

WTPF-21 – Working Group 3 of the Plenary

Virtual event

Opening Remarks

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Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, and Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's a pleasure for me to be able to address you today and deliver a few remarks on such an important topic as is the use of telecommunications/ICTs in COVID-19 and future pandemic and epidemic preparedness and response.

Without any doubt, COVID-19 has and continues to wreak havoc across the globe. When the pandemic hit, so much of our lives moved online, emphasizing the need for robust telecommunications networks and greater connectivity.

ITU's response to the pandemic has been comprehensive. We launched a community platform, supported digital health, enabled the development of international regulations and standards, and provided assistance for countries to benefit from the international framework to expand their broadband connectivity.

ITU launched the Global Network Resiliency Platform, also known as REG4COVID, to create a space where responses and best practices could be shared. Today, REG4COVID is helping countries build resilience, recover, and plan for the future.

In addition, the ITU-WHO Focus Group on AI for Health created an Ad-Hoc Group on Digital Technologies for Health Emergencies. ITU has been working with governments and mobile network operators to text people who may not have

access to the Internet with science- and evidence-based COVID-19 health advice directly on their mobile phones.

Government and industry are called upon to keep using the momentum gained during these challenging times to accelerate digital transformation and extend it to the almost 3 billion people who are still offline around the world. Going forward, our priority must be to bridge the digital divide and make access to communications affordable for everyone.

This is one of my priorities as Director of the ITU Radiocommunication Bureau. At a time when people in urban areas are twice as likely to use the Internet as those in rural areas, I am pleased that many of the outcomes of the World Radiocommunication Conferences reflect developments and innovations that have the potential to provide broadband connectivity and extend the coverage of telecommunication services in rural and remote underserved areas at an affordable price.

In addition to the development of international standards and regulations, we have worked closely with all countries, especially developing countries, to support the deployment and the use of new and emerging telecommunications/ICTs services and technologies.

COVID-19 knows no borders and makes no distinctions. It is, as the UN Secretary-General described, “the greatest test that we have faced together since the formation of the United Nations.”

As the draft Opinion in front of us makes clear, effectively harnessing telecommunications and ICTs in response to COVID 19 and future pandemics is more important than ever. We need to build on this effort and accelerate the implementation of comprehensive long-term ICT policy frameworks that enable the digital transformation of societies, industries, and economies.

So, let’s get to it! Let us work together and make a lasting difference!

Thank you.