COVID-19
HIGH-LEVEL MESSAGING

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ITU has a dedicated COVID-19 webpage highlighting all ITU initiatives, events, products and partnerships related to COVID-19 response, preparedness and recovery.

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has clearly illustrated the power of digital technologies, which have enabled billions of people around the world to continue to work, study, care for others and stay in touch with loved ones.

And yet, 3.7 billion people around the world are still not using the Internet and the digital technologies that have been so essential since the beginning of the pandemic. We need to bring them online.

ITU is helping countries to fully utilize digital technologies to respond to and recover from COVID-19, build preparedness for future global emergencies and achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for all people everywhere.

ITU'S COVID-19 RESPONSE

- When COVID-19 began to spread internationally, ITU lost no time devising its response. Thanks to a diverse membership of 193 Member States and more than 900 private sector companies, universities and international and regional organizations, ITU remains on the cutting edge of innovation. The Organization has been able to strengthen the public-private partnerships critical to delivering the promise of the digital revolution to all people. See the full list of ITU's initiatives here.
- Since the onset of the pandemic, ITU's response has taken a holistic approach, from its Global Network Resiliency Platform (REG4COVID) to multi-stakeholder initiatives, such as the Broadband Commission's Agenda for Action to common projects with sister UN agencies, including the work with UNESCO on e-learning and with the World Health Organization and UNICEF on health messaging.
- As the UN specialized agency for information and communication technologies (ICTs), ITU is the only entity in the world that harmonizes and coordinates the international use of the radio-frequency spectrum and satellite orbits. It also develops global standards for ICT equipment and services and assists developing countries with infrastructure and policy development.
- ITU's World Radiocommunication Conference 2019 (WRC-19) opened up new opportunities for people in underserved communities and in rural and remote areas, where most of the unconnected people live. By shaping the technical and regulatory framework for the provision of radiocommunication services in all countries (in space, air, at sea and on land), WRC-19 is playing a pivotal role underpinning the development of the digital economy over the next decade and will help accelerate progress towards meeting the SDGs.
- Likewise, the outcomes of the World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly 2016 (WTSA-16) reaffirmed the importance of ITU's standardization work in driving the

coordinated development of ultra-high-speed transport networks, the Internet of Things, future video technologies, and smart cities and communities, as well as in increasing digital financial inclusion, promoting affordable mobile roaming tariffs, and strengthening consumer protection and digital service quality.

- On the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao reminded that digital technologies are an instrument of social and economic development, and peace. He recalled that inclusiveness is one of the four pillars of what he calls the "4 I's": Infrastructure, Investment, Innovation, and Inclusiveness. Adherence to these pillars can drive connectivity, and guide countries in responding to COVID-19 and in building their preparedness for similar emergencies in the future.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES ARE A FORCE FOR GOOD

- Digital technologies are essential for driving global economic recovery and accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the era of COVID-19 and beyond.
- Leaving no one behind is a central promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. With only ten years left to achieve the SDGs, it is now more urgent than ever that we leverage digital technologies to leave no one offline, despite the setbacks brought about by the COVID-19 crisis.
- We must make this Decade of Action a decade where digital technologies will continue to make the world more connected and safer.
- The pandemic has underscored the urgent need for global digital cooperation where ITU plays an important role in areas such as digital infrastructure, digital literacy and capacity building, as highlighted in the UN Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation.

CONNECT2RECOVER FOR A SAFER AND MORE RESILIENT WORLD

- As pointed out in the 2020 State of Broadband report, world leaders and heads of industry need to place universal broadband connectivity at the very forefront of global recovery and sustainable development efforts. Collaboration between the health, finance and information and communication sectors holds the key to more effective and efficient investment in the digital infrastructure, technologies and services that have been so essential during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Emerging technologies such as 5G, artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, cloud computing, the Internet of Things (IoT) and many others have the potential to tackle the world's most pressing challenges and further improve the lives of billions across the globe.
- Through its ongoing initiatives, such as Connect2Recover, ITU aims at reinforcing the digital infrastructure of beneficiary countries, enabling them to use digital technologies (e.g. telework, e-commerce, remote learning and telemedicine) to support their response to and recovery from COVID-19.
- In response to the UN Secretary-General's call to "build back better", ITU calls on the international community to "Connect2Recover" and recalls that its Member States have agreed on the Connect 2030 Agenda as a way to expand quality digital infrastructure in countries for the benefit of all people everywhere.

3.7 BILLION PEOPLE STILL NOT CONNECTED TO THE INTERNET

- The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the **persistent digital divide**, especially between urban and rural areas, and between developed and developing countries.
- Although global Internet penetration rate increased from nearly 17% in 2005 to 51% in 2019, 3.7 billion people around the world are still not using the Internet and remain excluded from the benefits of digital connectivity. Hundreds of millions more people struggle with slow, costly and unreliable connections. See here for more data.
- At the same time, many people **lack the digital skills** to participate in the digital economy. In 40 per cent of the countries for which data are available, less than 40 per cent of individuals reported having carried out one of activities that compose basic skills, such as sending an e-mail with an attachment. See here for more data.
- The **gender digital divide** is yet another issue highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis. In 2019, it was estimated that globally 55 per cent of the male population is using the Internet, compared with 48 per cent of the female population. See here for more data.
- The ITU study *Connecting Humanity* estimates the investments needed to connect unconnected persons aged 10 years and above to broadband Internet by 2030. Hence, creating better environments for investment in digital infrastructure and promoting an enabling regulatory environment are among ITU's key priorities.
- To bridge connectivity gaps, ITU is also tackling demand-side barriers to Internet usage, including **improving affordability**. While prices for telecommunication services continue to decline, they do not translate into rapidly increasing Internet penetration rates. For many hundreds of millions of people access to telecommunication services remains unaffordable. See here for more data.