

**COMMISSION ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT
(CSTD)**

Geneva, Switzerland

Contribution by

International Telecommunication Union

to the CSTD call for information sharing on initiatives against COVID-19

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ITU ACTIVITIES IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

As at 14.05.2020

Introduction

The centrality of ICT/telecommunication in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 crisis has come to the fore. ICT/telecommunication networks have emerged as one of the most critical infrastructure to enable people work from home, school going children to learn from their homes, companies and institutions to ensure business continuity, among other uses. Noting the heavy reliance on ICT/telecommunication networks, ITU has taken the initiative to help countries and industry cope with the increasing pressure facing global networks. ITU's ongoing activities are listed below:

1. Global Network Resiliency Platform (REG4COVID)

As one of the measures, on 23rd March 2020, the ITU Secretary General, Houlin Zhao, launched a Global Network Resiliency Platform, named #REG4COVID, to assist national policy-makers, regulators and industry stakeholders in ensuring that networks are kept resilient and telecommunication services are safe and available to all. The **statement of the ITU Secretary General** is available [here](#).

Through this platform, policy makers, regulators, operators, civil society, international agencies are able to share best practices and initiatives which they have put in place, during the COVID-19 crisis, to ensure that their telecommunication networks and services continue to serve the needs in their respective countries and beyond. The overall goal is to have people remain connected and safe through the use of ICT/telecommunications services. The platform, located on the ITU website (<https://reg4covid.itu.int/>) is updated on a regular basis with information received from all parts of the world for this purpose.

The platform also has a discussion forum to enable interaction among peers on various subject matters relating to stability and resiliency of networks. The information submitted is also displayed on an interactive map to allow access to current and reliable country-specific official information on ICT policy and regulatory initiatives.

2. Addressing the response to COVID within the Broadband Commission

The Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development convened an emergency virtual meeting of held on 01 April 2020. The Commissioners adopted an [Agenda for Action](#) outlining immediate measures that governments, industry, the international community and civil society can take to support digital networks, strengthen capacity at critical connectivity points like hospitals and transport hubs, and boost digital access and inclusivity. The overall aim is

to strengthen collective response to the COVID-19 crisis now sweeping the world. The related press release issued is available [here](#).

The agenda which is built around three pillars: Resilient Connectivity, Affordable Access, and Safe Use for Informed and Educated Societies, serves as a framework for the Commission's 50+ Commissioners and their organizations to share their own initiatives, make new commitments, and foster collaboration and partnership.

3. Guidelines for National Emergency Telecommunications Plans

On 19th March 2020, the ITU launched the ITU Guidelines (<https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/PR05-2020-new-guidelines-for-national-emergency-telecommunication-plans.aspx>) to help countries develop and implement their National Emergency Telecommunication Plans (NETPs). The Guidelines (<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Emergency-Telecommunications/Pages/Publications/Guidelines-for-NETPs.aspx>) are critical tools to assist policy makers and national regulatory authorities to develop a clear, flexible and user-friendly NETPs using a multi-stakeholder approach. The guidelines can also be used for developing tailored contingency plans related to epidemics and pandemics involving all national stakeholders.

The guidelines have been shared with policy makers, regulators and other national authorities to help them prepare the relevant policies and regulations that are primarily important in ensuring resilience of telecommunication networks before, during and after a disaster.

Due recognition is given to the fact ICT networks and services are pivotal in the response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, other emergencies and in disaster management in the future. NETPs provide the framework for information sharing, and prioritization of response efforts to ultimately save lives.

ITU has also launched, in partnership with the Global Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC), the Tabletop Emergency Simulation Guide which offers tools to test and refine NETPs using simulated scenarios. The ETC is a global network of organizations that work together to provide shared communications services in humanitarian emergencies.

4. Collaboration with International Partners

ITU is in conversation with a range of international partners generally on issues of digital inclusion but more specifically in the wake of this crisis moment of COVID-19, on how best to keep telecommunications networks and services affordable, available and accessible, as well as safe and resilient, with digital as the new norm.

Under the ongoing collaboration between the ITU, the World Bank Group, GSMA and the World Economic Forum, discussions are being held on how they can bring together their communities and leverage on each other's activities to individually or jointly to support membership in their response to COVID-19.

Under the Speedboat initiative, the four institutions issued a **'COVID-19 Crisis Response: Digital Development Joint Action Plan and Call for Action'**.

5. Capacity enhancement for teachers in the online environment through collaboration with CISCO.

The recently launched DTCs Initiative is to embark on a programme to provide trainers with tools and skills on how to conduct remote teaching. <https://academy.itu.int/main-activities/digital-transformation-centres-initiative>. The DTCs' train-the-trainers programme is to be offered in collaboration with CISCO which is a founder member of the initiatives. The training will be offered by Cisco online and free of charge.

6. AI4Good Webinar Series

ITU has initiated the 'AI for Good Webinar Series', which will initially focus on how we can leverage on AI in combating COVID-19. The Webinars, <https://aiforgood.itu.int/webinar/>, kicked off on 27th March 2019, with a discussion on how ICT & AI can be used to flatten the curve, using the experiences in the Republic of Korea as a case study.

7. Collaboration with UNESCO on the COVID-19 Education Coalition

ITU joined the COVID-19 [global education coalition](#) under the coordination of UNESCO. The Coalition aims at ensuring learning doesn't stop in the current crisis, with targeted support to countries in scaling up their best distance learning practices. This is in keeping with ITU's commitment to connect the world. The ITU Secretary General's statement on the partnership is available [here](#).

8. Leverage on the "Be Healthy, Be Mobile" (BHBM) joint ITU-WHO initiative.

The joint ITU-WHO initiative (<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/ICT-Applications/Pages/mhealth-for-ncd-behealthy-bemobile.aspx>) aims to re-use resources, platforms and solutions for COVID-19 response in countries where BHBM is active e.g., Sudan, Egypt, Philippines, Tunisia, Senegal, Burkina Faso, India, etc.

ITU in collaboration and solidarity with the World Health Organization, and with support from UNICEF, is working with telecommunication companies to text people directly on their mobile phones with vital health messaging to help protect them from COVID-19. These text messages

will reach billions of people that aren't able to connect to the internet for information. The initiative objectives are reflected in the joint statement found [here](#).

9. Collaboration to support WHO AFRO

The ITU is leveraging the joint **ITU-WHO AFRO** collaboration (<https://www.afro.who.int/news/who-and-itu-use-digital-technology-strengthen-public-health-services-africa>) to support WHO AFRO in their response by engaging with telecom authorities for public announcements and mass communication.

10. Collaboration with UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office in Bangkok

Leveraging ongoing discussions with **UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office in Bangkok** to support engagement with telecom authorities in the region to get dedicated telecom resources for Covid such as short codes, zero-rated messages, etc.

11. Cybersecurity Resources for COVID-19 (CYB4COVID)

Outreach to member states to share information about initiatives, actions, resources and projects on cybersecurity that are designed to help ensure systems and networks remain connected safely and securely. The resources are available [here](#).

12. ITU-UNICEF GIGA initiative

ITU is leveraging the work of the **ITU-UNICEF GIGA** initiative (<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Initiatives/GIGA/Pages/default.aspx>) to accelerate the development of financing structures in a number of "quick start" GIGA priority countries, including Niger, Kenya, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and the OECS countries, with an aim to catalyze the funding required to accelerate national connectivity. GIGA is also working to update its broadband connectivity maps to in order to provide Ministers/regulators advice on how they can bring connectivity to health centres.

13. The ITU Smart Villages platform in Niger4

The ITU Smart Villages platform <https://coronavirus.ne/> is used to establish interactive voice service on COVID19 to everyone Niger. The service, created in collaboration with operators and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), is available via the short code 701 in the five local languages in Niger. Through the service, citizens are able to access important messages from the Ministry of Health regarding prevention and diagnosis of COVID-19.

14. ITU and USG Fabrizio Hochschild's office Joint Webinars on "Digital Cooperation in the Crisis of COVID19"

The Webinar series jointly organized by the ITU and USG/Special Advisor Fabrizio Hochschild's office, under the overall theme: "Digital Cooperation in the crisis of COVID19", are assessing the current situation of connectivity in different regions, and direct focus to actions required particularly in response to the COVID-19 emergency and further reduction of the the digital gap in order to enhance stable and affordable access for people who remain unconnected. The five webinars which begun on 15th April 2020 were concluded on 13th May 2020. More information can be found here: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Pages/seminars/2020/DigitalCooperation/default.aspx>

15. United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC)

The United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC) is a UN initiative coordinated by ITU, UNECE and UN-Habitat, and supported by other 14 UN bodies to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 11: "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable". Within the Thematic Group on Smart City Platforms, a new workstream has been created on 'Emergency Response of Cities to address the urban dimension of the response to COVID-19 pandemic'. This thematic group provides a platform to share solutions and best practices used in cities to address COVID-19. In addition, it will develop a framework on smart public health emergency management in cities.

16. WSIS TalkX:

The WSIS Team at ITU hosts a weekly virtual [WSIS TalkX](https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2020/Home/WSISTalkX) for WSIS Stakeholders to interact, connect and collaborate. These virtual interactive talks highlight linkages with the WSIS Action Lines and SDGs all held as precursors to the WSIS Forum 2020. The webinars have focused on various topics touching on COVID including Cybersecurity: Online Educational Resources and Child Online Protection during COVID-19, Free Application and Scientific Resources to track COVID-19, among others. More information here: <https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2020/Home/WSISTalkX>

17. Keeping Children Safe Online during COVID-19

The protection of children online is a global challenge. It is even more challenging now during the COVID-19 pandemic during which children and teens are now spending much more time online. The dependency on technology to remain connected is inevitable. There is high reliability on ICT networks to help reduce the impact of COVID-19 while allowing people to continue with their lives. However, this also poses risks and dangers, especially to children and teens who are vulnerable.

ITU, under its Child Online Protection (COP) Initiative, is reaching out to children, teens, parents and guardians to create awareness on how to keep children safe online during COVID-19. More information can be found here: <https://news.itu.int/covid-19-7-key-ways-to-keep-children-safe-online/>.

18. UN Interagency Network on Youth Development

ITU has issued a statement jointly with the UN Interagency Network on Youth Development regarding COVID-19 and Youth. It calls for agencies to make provisions that are responsive for the needs of young people, upholding their rights /youth-specific provisions when needed. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/news/2020/04/unianydn/>

19. WSIS ICT Case Repository (part of stocktaking)

As a part of the WSIS Stocktaking ongoing efforts to promote the good use of ICTs in making social impact, and in order to provide useful, replicable and actionable information to all WSIS community and beyond, the [ICT Case Repository](#) is now available for collecting projects and activities on how ICTs are assisting stakeholders in their everyday life, work, and combating challenges caused by this extraordinary pandemic. The Coronavirus (COVID-19) Response – The projects shared in the repository will be reviewed and featured on the WSIS Stocktaking Platform, and also promoted through various channels including the WSIS Flash newsletter, WSIS TalkX and social media channels.

20. ITU and WHO collaboration on AI for Health

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 are being pursued that can provide support to fighting COVID-19 and future pandemics include the use of AI for detecting outbreaks (TG-Outbreaks), for detecting counterfeit or adulterated medicines (TG-FakeMeds) and a proposed new working group on the use of AI in the various stages of managing health emergencies. More details can be found in the [FG-AI4H home page](#).

21. Use of ICTs to assist persons with disabilities cope with COVID-19

ITU published Guidelines on how to ensure that digital information, services and products are accessible by all people, including persons with disabilities (PWDs) during COVID-19. The full text is available [here](#).

22. ITU Innovation challenges

The ITU has launched three challenges calling for tech innovations responding to real-life problems faced by stakeholders in their communities, especially considering value chain competitiveness and global disruption due to COVID-19. These are also meant to allow innovators to develop sustainable and resilient solutions to navigate technological change and bridge the digital divide; to help and empower women in various sectors, including agriculture, fashion, and health. The information on the challenges can be found [here](#).

23. G20 Health Ministerial meeting

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. 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.”

24. G20 Digital Economy Ministerial meeting

Following the G20 Leaders’ Extraordinary Summit on 26 March, the G20 Ministers responsible for the digital economy issued a [COVID-19 Response Statement](#) on 30 April in which they emphasized the importance of 1) communication infrastructure and network connectivity, 2) exchange of data in a secure manner, 3) research and development of digital technologies for health, 4) use of digital technologies and solutions, 5) secure and trusted online environment, and 6) business resilience. ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao addressed the Extraordinary Meeting and urged the Ministers to seize the unique opportunity presented by the COVID-19 crisis to speed up the development of digital society. The Secretary-General said he was “confident that the message sent today 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 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.”

25. Dedicated ITU webpage on COVID-19

ITU has a dedicated [COVID-19 Updates](#) webpage to highlight all ITU initiatives, events and products related to COVID-19. All initiatives are presented by themes to ensure information is visible to consumers as well as users of ICT/telecommunication infrastructure.