

**Regional Development Forum for the Arab States  
Opening Session, 25 November, 2020**

Opening Remarks

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Good morning, good afternoon and good evening, everyone, and a warm welcome to this year's Regional Development Forum for the Arab States.

Our online event today is the latest in a series of virtual RDFs organized by ITU, and follows RDFs already held for Africa, Asia-Pacific and Europe. We are very lucky, in this time of rolling lockdowns affecting so many, that we can take advantage of the unprecedented levels of connectivity now available across the Arab world – a testament this region's very solid commitment to ICTs as a driver of national and regional development.

The theme for our forum this year is "Setting course towards the digital decade of action". That is a timely topic in light of the developments of the past year. At the G20 Summit recently hosted by Saudi Arabia, UN Secretary-General Guterres remarked that the COVID pandemic has laid bare the enormous fragilities of our planet. For each and every country, building back better to strengthen social and economic resilience is going to mean according urgent priority to the rollout of new digital networks and services.

In many ways, the Arab region is already in good shape. ITU statistics indicate a mobile cellular subscription rate of over 100%. A full 91% of

people in the region now live within reach of a mobile cellular signal, and almost all of these people are covered by a 3G or higher network.

That's very encouraging. And yet challenges remain. Despite high network availability, only just over half of the region's population is online. Our figures also reveal a persistent digital gender gap that is slowly and insidiously widening, with an average of 59% of men in the region connected to the internet, as opposed to just 48% of women. This digital gender divide increases even more sharply where communities are disadvantaged through poverty, through geographic isolation, or through access to education.

When COVID began to spread, it was these marginalized communities that were hit first, and hardest. The pandemic has thrown digital technology sharply into the spotlight, and with it, the realization that the ICT sector now underpins every single economic activity, as well as serving as the vital delivery mechanism for huge range of social services.

The reality is that when lockdowns were imposed, and economic and social activity moved online, governments that had invested heavily in digital infrastructure before the pandemic found themselves much better-placed to bear the impact. Health systems could quickly incorporate digital tracing technologies, big data could be leveraged to track the evolution of new outbreaks, education systems could adapt to deliver online learning, those whose jobs had been lost or suspended because of the crisis could receive digital financial benefits. Some online businesses even boomed, bringing new job opportunities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we embark on this final decade of action, COVID has made it very clear that this urgently needs to be a **digital decade of action**.

Nothing could have demonstrated so dramatically the reality that universal, affordable, meaningful connectivity is no longer a luxury, but a necessity.

So let us learn from this crisis, and use the pandemic as an accelerant of digital transformation.

Analysts estimate that countries with world-class connectivity could mitigate by half the negative economic impact of the current crisis.

And while such research may not do much to help those struggling with poor connectivity today, it does shine a beacon on our best way forward.

Put simply, broadband networks need to be considered basic infrastructure, as vital to nations and their populations as networks like water, roads or power.

I am most encouraged to see that governments and stakeholders across the world and in the Arab region are embracing this message, and have already started focusing on investing in meaningful connectivity and digital services.

At this time of crisis, we need this kind of regional leadership and collaboration to continue beyond the immediate COVID response, to ensure that, next time around, everyone, everywhere, benefits from the power of digital.

ITU is committed to continue working with all stakeholders to achieve this goal, through a comprehensive and growing portfolio of initiatives.

One of these is Giga – a joint initiative between ITU, UNICEF and others to connect every school to the internet, and every young person to information, opportunity, and choice.

Another is our new Connect2Recover initiative, launched with the generous support of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the government of Japan, which aims to reinforce the provision of affordable and reliable connectivity in beneficiary countries, as they adjust to the ‘new normal’.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As the Secretary-General’s Roadmap for Digital Cooperation so clearly communicates, success in connecting the remaining half of the planet will be all about working together.

And the UN75 Declaration recognizes, for the first time at the very highest level, the importance of technology as a fundamental global issue, and pledges to “improve digital cooperation and ensure safe and affordable digital access for all citizens.”

Coming just five years after the text of the UN 2030 Agenda, which barely mentioned digital technologies as a driver of global development, this explicit recognition of the vital importance of connectivity is an extraordinary achievement, and an extremely encouraging one as we energize ourselves to embark on this new ‘Digital Decade of Action’.

So as you take your discussions forward over the next two days, be bold, be creative, and most of all, be collaborative. Make partnership the lens through which you view the challenge of getting every person across the region online. With just under ten years to go to our deadline of 2030, now is the time to pool our ideas, our experience, and our energies, and make it happen!

Thank you.