



COVID-19 INITIATIVES, PARTNERSHIPS AND ACTIVITIES

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INTRODUCTION

This document outlines the initiatives, activities and partnerships that ITU has been implementing as part of its COVID-19 response.

The scope and breadth of these activities demonstrate that now more than ever, the world needs to be able to rely on digital technologies and ITU's leadership in promoting universal, reliable, and affordable connectivity.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, ITU has organized a series of web dialogues to analyze the response to COVID-19 and to discuss different ways in which digital technologies could be leveraged to ensure business continuity and achievement of development goals during the pandemic.

Some of the topics discussed included: the use of the cloud and digital accessibility during COVID-19; the economic impact of the pandemic on telecom operators and ICT providers; the use of digital technologies for climate action and rebuilding greener economies in the wake of COVID-19; vulnerability of consumers in the era of COVID-19; and the use of broadcasting services for COVID-19 response.

ONGOING ACTIVITIES PER THEME

DIGITAL COOPERATION AND ACHIEVEMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

- Opening the WSIS Forum 2020 final week on 7 September 2020, [ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao](#) noted that “as we recover from this crisis and try to build back better in the wake of COVID-19, we need to ensure that no one is left offline”. The first ever virtual WSIS Forum had the highest participation ever and the best ever balance between stakeholders, regions and gender. Over 160 workshops, around 800 speakers and 15,000 attendees paid special attention to how power of ICTs can overcome severe challenges such as COVID-19. Many lessons were learned which will help us further improve WSIS Forums - even when we return to physical events - to make them more participatory and inclusive.

- Weekly [Virtual WSIS TalkX](#) has delved into an aspect of the global response to COVID-19. Building on the expertise of the WSIS community, this podcast series provided WSIS Stakeholders with a platform to create partnerships for on-the-ground action. As a part of the WSIS Stocktaking efforts to promote the innovative use of digital technologies in making social impact, the [ICT Case Repository](#) has collected projects and activities dedicated to responding to the COVID-19 crisis.
- ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao also addressed the Extraordinary Meeting of G20 Ministers responsible for the digital economy on 30 April and urged the ministers to seize the unique opportunity presented by the COVID-19 crisis to speed up the development of digital society, saying that he was “confident that the [message](#) sent by the ministers from G20 countries will play a historic role in the fight against COVID-19 and the role of digital technologies in the achievement of the SDGs.”
- In collaboration with the office of UN Undersecretary General and Special Advisor Fabrizio Hochschild, ITU organized a series of webinars entitled “[Digital Cooperation during COVID-19 and beyond](#)” that focused on how to secure safe, stable, affordable and inclusive connectivity. The series helped identify possible solutions and common approaches and strategies from different nations and stakeholders. The five webinars which begun on 15th April 2020 were concluded on 13th May 2020. More information can be found [here](#).

GLOBAL CONNECTIVITY AND DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- Opening the 20th edition of ITU’s Global Symposium for Regulators on 1 September 2020, ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao underlined that the role of ICT and telecommunications regulators and policy-makers had taken center stage in the response and recover from the COVID-19 crisis. “As we look to recovery, investment needs in ICT infrastructure are in the hundreds of billions of dollars [...] This crisis has demonstrated that ICT is a unifying thread that runs through all aspects of our societies and economies, and our approach to ICT investments must recognize and embrace this reality,” he said.
- On March 23, ITU launched the [Global Network Resiliency Platform \(REG4COVID\)](#) to deal with the stress being put on telecommunication networks as more countries, companies, and individuals turned to digital technologies to respond to and cope with the impact of COVID-19. The platform helps policy makers, regulators, and industry players ensure that networks are kept resilient and telecoms services are available to all, to the maximum extent possible.
- The Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development adopted an [Agenda for Action](#) outlining immediate measures that governments, industry, the international community, and civil society can take to shore-up digital networks, strengthen capacity at critical connectivity points like hospitals and transport hubs, and boost digital access and inclusion.

- ITU joined the World Bank, GSMA and the World Economic Forum in setting in motion concrete and immediate actions ranging from promoting network resilience to ensuring access and affordability of digital services in order to help governments, private sector and every citizen cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. A [Digital Development Joint Action Plan and Call for Action](#) was launched to better leverage digital technologies and infrastructure during the pandemic.
- ITU's latest initiative – [Connect2Recover](#) – aims at reinforcing the digital infrastructure of beneficiary countries and better means of utilizing digital technologies (e.g. teleworking, e-commerce, remote learning and telemedicine) to support COVID-19 recovery efforts and preparedness for the “new normal”, as well as potential future pandemics.

HEALTH

- In a [video statement](#) to the 73rd session of the World Health Assembly (18-19 May 2020), ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao said: “I am confident we can use the momentum around COVID-19 to bring digital health solutions to billions and transform today’s digital revolution into a development revolution for all.”
- ITU together with WHO has dispelled rumours that 5G technology is responsible for spreading COVID-19. Such claims have no scientific basis whatsoever, and ITU condemns the attacks on infrastructure vital to address the pandemic and keep our economies and societies working.
- Building on the joint WHO-ITU BeHealthy BeMobile initiative, and with support from UNICEF, ITU have been working with telecommunication companies to [text people that might not have access to Internet directly on their mobile phones](#) with vital health messaging to help protect them from COVID-19. So far, the initiative has reached millions of people across Niger, Senegal, Sudan and Tunisia in Arabic, French, Wolof and five local languages in Niger. As part of the same effort, ITU, WHO and UNICEF have also reached out to mobile network operators (MNOs) and national ministries of telecommunications and health in dozens of countries across Asia, Africa, Arabic States and the Caribbean to encourage public-private collaboration in disseminating reliable COVID-19-related health advice. In the Asia-Pacific region, for example, 24 MNOs were contacted across 20 countries.
- On 19 April, ITU joined G20 Health Ministers to address the impact of COVID-19 on the global health sector and society. The virtual meeting addressed the necessary actions to improve pandemic preparedness and emphasized the importance of utilizing [digital solutions](#) in current and future pandemics.

EDUCATION AND DIGITAL SKILLS

- ITU joined the COVID-19 [Global Education Coalition](#) led by UNESCO to ensure that learning continues for more than 1.5 billion students and youth across the planet affected by school and university closures. The pandemic has revealed startling divides in digitally based distance learning. Nearly 830 million learners globally do not have access to a computer, while more than 40% have no Internet access at home.
- ITU has been leveraging the work of the ITU-UNICEF [GIGA initiative](#) to accelerate the development of financing structures in a number of priority countries, including Niger, Kenya, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and East Caribbean countries, with an aim to catalyze the funding required to bring connectivity to schools.
- Building on its [Digital Transformation Centres Initiative](#), ITU, in collaboration with Cisco, organized a free-of-charge [programme](#) providing trainers with tools and skills on how to conduct remote teaching in the context of COVID-19. So far, 658 people from 28 countries in Africa, Asia-Pacific and Latin America have been trained in Bahasa, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish.

YOUTH AND CHILD ONLINE SAFETY

- Due to COVID-19, for many parents the question of how to ensure their children's online safety has become more pressing than ever before. On 23 June, ITU launched the new 2020 [Guidelines on Child Online Protection](#) (COP), a comprehensive set of concrete recommendations for children, parents and educators, industry and policymakers on how to contribute to the development of a safe and empowering online environment for children and young people.
- An [Agenda for Action](#) launched by eight UN agencies, including ITU, places children's protection from violence in the context of COVID-19 as top priority for governments and provides concrete recommendations to safeguard children's well-being.
- As member of the UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development, ITU has also contributed to the [Statement on COVID-19 and Youth](#).

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

- ITU has published [guidelines](#) on how to ensure that digital information, services and products are accessible by all people, including persons with disabilities, during COVID-19.

EMERGENCY TELECOMMUNICATIONS

- In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, as in any other emergency, the speed and efficiency of our response is proportional to the level of preparedness. ITU launched [new guidelines](#) to assist countries develop national emergency telecommunication plans.

SMART CITIES AND VILLAGES

- Cities house over half of the world's population and risk amplifying the COVID-19 pandemic. The [United for Smart Sustainable Cities](#) (U4SSC) – a UN initiative coordinated by ITU, UNECE and UN-Habitat, and supported by other 14 UN bodies – has created a new workstream exploring the solutions and best practices used by cities to address COVID-19.
- The [ITU Smart Villages Platform](#) has been used to establish interactive voice services on COVID-19 to everyone in Niger. The service, created in collaboration with operators and SMEs, is available via the short code 701 in the five local languages in Niger. Through the service, citizens have been able to access important messages from the Ministry of Health regarding prevention and diagnosis of COVID-19.

CYBERSECURITY

- To help build a secure and trustworthy environment for those relying on ICTs during the COVID-19 crisis, ITU has been working with partners to make cybersecurity-related tools and resources available, and launched [CYB4COVID](#), a comprehensive repository of cybersecurity expertise related to COVID-19, assisting countries, businesses and citizens in their response to amplified and new threats in the digital space during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

- ITU has been drawing upon expertise from the AI for Good Global Summit community and has launched an [AI for Good Webinar Series](#) delving into promising use cases of artificial intelligence in healthcare and other global challenges, including how to combat COVID-19.
- The ITU Focus Group on AI for health ([FG-AI4H](#)) is a collaboration with WHO to establish a standardized benchmarking framework for the evaluation of AI-based methods for health, diagnosis, triage or treatment decisions. Several topics have been pursued to provide support to fighting COVID-19 and future pandemics by using AI for detecting outbreaks (TG-Outbreaks), for detecting counterfeit or adulterated medicines (TG-FakeMeds), whereas a new [ad-hoc group on digital technologies for COVID health emergency](#) aims to establish best practices in the use of AI at each lifecycle of a public health emergency. The group will review AI and other digital health technologies' performance in combatting COVID-19 and future health emergencies.

INNOVATION

- Several innovation solutions are sought to tackle the challenges posed by COVID-19. ITU is a key partner in several hackathons and currently leads the [ITU Innovation Challenges](#). The overall theme of this year's challenges was *Rethinking the digital economy's value chains during the COVID-19 pandemic*.