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>> SARAH DELPORTE: Welcome to everyone who are joining us today. We will give three more minutes for everyone a chance to join the event and then we will start.

(Pause).

>> MALCOLM JOHNSON: Ladies and Gentlemen, esteemed partners, good morning, and thank you to all of you who are following us today.

It is 10:05 and it is time to start this regional briefing. We are very pleased to welcome you to the ITU-UNICEF regional briefing on education, status and recent developments in nine non-EU countries. Before starting the event I would like to invite our colleague, Luiza who will be providing the house rules for today's event. The floor is yours.

>> LUIZA BADULESCU: Thank you. My name is Luiza. I will be the technical Moderator for the event. Before starting the meeting I would like to share with you how -- the housekeeping rules of today's event. The meeting is entirely remote. So the audience is kindly asked to keep their microphones switched off. The Moderator of the session will address the

speakers and will give you the floor when your turn comes. You may use the chat for any questions or comments. Please include your name, affiliation, and to whom your question is directed to for making it easier for the organizers. Moderators will be moderating comments and will be read out if time allowed. When the floor is open to the audience, raise your hand to request the floor. The raise hand function is located at the bottom of the participant window.

You can view and activate the captioning by clicking on closed caption in the bottom bar of the Zoom interface.

We kindly ask you to display your full name and affiliation, if possible. Incomplete or suspicious information might cause you to be removed from the meeting room. The meeting is being recorded. Should we experience any technical issue during the event, please feel free to reach out to me directly using the Zoom chat direct message function.

Before starting the event, we would like to invite you to turn on your camera to take a group picture. I will leave a few seconds for all of you to turn on your camera and get ready for the picture. So let's see how many people we have.

Your camera on, perfect. So I will count to 3. I will make it full screen. One moment so I can see everyone. It is wonderful. Everyone smile.

Okay. So I will count 1, 2, 3. Smile. Awesome. One moment. I need to turn off something. Okay. I will do it again. 1, 2, 3, smile. And I will go to the second page of cameras. One more time. Awesome.

So for me it is good. Picture is taken. You can continue with the meeting. Thank you, everyone, for turning on your cameras.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much for this guidance. And it is my great pleasure now to give the floor to Ms. Gwi Yeop Son, regional director for Europe and Central Asia of the UN Development Coordination Office to officially open today's event.

>> GWI YEOP SON: Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity to join and open this briefing. It is great to take part in this joint initiative of ITU and UNICEF to enhance connectivity, covering nine countries. Just give me -- sorry, apologies, I am having some challenges with the technology here. So nine European countries. And, of course, the countries in the spotlight today include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine. Information communication technologies are part and parcel of the education before the pandemic. During the pandemic they were a lifeline to students and young children with hunger for knowledge, learning and social interactions.

I don't think we need to discuss the vital importance of children having access to digital services and tools for staying educated. It is such an obvious recognition of this vital need. And during the lockdown it was only the means to get them to continue their education curriculum. And we

recognize that the silver lining of the COVID pandemic was the acceleration of digitalization. But the pandemic has exposed digital divides, particularly in education, in gender, and in urban and rural areas.

It was particularly brutal for young girls and women in rural areas as they were impacted by this double and triple divides.

If actions are not taken today and now to address their vulnerabilities, they will be further left behind.

In the report of the SG our common agenda he underscores the need for ICT development and education to go hand in hand. Our common agenda calls for transformative measures in education, skills training and lifelong learning underpinned by digital access as part of the global common public good. And I'm hopeful that this collaboration between ITU and UNICEF in the field of connectivity and education will give a new impetus for partners and colleagues to join this endeavor and work together to ensure connectivity for all children everywhere.

I'm also pleased to see this issue is being tackled as part of the regional development architecture. Regional collaborative platform, RCP and more precisely the digital transformation group for Europe and Central Asia. They are demonstrating how the new way of working is giving a sharpened focus on SDGs and the principle of leaving no one behind. It is about making meaningful impacts for children and their future.

One of the key objectives of the Digital Transformation Group is to support regional coordinators and UN country teams for them to help make a difference on the ground. By enabling the country teams and the regional coordinators to access, expertise and competencies available in the digital domain, they would be better equipped to help drive their respective national digital agendas forward.

In doing so, the country teams can contribute to making connectivity come true to everyone and everywhere and in turn help leapfrog on SDGs.

Today's briefing will provide an example of how multi-agency cooperation strengthens collective delivery of the UN system in terms of scale, richness and impact at the regional level. This collective delivery is particularly relevant as it reinforces the efforts being made at the country level in the domain of connectivity in education.

So with that, I reach to thank ITU and UNICEF for leading the way and inspiring others to follow this approach. So I wish you all a fruitful exchange today. And look forward to further impactful collaboration and look forward to hearing the outcome of today's discussion. So thank you once again for this opportunity. And I'm very pleased to join this meeting. With that, let me hand over to you, Jaroslaw.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much, Gwi, for this introduction. And as the head of the ITU office for Europe it is my great pleasure to introduce you to the subject of today's event.

With the regional initiatives for Europe on problems, development and

digital skills, we are advancing the agenda and supporting the country's endeavor. Yet the diversity of the drivers of connectivity in education requires a wholistic approach which further underlines the importance of multi-agency cooperation within this context the ITU has partnered with the UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Asia as to ensure that all aspects of this topic are being addressed through the collaboration of a joint report. And we are building the good evidence in order to make sure that in the next step we can work together with the countries to address their challenges.

Currently at the global level one in three Internet users is under 18 years old. More than 175,000 children go online for the first time every day. However there is a persisting and increasing digital divide preventing many others from using ICTs. Globally to the words -- word "children", aged from 3 to 17 years old do not have Internet in their homes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a serious disruption in education globally. But also at our region, regional level. It has shown the critical and crucial necessity to strengthen connectivity and its importance to allow access to the basic education. Social interactions and access to help and support services. Over the last two years more than one billion school children stayed at home and have been in necessity of access to technologies and to be able to continue their education.

In that context it is important to not only address connectivity but also affordability and accessibility of such connectivity. These two factors play a crucial role, especially for marginalized groups of children who might be excluded from education.

This joint ITU-UNICEF report provides us the insight on a country level and aggregated perspectives of the stages of digital skills development, e-governance of education system and smart and flexible education delivery at the school and at home. It focuses on nine non-EU countries that Gwi has already mentioned. This briefing further provides us the information related to the multi-stakeholder partnership financing mechanism for investment and the COVID-19 related measures in ensuring continuity of learning through ICTs in each country. We hope that this report will serve as a regional public good that will help us all together to create proper conversation at the country level and to advance the work on bridging the digital divide.

One of the grant (inaudible) identified by the UN Secretary-General and reflected in the vision of the UN common agenda. This is the reason why the multi-agency efforts are so important in order to advance and work on these topics. This work is also advancing our work towards the implementation of the UN Secretary-General roadmap on digital cooperation reflecting several workstreams including two very much relevant to us. One where we are jointly together with UNICEF working on bringing the connectivity to those who need it the most.

In particular through the Give initiative, a global initiative and to connect every school to the Internet and every young person to the information opportunity and the choice.

Also it is relevant to the ITU UNDP work on the capacity development and in particular the recently launched joint facility on the capacity development as well as multi-stakeholder partnership which will be launched just about a few days at the IGF.

Before I close, let me also draw your attention to our big milestone of the next year. Next year the digital for development community will be celebrating and more importantly, working together on a new set of the commitments and the pledges towards the new connectivity agenda. The ITU World Telecommunication Development Conference in June will bring together all stakeholders who are working together to bridge the digital divide and address the challenges related to digitalization and digital transformation. This is the reason why we have launched the Partner to Connect Digital Coalition. And we invite you to consider joining our efforts in order to make sure that the political decisions are backed up by the proper commitments and the work at the grassroots level.

So if you didn't have the occasion to take a look at this milestone, please take a look at the chat where we will be sharing with you the more information. And we are there to provide more guidance how to engage meaningfully.

Ladies and Gentlemen, so feel welcomed and warmest greetings from the ITU. And without further ado I would like to leave the floor to our sister agency, Ms. Afshan Khan, regional director of UNICEF Europe and Central Asia for her opening remarks. The floor is yours.

>> AFSHAN KHAN: Thank you. Thank you so much, Jaroslaw. It is a pleasure to be with you today. The COVID-19 pandemic has placed the challenges of the education system and the learning crisis in our region in stark relief. Before the pandemic, 2 million children in the nine countries that we are discussing today were out of school. Of the 24 million children who were enrolled in formal education, 41%, that's around 9.8 million children, were not achieving minimum proficiency in the formulation of skills needed for further learning.

When COVID-19 came, school closures triggered by the pandemic disrupted learning for 26.6 million school children in these countries. This pandemic has also highlighted the key role of ICT in times of crisis.

In response to the disruption of education, countries turn to television and digital learning platforms to ensure children could continue their studies. However, the status of connectivity in the region meant that countries were inadequately equipped to guarantee learning continuity for all children. Across Europe and Central Asia, over 11 million households do not have access to the Internet.

And more than 18 million do not have a computer. In countries where

UNICEF has programs we estimate that one in three learners were not reached at all by digital and broadcast remote learning. The figure for the most marginalized children including children with disabilities, refugee and migrant children, Roma and other ethnic and linguistic minorities are estimated to be even lower.

All these factors have broadened the digital divide leaving the most marginalized children from living and participating in social life.

If we consider the ongoing digital transformation of education and other sectors we realize that this digital divide is contributing to deepening inequalities, leaving much of the potential for ICT untapped. And threatening the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Expanding connectivity to the most off the grid schools and the hardest to reach children, is key to making education systems resilient to shocks and fit for the Digital Age.

This can help ensure continuity in the service of delivery of education, expand the learning offer, facilitate inclusion, and enable the use of assistive and adaptive technologies. Can also improve data collection and education administration and to learning. And future employment opportunities.

It can empower schools, teachers, learners to be leaders in the digital transformation. These opportunities require adequate infrastructure at the school and country levels including access to appropriate ICT devices and reliable Internet connection. Countries have made notable progress such as improving data and training on digital skills, mapping infrastructure, and increasing collaboration to mobilize financing and improve investments in connectivity.

However, there are still huge opportunities to grasp. This includes improving broadband strategies, increasing access to quality and inclusive education and Internet for the most marginalized children and family and equipping schools with connectivity and devices and capacity needed for 21st Century learning.

There is still potential to capitalize on large scale innovative funding mechanisms. To fill these gaps the importance of partnerships and coordination cannot be stressed enough.

UNICEF and other organizations are facilitating public/private partnerships to increase Internet access for families and schools, fill device gaps and procure connectivity contracts. We are offering technical assistance and strengthening capacity and generating evidence to bridge the digital divide. Accelerate learning outcomes and increase in equity in the region.

UNICEF's regional play and learn initiatives are offering sustained support across the life's course to enable countries to develop inclusive digital learning ecosystems. And remove barriers to quality digital learning for the most vulnerable children. With generous funding from the EU Directorate-General for neighborhood and enlargement negotiations and

together with ITU-UNICEF is conducting research including in the report being discussed today, supporting initiatives such as GIGA to identify financing solutions for connectivity and facilitating knowledge exchange and engagement on these critical issues.

As technology continues to transform and affect the way we communicate, learn and live our lives UNICEF remains committed to working with Governments, other UN agencies and partners to harness its power to improve education, learning opportunities, and outcomes for all children everywhere.

Our commitment as Gwi clearly said is to leave no child behind. Thank you for this opportunity.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much. Thank you once again for this great collaboration. Another sister agency that joined us in this endeavor is UNESCO. In this context it is my great pleasure to invite Jonathan Baker, officer in charge of the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe to take the floor for delivery of the final introductory remarks.

>> JONATHAN BAKER: Thank you very much. Dear colleagues and friends, I join you on behalf of the director of the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture for Europe who can't be with us today. But she asked me to convey her warmest greetings to all of you and to congratulate ITU and UNICEF for the publication and briefing in the connectivity and education status and recent developments in nine non-EU countries. As highlighted in the publication, education is multi-dimensional topic.

Today's webinar is strategic country importance to explore and identify concrete actions. The COVID-19 pandemic escalated reliance on connectivity and pushed education even further in to digital ecosystem. In 2020 and 2021 computers and Internet connections temporarily replaced the traditional classroom structure and determined if hundreds of millions students could access classrooms. The digital transformation of education continues to accelerate.

And teaching and learning are increasingly shifting to virtual spaces. And we look to the future and work towards the implementation of global commitments to inclusive equitable and quality education life learning for all. At the same time the growing use and reliance on connected technology, increase in learning inequality, barriers related to inadequate digital skills and competencies especially among women and girls. In this time of transition it is important to undertake a collective, informed action to preserve collective gains and ensure that the environment transforms education systems in safe and inclusive equitable directions in line with national priorities and curricula.

Together with ITU-UNICEF and other development partners, UNESCO has been advocating the importance of promoting equitable and quality access to digital learning and more broadly connectivity for all. Notably the Global

Declaration on Connectivity for Education which will be launched at the Rewired Summit in Dubai aims at supporting countries in connectivity to make education more inclusive, equitable and of higher quality. UNESCO has been coleading the work of Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development together with ITU and UNICEF and other development partners. This year's broadband report focuses on hybrid learning and guidance for highlighting key challenges and important requirements.

Today the 10th of November coincides with the launch of the future of education reports. This report is a flagship initiative of UNESCO. It examines the role and implications that digital technologies may have in the way that learning is organized, in matters related to the curricula content, teaching in schools. It highlights the urgent need to rebalance our relationships with one another, with the planet and with technology, calling for global collaboration to address the emerging challenges, those generated by technology itself.

All these important reports and tools focus on connectivity and education. And this underlines the importance of our discussion today in the region and in this context. I wish you all a very fruitful deliberation and exchange. Thank you very much.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much for your introduction. And a warm thank you to Gwi Yeop Son and Afshan Khan for their interventions.

Now that the introduction has been provided in the Opening Ceremony I'm delighted to the leave the floor to Sarah Delporte, project officer at ITU Office for Europe and Sarah Fuller, education consultant at the UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia to provide the overview of the findings of the report. And this block will be followed by the open discussion with our distinguished panelists. So I'm handing over to you, Sarah.

>> SARAH FULLER: Thank you very much. Good morning, distinguishes guests and colleagues. It is a pleasure to be with you this morning. We appreciate the opportunity to share with you the outcomes of this report which as I have understood from the opening remarks was not only jointly written by ITU and UNICEF and from feedback.

Thank you for making this report such a collaborative effort and thank you for joining us today.

I'm Sarah Fuller. I am an education consultant for UNICEF Europe and Central Asia. I'm the project manager for the digital learning initiative Learn In and I lead on the evidence generation component as well.

Sarah.

>> SARAH DELPORTE: Yes. Thank you very much, Sarah. So dear participants, let me thank you as well for joining today's event. My name is Sarah Delporte. I'm a project officer focusing on UN affairs and partnerships and supporting the implementation of the ITU regional

initiatives for Europe. As it was outlined in the introductory remarks this report focuses on addressing the enablers in education. The report follows a standardized structure for both the original overview and the country profiles which consist of the section that you can see at the moment on the screen, the overview of the education system and status of broadband which I will shortly talk about. Then the Government strategies, status of education, quality and the role of ICTs. Thirdly we have the multi-stakeholder partnerships and financing mechanism fostering investment in school connectivity. And finally the national responses to COVID-19 and educational initiatives for distance learning.

So today's presentation will focus on providing an overview of the regional aggregated perspectives. So just to give you a bit of a sense of what studying the connectivity in education of these nine countries represent in practice the report covers 23 million pupils between the age of 6 and 17 in 130,000 schools. When we are addressing connectivity in education it is important to look at the first pillar. So if we could go to the next slide, please.

Hereby broadband, we made Internet connections. We identify that 39% of the total population of nine countries combined do not make use of the Internet. More than 11 million households have low Internet access and more than 18 million still lack a PC at home. A lot of notable progress has been made. Since 2015, 34.6 million people have been brought online in these nine countries and a number of active mobile broadband subscriptions have more than doubled. And fixed broadband subscription increased by 65% since 2015. The proportion of the population covered by 4G also increased leading close to 91% of coverage of the total population on average in these nine countries and with the lowest rate at 78%.

So this really shows great commitment from Government operators and National Regulatory Authorities, especially in places where there was no coverage just six years ago. However despite the significant progress there are still some challenges remaining that my colleague Sarah will mention now.

>> SARAH FULLER: Thank you. In addition to the connectivity gaps we see persistent gaps in education. If we can go back one second to the previous slide. We see these persistent gaps in education, access and quality. Despite significant progress in increasing access to education, just two million children between the ages of 6 and 17 are out of school in these nine countries. With out-of-school rates ranging at primary level from less than 1% in Georgia and Montenegro and Macedonia. To more than 30% in North Macedonia, Moldova. Foundational skills that they need for further learning and skills development, exclusion from quality education disproportionately affects the most marginalized children.

Next slide, please. The lack of household Internet access and the lack of PCs that Sarah mentioned during COVID-19 worsened these existing

inequalities. Mobile devices have lower prices and allow for greater mobility, efficacy for delivering quality education is still disputed. Teachers lack training. Across the region we see weak systems for high quality teacher recruitment and retention as well as lack of quality training. This insufficient quality of education exacerbates the urban, rural and high income, low income divide as evidenced bye the Pesa analysis. Poorly aligned with skills. Conflicting policy objectives stop progress towards inclusive quality education for all children. All nine countries in this report consider education policy as a strategic priority.

And we want to stress really the importance of this as a critical first step in leveraging the potential of ICTs to strengthen education systems and improve outcomes in learning. For example, most of the countries have established centralized education management information systems to manage and use data more efficient which is a commendable step in the right direction. Next slide, please.

So how can ICTs help countries to do this? There are significant opportunities to use sufficiently developed information management systems to leverage advancement in connectivity and innovation to facilitate efficient evidence-based equity focused decision making at both national and local levels. ICT infrastructure in schools is both necessary for and also directly related to the digitally supported innovative management of education systems. It is a lot at the same time a key enabler of the introduction of digital skills development in curricula. Moreover as we have seen, ICT infrastructure and school connectivity can support the continuity of education services during the periods of school closure.

During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic this affected 23 million children across these countries. But the benefits of distance learning also extend beyond the pandemic. They include providing ongoing quality support like mentoring to teachers and distance learning for children who cannot attend instruction.

My colleague Sarah will share more about the remaining challenges and what is needed to bridge these gaps on the next slide.

>> SARAH DELPORTE: Thanks. The cost of high education personnel can overshadow investment in learning materials, equipment and training. And limited access to devices but to digital tools and connectivity both at schools and at homes and both for teachers and children. This strengthened the existing inequalities. There is also a lack of broadband strategies based on data and dual reference broadband mapping system. And there is a lack of comprehensive and wholistic data.

As there is a poor harmonization in education data collection system and oversight mechanism in the centralized school system but also the lack of monitoring and evaluation systems with a special focus on equity. There is also insufficient ICT training for teachers, and lack of digital skills among the student population.

And then finally, there is also a lack of coherent links between digital reform and other key educational reforms such as the curricular reforms. If you can go to the next slide, please.

So we have also been talking throughout the presentation so far about the lack of PC. But what does it mean concretely? The national average of PCs per student range from 0.21 in Montenegro to 0.17 in the Ukraine. So the current PCs in school are sometimes outdated. And they are not connected to an Internet speed that's adequate for online learning. Speaking about this it is also important to keep in mind that national averages are an imperfect estimate of existing -- the existing infrastructure because the technology is distributed differently.

So this ratio don't fully capture the digital divide as it affects the most marginalized children and hardest to reach schools. And the cost for filling these gaps to range between one billion and 12 billion U.S. dollars with low range estimates. So one billion USD being only for the cheapest available devices which is not necessarily ideal for education, and high range estimates to 12 billion USD which is calculated using a higher end computer and monitors. And these figures do not take in to cost the maintenance cost. We touch upon the cost of filling these gaps. It is important to address the partnerships and financing mechanism to leverage the necessary funds.

Next slide. So the main issue -- there is two main issues to finance connectivity in education. The first one is that often Ministries of Education must sacrifice investment. And at the same time Ministries of Education may not have a strong voice in decision making. In addition to this, ICT's infrastructure requirement in public services have been included only very recently in policy and financing mechanism. And schools are neglected, especially in rural and urban areas. In that context there are five main types of partnerships that we can look at. The two first are the partnerships with international organizations which can provide technical assistance of fundings.

So an example of an international financial institution fund is the Western Balkans' investment framework which you can find more information in the reports. I invite you to go and have a look at it. But these projects have focused more and more on connectivity in households and public administration, rather than on specific focus on school connectivity. So we can think that we think that more can be done in the future in that sense.

Another role of the international organizations is that they can help developing digital skills programming in schools as a fundamental part of the curricula and build this concretely between ICT infrastructure and the education system.

And then international organization and international financial institution also play a very important role in facilitating partnerships with Governments and the private sectors. And with this we go to the third type of partnership

which is the partnership with Mobile Network Operators, Internet Service Providers and other type of private sector partners. And public/private partnerships are important because they can provide an innovative financing mechanism, tapping in to international organizations, Civil Society Organizations and international financial institutions.

And we will also hear during the panel discussion and intervention on the role of the private sector in advancing connectivity in education. And finally, a last one that we can mention and it is very interesting, leverage is the partnership with NGOs and Civil Societies. In addition to this partnership, this report also identified some other good practices that are undertaken at the country level in order to advance connectivity in education.

So if we can go to the next slide, please. And so I will just mention a few of them. There is more to look at in the report. But, for example, we have been discussing about one of the challenges being the lack of broadband infrastructure mapping. One of the good practices to have such kind of broadband infrastructure mapping systems which can provide transparent information and broadband to market and consumers and support infrastructure sharing in order to allocate more efficiently public funding for schools and also hear an example of such kind of mapping system in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the panel discussion. It is very important to develop geographical information systems which are dedicated to mapping school infrastructure.

Then staying on this more data related subject it is also important to collect transparent and comprehensive data on digital skills level among students, teachers and parents as it can better help access gaps in this -- and have more targeted interventions. So we have been talking about how to leverage the fund. It is also important to that tap in to the budgets to make large investment in connectivity that can help close digital gaps between schools and students.

I will finally mention one more good practice before handing over to my colleague Sarah which is television broadcasting. So during the COVID-19 television broadcasting was a really good solution that emerged to fill education gaps and that can be continued post-pandemic. And then my colleague Sarah will give you the rest of the good practices.

>> SARAH FULLER: Thanks, Sarah. In fact, looking a bit more specifically at education, education can better focus the priorities for long-term policy. Collaborations between various Government ministries can mobilize for connectivity and schools. We will hear more about this in the upcoming panel session. Transparent gaps based donation campaigns can connect others. This is an important focus. And as I mentioned earlier most countries have established a centralized education management information system to manage and use data more efficiently. So digital for more efficient education system administration.

Centralized Government led websites and one-stop portals that play close attention to universal design and accessibility can connect students, parents and teachers with various tools, resources and platforms managed by a range of actors to support digital learning. Increasingly we are seeing the design of these digital learning contents and platforms to be accessible.

Focusing on bridging digital skills gaps for teachers. It is important to note the need for ongoing wholistic support. Support students, digital competencies we know that not all the curricula have fully integrated. Some are embedded digital skills across a wide range of subjects to support authentic digital skills development. Many of these practices are promising. We do still need more data on the effectiveness. And it is important to remember the need for ensuring that policies, partnerships and programming are all based on local needs and fit for context.

With this in mind UNICEF and ITU have developed a series of country briefs to highlight the key findings for each country in this report. We are sharing the link in the chat for those country briefs so that you can view the data for your country. We are also happy to share that ITU and UNICEF are available to facilitate national workshops with countries.

Could we move to the next slide, please? Thank you. Thanks for your attention. And we are now very much looking forward to the panel discussion where key actors and decision makers from across the region will share insight at international and national levels through policy and planning and multi-stakeholder and intersectoral partnerships. I will hand back to Jaroslaw Ponder to moderate the panel discussion. Thank you very much.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much for their presentation of the report. And we are inviting you all to take a look at the report and to also take snippets from the report relevant to different countries. As Sarah already mentioned we would be very much welcoming the initiatives from the countries to have the national interaction and in order to deepen our discussion on challenges and possible gaps which could be addressed by the international community with the support of the multi-agency system.

So we will now start the third segment of this event, which aims to bring forward national and international perspectives towards the strengthening connectivity in education as well as identifying the remaining challenges to be addressed. As outlined during the presentation, connectivity in education is a -- I'm very sorry. Something has happened with my system. But yes.

So now let us turn to our panelists as outlined during the presentation, education is an important multi-dimensional issue that calls for close collaboration with stakeholders. It is my pleasure to introduce Marta Markowska, policy officer for digital education in the Directorate-General for education, youth, sport and culture.

>> MARTA MARKOWSKA: Good morning. Good morning. Marta Markowska. First of all, many thanks for inviting me to speak today. I

joined the discussion earlier. And really enjoying the variety of insights and expertise that has been shared. And I think discussing how best to deliver on connectivity comes really at a timely moment here for us. Not only looking at what was revealed during the pandemic and taking stock and how we can move forward in terms of mutual learning, in terms of political commit in terms of sharing expertise. So I think today's discussion is very vital on this and I thank you for organizing it.

Now we know that connecting to the Internet, offers so many advantages to schools. Everything from looking at access to a variety of online resources, using platforms for collaboration, access to tools for inquiry based pedagogies. It is vital that we can support education and training institutions sort of to keep up with the pace of change and to ensure that our young people can lead and really play a pivotal role in that.

Having said that we know what the challenges and shortcomings are when it comes to connectivity. The older the students the high likelihood that they attend a school with a fast Internet connection. We are aware of the geographic divides, urban/rural divides.

So this is all apparent to us. Having said that, we cannot realistically speak about rolling out high quality digital education for all learners if we do not tackle gaps when it comes to connectivity. And so the question is how do we do this. The Commission last September, actually September 2020, adopted the new digital education, an action plan for 2021 to 2027. And it provides a vision for essentially inclusive, high quality, and accessible digital education for all learners. And it does this through focusing on two priorities which are key here. The first one is looking at the creation of a high performing digital education ecosystem.

That essentially means everything from infrastructure, connectivity, pedagogy, learning content, use of AI. All the stuff that's needed within education training institutions to deliver on successful, effective digital education. We need these things in place in order to deliver on the second priority of the Digital Education Action Plan which is really looking at strengthening the digital skills and competences of all learners. Digital literacy, STEM, looking at the ICT skills of teachers and educators. So it is essentially through these two priorities that we look at connectivity sort of in a more wholistic manner.

Now first -- so firstly, on the political level, I'm -- I will begin with the political dimension and then a couple of examples in terms of how we support connectivity through your EU instruments. So on the political level I'm pleased that the commission is launching a structured dialogue on enabling factors with Member States.

So the goal here is to really focus on enabling factors that we know are needed to deliver on effective high quality digital education.

And within these enabling factors we will be looking at connectivity. So we will be looking at what commitments can be made by the EU and its

Member States to ensure that connectivity happens. That we look at tackling those gaps in connectivity. And the good news also is that this -- these commitments will be delivered essentially in the form of guidance and recommendation that the Commission will adopt later this year.

So the political appetite and the political incentive is there. If we look at how EU supports connectivity, I know I only have a couple of minutes. We look to the recover and resilience facility, connectivity flagship where digital infrastructure was among the top five areas of investment. When Member States submitted plans to the Commission we saw that digital infrastructure including connectivity was viewed as a real high need priority. The political appetite and the motivation to do more Member State level at the EU level is there. So this is definitely a look in the right direction.

We look to the connecting Europe facility and digital strand and the work program for this is still being finalized but we foresee there will be a 5G for smart communities call. And it targets socioeconomic drivers to be awarded on the basis of 5G use cases. So training institutions are priority. And this essentially will support connectivity and 5G.

I'm also pleased to say that under the previous digital education plan that covered 2018 to 2020 should be also mentioned that we had launched the WiFi for EU scheme. This is key. Because municipalities to apply for vouchers for WiFi. Since April we had 4,000 municipalities to take part for the amount around 130 million Euro.

Two more quick points on my side, it is sort of impossible to talk about funding, support for connectivity without mentioning the European Regional Development Fund. Looking back we had nearly 7 billion of Euro invested in education, training, lifelong learning. Essentially this meant that almost 7 million young people or children were to use new or improved facilities for education or childcare in 20 states. We also looked at an economic and investment plan for Western Balkans. We see around 9 billion of funding for the region, including human capital, competitives, inclusive growth and working towards the twin green and digital transitions.

I think in closing it is clear that through the Digital Education Action Plan but in addition through the recovery and resilience facility, through the connecting Europe facility, through the regional development funding there is a real appetite to strengthen connectivity in the rollout of high quality digital education. So this is definitely, definitely the way forward for us. Thank you.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much for highlighting all instruments and also the strategy, how the ECU and European Union structures are supporting the Member States in advancing those who are members of the EU but also those who are in the process of the accessing the EU and others in the neighborhood. Thank you for highlighting diverse dimensions of the support coming and the strategy.

And now let's move to the Western Balkans region. We have the two Distinguished Representatives of Albania, Romina Kostani, Director of Innovation and e-Gov Sectorial IPA; Rozalba Merdani, head of education at Ministry of Education and support in Albania. They will be intervening both. What are your most important achievements in terms of connectivity in education? And can you briefly mention some short/long term plans to improve it.

>> ROMINA KOSTANI: Thank you. I'm glad to be part of such discussion that helps us a bit in shaping the future of our next generations. Modern technology, increasing relying on web access, a generation that's online and recently the COVID pandemic that emphasized the need for further investments in ICT structure. The pre-University management system is rolling out in the whole country and connects all education stakeholders in one place. The teachers, students, parents and various civic employees from the education system. It has revolutionized the way that pre-University education is collected as well as encouraging users to use new technologies in education. The system enables the generation of electronically sealed documents such as graduation certificates at the end of the school year.

Students will access information on subjects, topics as well as download lesson materials, provided by their teachers. On the other hand, the system facilitates the daily work of the education staff to note any information on students and subject. Meanwhile the parents can track in realtime their children's progress such as grades of each subjects, different comments from teachers, et cetera.

Part of our nationwide plans is also the interconnection of all educational institutions through national fiber network as part of the Government network that we currently have. This connection will contribute in improving the education performance and its outcomes through the creation of temporary digital infrastructure in school. This investment will also help us set in to motion our plans for preparing ready for the job human resources through the model of professional training and bootcamps by enabling classes with sufficient Internet speed and necessary ICT infrastructure for a smoother learning process. Our short-term goal is having 1,000 new coders successfully trained by 2022 and 3,000 by 2023.

And finally to bridge the gap between education and work, and address the lack of professionals in long term, we are joining efforts between various government stakeholders to profoundly change the way ICT is being taught in schools, starting with designing a new preuniversity ICT curricula. Thank you. That's from my side, from the National Agency of Information Society is doing in connectivity in education. I pass the floor to my colleague for other achievements and plans for Albania. Thank you.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much. I heard that Rozalba Merdani could have some challenges in connecting. Is Rozalba

finally connected?

>> ROZALBA MERDANI: Yes.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Yes.

>> ROZALBA MERDANI: Good morning, everyone. I have to present some recent achievements we have in the education system. Since the late 1990s we have made important steps towards access to the information and communication technology of educational institutions. Dedication to digitalization was stated previously. With the promotion of student digital skills and ICT integration in teaching and learning being a priority. It has been informed in the Government program. We had also a new main document, strategic document, which was the Albanian digital agenda. And it was a cross-cutting strategy on the country digitalizations.

This agenda stipulated a specific objective related to the education sector way was digitalization of the education system in order to increase the quality of education. And in the framework of these objectives some important activities were carried out such as equipment for schools, with operational infrastructure, for utilization of information, high speed Internet and the possibility of online access in other parts inside schools and not just in laboratories.

Technical support that ensures sufficiency. Access possibility in to education portals, in compliance, of course, with the planned curriculum and, et cetera. Also we had the new situation beginning from November 2019 when Albania was struck from a destructive earthquake that with -- and more with the COVID-19 pandemic situation. And all the forecasts about the country's economic and social situation including the education were through.

But this situation presented the new importance for developing and strengthening the ICT issues within the education system. And during the March --the period March-June 2020, when classes took place remotely, the Ministry undertook the responsibility to create online resources in the form of video recordings, while issued instructions on the organization of remote learning under this global emergency.

And with the support of UNICEF the Ministry developed a digital platform to provide online classes and blended learning. And recently we are implementing a new program under the leadership of the British Council financed by the UK government. And this program aims to equip 10 to 15-year-old students with critical thinking skills, digital skills and problem solving and coding skills. And every basic school education is equipped with micro bead devices which help students to program and can be used in different subjects to solve daily problems.

And, of course, despite the considerable attention of policies towards ICT importance in education, a lot of challenges still remain for us. We know and we are aware that there -- students in pre-University schools is far from EU Member States standards. Access to ICT devices and Internet is mainly

limited to the dedicated computer laboratories while chances to use the devices in the classroom are limited.

And another barrier to ICTs in schools is the lack of coordination at the national level. In Albania there is no central authority that provides ICT and Internet services for schools.

Instead, these services are offered by private companies which do not always provide sufficient Internet speed to fulfill school needs. And to address all these challenges we are faced with, we have prepared -- we are going to implement the EU strategy on education system which has put a specific objective on the digitalization of education. And these specific objectives is focused on developing digital competency by utilizing information and communication technology better in teaching and learning process.

And under these or in the framework of this objective we are working to achieve some important -- some important outputs like establishing and maintaining a suitable infrastructure to utilize ICT in schools. Right now we are working on defining standards on ICT devices in schools. We are working on installing wireless networks in schools that should provide coverage of all school environments with connection to Internet.

And also we are working to invest in increasing the number of digital devices in schools. Also the technical maintaining of ICT devices through student clubs at the local educational structure is the main priority now. It is a new approach in the school environments where student clubs are set up in schools and these clubs jointly with the informatics teachers ensure maintenance of ICT devices including software installation and update, device configuration as well as prevention of all minor defects.

And this process is going on with special Guidelines, drafted by the Ministry for these students' clubs.

Also we are working on developing ICT youth policies at school level. And another important output in the framework of this strategy is the developing digital competencies through increased use of ICT in all subjects, including digital competence in teacher standards, raising students awareness of Internet safety. In order to address the challenge of Internet use where staff will receive training of safety of children on Internet. Promotional materials on Internet safety are drafted and awareness activities are organized in accordance with European best practices. It is of special importance to provide teachers with support including access to resources and training and seminars to enable them to produce instructions and efficient support to students and parents about privacy, personal data protection and issues concerning online children protection.

We are working also in defining standards on achieving digital competency according to the European Union format. The Ministry in collaboration with our partners and stakeholders is developing standards on achieving digital competency based on the EU digital competency

framework. And we work also involving students in lower upper secondary education in the program, through complete engagements in order to include in specialized centers to develop digital coding competencies for later group age. And our schools, our basic education schools are engaged in active participation in the EU code week. Also the e-training network is strengthened and as an actual opportunity for teachers on opportunities to become actively involved in training curricular projects based on sustainable competency development in regards of ICT and coding.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Great.

>> ROZALBA MERDANI: Thank you for this opportunity.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much. We are really impressed after the presentation of the value proposition from the European Commission. We've heard a lot what is happening at the level of the country. It is very impressive what you have been achieving and we would like to also take a look at what is happening in the other countries and maybe let's move to one of the neighboring countries, North Macedonia. You have just launched the new strategies. So I will turn now to the colleague from North Macedonia to brief us on your development.

>> BILJANA TRAJKOVSKA: Thank you very much. Thank you very much for your report. We find it very useful and thank you for hearing us here.

Based on the most recent analysis on the education in North Macedonia we have adopted a new law and primary education which outlines the core values and direction of primary schools and provides a framework. This new concept took in consideration the lessons learned from the COVID-19 health crisis as well as the two most recent European Commission initiatives. The initiative is for the European period to take -- quality, inclusion and gender equality, quality teachers, high education, a stronger Europe in the world.

The second initiative is one that was already mentioned, new action plan for digital education 2021-2027. These initiatives offered us way to improve the quality, in terms of basic and digital skills and to make school education more inclusive and finally to improve the achievements.

Changes that have been made in primary school focus on the new curricula and improve the teaching and learning process to ensure analytical. Encouraging children, they are able to recognize through information. Correct use as far as more useful and available than nearly having information. The schools are expected to make sure they are capable of responding to requests. Teach students how to learn in life in general and future education. This new way of learning includes devising education, instead of memorizing facts which are not only easily available but prone to manipulation. By aiding additional ICT subject or aiding ICT existing teaching methods. Digital methodology -- this new concept of primary schools including preparation of students combined approach of learning, to

digital platforms or to do distance learning. As well as the use of digital technology to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in to the mainstream education setting.

This was highlighted as well in our new business learning concept, that was adopted in 2020. In 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic we have developed together with the UNICEF support other platforms called Eduina that enabled us to transfer to distance learning once the schools were closed. The platform offers more than 5,000 video recorded lessons as well as tools and webinars for professional development of teachers. For the school year 2020-2021 we used the combined learning we developed a comprehensive distance learning system.

Analysis conducted together with UNICEF showed that all teachers, 98% conducted distance learning that enables interactive teaching by joining a conference call. This was a significant improvement compared to the first year of the pandemic with only half of the teachers had conducted this type of teaching. Half the parents whose children attending distance learning, 26% give it a very good form. Part of the education system in the country even though started the school year with physical spaces.

This information, digital integration does not only meet technologies in digital platforms. The internal part of the concept, it enables competencies to be required of the students. In defining these competencies, incorporated international standards we use the framework, skills and attitudes. Additional standards are divided in eight areas.

Digital literacy, we mean the competencies which provide for technology. This competencies refers to use of ICT to access information, skillful and effective use in problem solving, sharing ideas, communication and cooperation within the school and also in the -- out of school life, creating digital context as well as ethical and safe use of digital technology. Initial standards are incorporated in to the curricula, represented by the subject and extracurricular activities. Competencies in to learning outcomes.

In another important aspect of the recent reform in Macedonia are teaching materials. The classic forms of textbooks are available in printed or electronic form to be replaced by digital versions that make it easier for teachers to implement strategies and -- to achieve the expanded learning outcomes. Digital textbooks, integrated ICT in to teaching and modernize teaching. They do not only develop people's ICT competencies but encourage their creativity. Starting from this school year we introduce all the textbooks. Develop by the Bureau for Education, together with the teacher of -- and with the support of UNICEF. Portal was created in library where all digital materials are placed and ready to be online and offline in Windows on other applications. For that reason the Ministry of Education published projects. These are the most reforms in North Macedonia regarding education in ICT. Any additional questions I am happy to answer.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you. We are very much impressed

with your new concept which you have introduced constantly and integrated with the new strategy for development of information society in the country.

So thank you very much for this update. We will come back to you just in a second but just -- while we are continuing to talk about the digital skills, today we are also joined by Gulsanna Mamediieva, Director-General of Directorate for Eurointegration, Ministry of Digital Transformation in Ukraine. Current initiatives were undertaken at the national level to enhance the level of digital skills among the population between others, the elaboration of skills assessment. Could you elaborate on the national perspectives to enhance connectivity in education and the remaining challenges to be addressed to move from the initiatives to concrete actions?

The floor is yours.

>> GULSANNA MAMEDIIEVA: Thank you. It is a great pleasure to be here and the opportunity to discuss the important strategic goals for the regions. And I will start out my presentation from this statement that we have concrete goals in the Ministry of Digital Transformation we have to in three years cover 95% of controlled territory with high speed Internet. 6 million Ukraine citizens teached by digital skills. And provide 100% of priority public services online. This is a strategic goal that we started in 2019 and the pandemic enforced and the -- gave us let's say a speed and push to move faster.

And I would like to emphasize our initiatives and programs that we are deploring now and what results we have in terms of connectivity and education. And, of course, the first is our program on digital education. DIA means state and I. And we already have one million citizens registered and going through education on our educational platform online courses. And I will be glad to share this platform because we are going to have it also in English for the international partners using these materials. There is no boring lectures. Only exciting educational series.

We combine it with entertainment. So there is also celebrities and the courses and lessons fill these clever dialogues and jokes. We have a great result that 80% of our users they watch all episodes of all series and have a final test and receive a certificate. The certificates are acceptable by the employees and companies, private companies, by all of the countries. And on the website where people can search jobs, yes, and post CVs. They can also use the certificate proving their level of their digital skills.

And we compare our result, how effective the programs are by -- we conducted research national one. And we discovered that 53% of Ukrainians have digital skills below average. And 15% of it doesn't have digital skills at all. And we are going to have actually the result of the second research, compare results of the -- actually how the national program influenced and what effects there are in December this year. So we will be able to present actually our progress.

And also important that there is not only online component of digital

education but also offline because it is important to reach people who are -- who don't have access, yes. And who are outside of digital domain. And we have actually 600,000 digital education hubs they consist from libraries and universities. They can visit for free and receive trainings in digital literacy. We have 1500 certified trainers. They work on digital training hubs and help people from offline go to online.

And this is less working now due to pandemic. But still we have a great result. As I said one million students are actually registered and passing the courses. We also started the program laptop for each teacher and within -- we have aimed to buy 6,000 laptops for teachers and provided in rural areas. And we also have actually it is -- it is a transparent approach we have, we have a dashboard and also sending it here, where the -- where the citizens can see how many laptops for which prices with both in regions and to which actually schools.

So this is a very great initiative. And it was supported and actually managed by the Minister of Digital Transformation, Minister of Education and local authorities.

We are also doing some mention for the Internet connectivity high speed Internet. And this is a really huge and I would say challenging work because we are announced and did research. At 65% of Ukrainian villages are not covered with high quality broadband. And we have 95% of control, should be covered by the high speed Internet and just to understand the 65, it is from villages and rural areas.

And we have -- this is 500 million Ukrainian to deploy fiber optic network in rural areas. So this allowed to connect 1400 schools. And 100 -- 1100 primary school education institutions in 3500 villages where actually we calculated that with this program 1 million -- 1.2 million Ukrainians will have actually access firstly for the high speed Internet and for the one we deployed this program one and a half months ago. And we already managed to connect 300 villages to optical Internet. And 100 Ukrainians can actually watch movies and have good quality to communicate. So this is actually we stick to our plan. And, of course, schools and press schools, educational institutions are the most important. And like criteria of the coverage. So we also have a dashboard where it also can be tracked in a transparent way.

Yeah, this is a dashboard to see optical Internet connection. And I also would like to mention the initiative of all Ukrainian school online that was deployed with the COVID pandemic. And this is an educational resource which provides equal access to education for all children. And including children with vulnerable groups, children with disabilities, and from displaced families due to the conflict in the east of Ukraine. So this platform all -- all Ukrainian school online is a valuable tool for students and for children who doesn't have access, yes, for going to school or with the pandemic to stay home and actually be on the track.

And during this all I would like to also emphasize that we pay a lot of attention for child online protection. We collaborate with this topic a lot with ITU and support and Guidelines that were presented. So actually we work with schools, provide online schools for teachers. We teach teachers, parents and children in many other -- in many educational campaigns about online safety. And how to maintain online security. We are also developing, we have had last year the big conference with all stakeholders in Ukraine. And international experts on this topic that allowed us to push for it and actually shine the light on this very important topic.

And this year we also plan to present at the beginning, beginning the next year, plan to present the national platform on e-safety which will play the role of education and prevention of online risks. And also reduce harm reduction. And help with deleting legal material and so on.

So this is the basic overview of our initiatives we have. And what we work on last two years. And speaking about challenges, of course, the broadband coverage I would say is a most challenging topic here because there is a lot of Ukrainian telecom sector is a bit different. For example, we have in European Union and we have our obligations that we are working on in harmonization with the European Union broadband regulation and telecom regulation. And, for example, we have challenges from -- of receiving data from the Internet operators, yes. And this -- to ensure that the data is correct. And provide it in timely manner and so on.

So for us to allocate budget and investment they have Internet in the regions. It was difficult to do it without sufficient data because we understood that data provided by industry in some places was not really correct. And we are now working on the legislation while -- and reforming actually the sector. Creating independent telecom regulator who will be enough empowered and competences to enforce this data collection and analyzing. So thank you for your attention. And I would take this chance to actually congratulate ITU and UNICEF for this great conference and chance we have to share our experience and constant support and collaboration with providing best practices and Guidelines where actually we all move.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much for the overview of the strategy of the Ministry and projects. We are very much impressed likewise with the other examples which we have heard so far.

So just one observation, we have heard a lot about the good things happening already on the ground. We have still two speakers to provide us their insights on the connectivity, on the role of the private sector. But after this I would turn also with the additional questions to all our colleagues with the question to name like one, two challenges which we are facing and eventually where the international community would be of help. But this will happen after our two speakers. And I have a great pleasure to welcome with us Meliha Kovacevic, head of telecommunication licensing department,

Communications Regulatory Agency. Very important stakeholders in providing and creating enabling environment and regulating this work, the private sector can do and can't do at the national level.

But let's hear from Meliha what activities are being undertaken in Bosnia Herzegovina and how does this reflect on the connectivity in the educational sector. The floor is yours.

>> MELIHA KOVACEVIC: Thank you. So I'm very pleased to join today's meeting to discuss such an important issue. One of the most important challenges that societies are facing how to ensure connectivity. The agency is a national regulator responsible for electronic communication is dedicated to implement regulation, to adopt informed regulatory decisions, to monitor policy implementation and to determine regulatory challenges. Therefore, CRA identified me to establish a comprehensive system that could provide necessary geo reference data on service availability, of demand in the market. So the broadband mapping tool is to be a cornerstone for any regulatory framework. Spur investment in increasing the regional quality of broadband networks.

So the very rationale from beginning of mapping is to identify areas of limited or affordable connectivity. To begin the process of identifying potential reasons for the limited services and potential sustainable solutions. Essential requirements to collect data on total service availability have been re-enforced to a lower cost and speed up process of network deployment. So institutional and technical environment, it needs to be upgraded in order to respond to requirements of the market. So challenges we have been facing is that existing elements of broadband mapping have been started by different applications. There is insufficient cooperation between stakeholders. Not all data geo reference, et cetera.

So therefore, CRA applied for technical assistance. We are pleased that the project is currently underway supported by our colleagues. Project aims to enable Bosnia Herzegovina to align with the technical policy making practice in EU and mitigated digital gap between EU and Bosnia Herzegovina. Within this project should be done a country wide assessment of existing data. We have launched existing -- extensive consultations with stakeholders including ministries, physical offices, major operators in order to properly define scope and path for future broadband mapping system.

And once established, a broadband mapping system maybe is extended to incorporate more dedicated to connectivity in education. But a prerequisite point would be to mapping the locations of the schools and that remains one of the core challenges in Bosnia Herzegovina. Achieve this cooperation between responsibility institutions, educational sector, statistical offices. So educational sector in Bosnia Herzegovina is hardly centralized. The adoption of the implementation of measures and promotion of digitalization there is lower level authorities. Institutions at a national level. So all the policy documents that are related to electronic communication

sector and information society is to identify necessity to adopt actions for realization of action. So no action plan and activities have been adopted yet.

The COVID crisis taught us that access to activities is crucial. At the beginning of the pandemic a lack of adequate devices, learning tools and experience of teachers appeared to be evident. With the support of international organizations, with UNICEF, and foreign Embassies the level of information technology, competencies of school has been upgraded. Also large telecom companies in Bosnia Herzegovina extended connections to homes and families that did not have access to the Internet.

And on a regular basis Telcos offer services. To achieve the appropriate level of digitalization in education, a strategic approach needs to be adopted. And certainly as a first step there needs to be determined actual connectivity status of schools to identify gaps and to tailor measures to support the telecom sector to fulfill the connectivity needs of schools. Thank you.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Great. Thank you very much for bringing all those components together. We are looking forward to the progress on the mapping system in Bosnia and Herzegovina and also looking forward to the ongoing activities carried out in parallel. We are aware that UNICEF which has just kicked off the mapping of the schools in the country, which will create, in fact, the opportunity exactly as it was mentioned. And the possibility of creating a special layer in the mapping systems of putting all education institutions in one space in relationship to the connectivity.

So we are looking forward to this next steps of the cooperation. But you mentioned also several times, in particular in the last point, referred to the role of the private sector. And we are privileged today to be joined by Luka Radunovic, digital services coordinator at m:tel, who would highlight a little bit the role of the private sector in the connectivity for education and providing the new opportunities for the young people. So Luka, I will turn to you.

>> LUKA RADUNOVIC: First of all, thanks for the invitation and the question. As the only teleindustry representative it is important to join the topic. In order to even start talking about the current situation in Montenegro we have to acknowledge the fact that the social and digital gap in my country is huge. The fact that Montenegro is the smallest country in the region, the total numbers of whatever is happening here are really small compared to everything else.

Gives us motivation and hope that improving connectivity internally but also on a regional level can make a great difference. One small step for the region, one huge leap for Montenegro. We are following closely the ITU and UNICEF's work. Even though the Government has tried to increase the use of digital and online methods in education recently, the inequalities surrounding access to ICTs is aggravated because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This huge digital and connectivity inclusion gap, well, that's

something where we as a CSB saw an opportunity to jump in and to join the common cause of Internet provisions of schools with special focus on rural areas. Even though we started providing Montenegro schools with Internet connection. As soon as the pandemic hit in a couple of months we have introduced free fiber optic connection to 70 schools. I know that 70 schools doesn't sound impressive to you. But in a small country like Montenegro it makes a difference. As I said connectivity in education report, while 80% of urban households were connected in 2019, that figure for rural areas was only around 62%. This was a real problem that we identified.

And together with the Montenegrin education participated in a project that was meant to deal with it. The name of the project was Study with Me. And the goal of the project was digitalization of textbooks for primary school first graders.

So idea behind it all was to provide all first graders equal quality and access to education, regardless of where they live in urban or rural areas, in the Northern or Southern part of the country and regardless of their parents' social and economic status.

This digital study platform is completely free for all students and teachers. And it is available to them in their schools but also their homes via mobile app which was completely financed by m:tel, a telco company I work for. All students and parents receive free licenses for the platform. Unlimited data for all the educational content. Teachers weren't left out. All of them had access to the platform and they even had teacher training, the first phase of the training was about them acquiring basic digital skills which they mostly lacked. Partners in the project were National Geographic as a content provider and one of the largest European educational publishing housings, German Celect. It involved more than 7,000 first graders and 500 primary teachers. Also a thing mentioned is the study at home platform for distance learning which was actually mentioned in the report on connectivity in education.

About 1700 lectures were recorded and broadcasted through an online platform. And we have three new study at home channels. According to a survey from March 2020 over two-thirds of citizens have watched these TV channels at least once in the previous week.

Okay. Since I see my time is almost up, my final conclusion would be that it is relatively easy to introduce Internet connection to schools to digitally educate the teachers to develop some different useful projects. But in order to make a significant change, every student will feel I believe a joint strategic initiative from the Government in all Telco companies from the countries needed.

After providing the infrastructure, I believe we need to introduce some new hybrid educational system that will be a good combination of face-to-face remote studying, not only in moments of crisis or pandemics but in long term for the future generations. Thank you for your attention.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much for this. And thank you very much for bringing to our attention the importance of activating the ecosystem at a national level. I think the private sector has a lot to do in this area. So it is also supporting the public sector and the national education systems. But also the role of the NGOs and others. It is something of what is key importance. And thank you very much also to those who are using the chat in order to have the discussion in parallel. Afshan Khan was raising a point to several items. Drawing attention to the issues that require our attention, including the work on the different layers of the connectivity. We also got the update from our colleagues from the UNICEF Montenegro regarding the new strategy. So we invite you also to use this channel. But unfortunately our time is -- we are running out of the time. But I would not like to finalize this meeting without one important question. We have heard a lot regarding the great things happening in the countries.

But we would like to also hear what would be one challenge which you see to be addressed in the short-term period. And how the international community could support you as the country in this endeavor. And let me start maybe from our colleagues from Brussels. I know that you are not dealing directly with the countries, but maybe also if you might just point out one challenge which would be -- would require international cooperation and strengthening of the efforts.

So Marta, the floor is yours.

>> MARTA MARKOWSKA: If we look at the persistent urban and rural gap when it comes to connectivity, and I think this is something that most countries are faced with. And I think in terms of mobilizing investment, mobilizing political will, but also looking at exchanges of best practices, mutual learning, see this as a challenge that affects most countries. I think there is much to be learned from seeing how this is dealt with at a country level and discussions such as this and other foras provide an opportunity to look at what the evidence says and what the practices are and how that can be duplicated or upscaled else where. That would be my quick comment on that.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much. Let's move to Albania. Focus on one challenge.

>> ROMINA KOSTANI: In my perspective I think that in Albania changing the ICT curricula as I also mentioned is very important. So that we have in the short and long term real IT professionals. So we now see the gap between students leaving education. And they have difficulties in adapting to work because their studies and their curricular is not concrete enough. And it is not really adapted to the market.

So I believe that changing the curricula is very important. And also training teachers and the educational staff to adapt to a new model of learning ICT, having trainings maybe from international experts for them, to

help them change the way they are conducting their lessons. And also the expertise of international experts in terms of suggesting the adequate curricula that has been found successfully in other European or other countries of the world.

So real examples of some efficient ICT curricula that has been proven to have real benefits for the youngsters.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much. We move to Rozalba. Anything to add from your perspective as the Minister of Education? Rozalba, might be that there is some technical problem. But there is no problem. We will come back to her.

Let me turn now to North Macedonia, Biljana Trajkovska.

>> BILJANA TRAJKOVSKA: Thank you. I agree with what the other panelists have said. Just to add we need to invest in the teacher training. Not only in the current teachers but also in the preservice training. We must immediately inform the curricula and the study programs and faculties that train teachers. This should be our focus as well in the near future.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you.

>> MELIHA KOVACEVIC: So in my opinion it would be quite necessary to conduct a comprehensive survey on school activity to determine the need of schools, to produce a map of schools and that we can recognize gaps, gap in connectivity. So therefore, we need to establish cooperation radically within the educational sector and collaboration with the communication sector as well.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much. And this is something what is happening in already some countries. We are also encouraged all of you to take a look at the approach proposed by the GIGA, the global initiative led by ITU and UNICEF which is also handling this. Follow up to those discussions that we will have, contain concrete activities that will be happening like we kicked off in Bosnia Herzegovina.

>> LUKA RADUNOVIC: The real challenge is lack of Government initiative in order to motivate the private sector to join the common cause of improving the connectivity in education. All we do now is part of our corporate social responsibility but we wanted to be more. That's why I think we need national and regional cooperation between private sector and the Government regarding this topic.

>> JAROSLAW PONDER: Thank you very much. So systemic approach. We have heard a lot of this. What is happening currently. So we need to coordinate more on this.

And Ladies and Gentlemen, this would bring us unfortunately to the end of our today's meeting. We have heard a lot of extremely valuable exchanges of the practices happening in many countries. We call for your attention regarding the report. Please take a look at what is there for you, what is happening in the neighboring countries and what is happening in the countries maybe more farther than your location. Important is that we are

learning from each other. And we hope that with this report we are able to create the proper reference point to kick off, entertain the cases, discussions on this, what we can do better and how to better support the countries with the international community.

So one more time thank you very much. Sincere thanks to all panelists. A big applause to you. Thanks a lot to both Sarahs. It is not a coincidence. Sarahs always like to deal with education. Thanks a lot to Sarah Fuller and Sarah Delporte who have helped us to set the scene. Thank you very much to all those who took time to make a stop and a little bit to brainstorm with us on what could be done in order to build the new normal, post-COVID normal which is coming very quickly. And this is a unique opportunity to make the change in this area.

So the call for addressing remaining challenges have been heard. And I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the readiness of the ITU and UNICEF to provide an in-depth view of the analysis at a national level for workshops and policy discussions with the national stakeholders. We count on the national stakeholders to work with us on those. And as we mentioned, being as part of the activities carried out under the United Nations digital transformation work group. These workshops would allow to filling the gaps furthermore. ITU and UNICEF can provide support in building the necessary engagement of local partners, participating in a generation of new and multi-agency projects for the UN. The potential use of existing projects, such as ITU-UNICEF GIGA initiative which aims at connecting every school to the Internet.

ITU's engagement in the several UN mechanisms both at the regional and national levels such as UN Brussels Team Task Force on Digitalization of the SDGs, and digital transformation group for Europe and Central Asia as well as UN country teams provide us with the capacity to leverage different actors across different levels to ensure a coordinated UN approach. But also alignment with the EU which is of specific interest in the journey towards accession for many countries in our region.

I would like to also take the opportunity to draw your attention to the other work which is conducted by the UNICEF but also by the ITU. We have just launched the ITU digital skills insights, which we would like to encourage you to take a look at which provides a great overview of different best practices in the field of the digital skills. With this, we would like to on behalf of the ITU and UNICEF thank you very much for your attention. And for the time spent with us.

And we will be remaining in contact. Please follow us on the Twitter channels of the ITU Europe but also at the Twitter channel of the UNICEF to stay tuned and stay connected in order to make the next steps in this respect. Thank you very much. And we wish you a pleasant end of the day. And thank you. And bon appetite as we are approaching the lunchtime. Thank you.

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