. Many children have gone online for remote learning, and game traffic has increased by +75%. These digital natives will be ‘royalty’ in our digital future, which means we run the risk of excluding all the young people who did not grow up with digital access.

H.E. Paula Ingabire, Minister of ICT and Innovation of Rwanda, noted that operators normally focus network capacity in commercial districts, but with teleworking and home learning, traffic is surging in residential areas. It is not just about infrastructure, it is about skills, the right tools and devices, but also the costs.

Ms Mitchell Baker, Chair of the Mozilla Foundation, noted that ‘crises drive change’ and suggested we must seek the opportunity in a crisis. Before the pandemic, there was an active social discussion about the nature of the Internet and its impact on society. She concluded that we must prioritize access for everyone, investing in people and consumer choice.

Mr Joakim Reiter, Group External Affairs Director of Vodafone, said Vodafone is handling a fifth of all world’s traffic, which is now coming from bedrooms and homes rather than offices, putting the network under enormous pressure. We need to think about traffic management, as critical services are expanding rapidly. There has been more digitization of healthcare in the last six weeks, than over the last 20 years; and an almost 300% increase in phishing.

Mr Carlos Lugo, Director of the Communications Regulation Commission (CRC) of Colombia, observed that not all jobs can be done by teleworking, noting that many problems remain much the same before and after COVID, and need solid follow-up. He emphasized that the priorities of the CRC



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of Colombia will continue after the COVID crisis – the roadmap for connectivity, and deployment of 5G and regulatory conditions for 5G deployment.

Ms Tiziana Bonapace, Director of ICT & Disaster Risk Reduction, UNESCAP, congratulated participants on the progress of the GIGA Initiative. She noted that e-commerce sales are up 50-60% on medical equipment and e-commerce. She observed that mobile connectivity is faster to roll out, but also noted that mobile networks offer lower transmission rates than fixed networks. The COVID pandemic underlines the fact that that people with fixed Internet access are at an advantage. We must accelerate the telecom investment needed to meet accelerated demand from frontier technologies, which is all the more urgent in the context of COVID.

This stellar line-up of speakers was followed by reactions and comments from a number of other speakers, including H.E. Ms. Makiko Yamada, Vice-Minister of MIC from Japan, H.E. Ambassador Amandeep Gill of India, and others. Mr Alex Wong, Senior Strategy Advisor of ITU and co-moderator of the webinar, encouraged the sharing of examples offered by many of the speakers on how their countries are increasing access and connectivity, so that others can learn from them.

The co-organizers thanked everyone for their insights and constructive support and looked forward to continuing the conversation in Webinar #2 “Connectivity: Best Practices - What Works & What Does Not”, on 22 April.

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