

Connect2Recover Webinar

Identifying country-level connectivity gaps and building resilience to future pandemics

Opening Remarks

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15 March, 2021, 12:00-14:00 CET

Distinguished delegates, ladies & gentlemen,

Good morning, good afternoon and good evening, and thank you for joining us today for this webinar on the Connect2Recover initiative.

Over the past 12 months or so, around the world, we have seen the dial on broadband connectivity shift sharply from 'desirable' to 'essential'. In the face of lockdowns and quarantine restrictions, ready access to digital infrastructure has become a basic requirement for fully-fledged participation in society, and the economy.

Reliable and affordable fixed and mobile broadband continues to play a vital role in helping companies and citizens adapt to the pandemic, enabling businesses to stay open and citizens to continue working, learning and socializing remotely. But we do have to remember that those of us who have been able to seamlessly move our activities online are the privileged few.

For communities that are poorly connected, lack affordable access, or have few digital skills, the pandemic continues to catastrophically disrupt every aspect of life, from employment and education to access to healthcare and essential government services.

Our partner UNICEF estimates that two-thirds of the world's children and young people remain unconnected and deprived of the digital technologies and services that are supporting distance learning in wealthier nations.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of fixed internet connectivity at home, yet our figures show that 63% of young people aged 15 to 24 lack such access, and that a great many of these young people live in Africa and the nations of Asia and the Pacific.

We are proud of the partnership between ITU and the governments of Japan and Saudi Arabia to support the Connect2Recover initiative as a key element in the ITU community's response to the United Nations call to Member States to 'build back better'.

Launched last September, it aims to reinforce the digital infrastructure and ecosystems of beneficiary countries, so that they can better leverage digital technologies to support pandemic recovery and preparedness for a new, post-COVID normal.

During this webinar, we will hear from ITU and external experts about a comprehensive new study launched under the Connect2Recover umbrella that seeks to develop a global methodology for building resilience in the face of future pandemics. We will shortly see a presentation on data collection efforts that will help us assess the current access situation, followed by a series of discussions and interactive Q&As on potential strategies now being evaluated that could concretely and rapidly increase social and economic resilience at the national level.

I encourage you to join the conversation via the interactive chat function – ask questions, contribute your own expertise, and of course, give us your feedback during the Q&A sessions.

Thank you again for your participation, and I now hand the floor to my colleague, Sameer Sharma, to kick off our programme.