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| **Virtual consultation of councillors** |  |
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| Report by the Secretary-General |
| IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE FUNCTIONING AND ACTIVITIES OF ITU |

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| SummaryThis document summarizes the impact of the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the functioning and activities of ITU, new initiatives and work programmes implemented, and measures introduced in response to COVID-19.Action requiredThe Council is invited **to take note** ofthis document.\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ReferencesAgenda item 13 of [Document VC/1](https://www.itu.int/md/S20-CLVC-C-0001/en) |

## 1. Introduction

1.1. The coronavirus (COVID-19) was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the UN on 30 January 2020 and subsequently declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020. The world is now in an unprecedented situation under COVID-19. Isolation measures, national and local lockdowns, and the adoption of home teleworking and remote learning have boosted demand for telecom/ICT services very suddenly. The telecom/ICT sector has so far responded well to meet the unprecedented surge in demand, keeping the world connected, and offering critical support to the medical system and others.

## 2. ITU New Initiatives and Work Programmes related to COVID-19

2.1 ITU has a number of new initiatives in response to COVID-19 and work programmes that are increasingly relevant in the current situation. The ITU [COVID-19 Updates](https://www.itu.int/en/Pages/covid-19.aspx) webpage highlights all ITU initiatives, events, products, and partnerships related to COVID-19.

2.2 In March 2020, ITU launched a [Global Network Resiliency Platform (#REG4COVID)](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regulatory-Market/Pages/REG4COVID.aspx) to help regulators, policy-makers, and telecom companies deal with the stress being put on telecommunication networks as more countries, companies, and individuals turn to digital technologies to respond to and cope with the impact of COVID‑19.

The platform provides an overview of key initiatives that shared on the #REG4COVID platform. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regulatory-Market/Documents/REG4COVID/2020/Summary_Key_Covid19_Initiatives.pdf>

From more than 400 submissions received, the ITU summarized and provided analysis reports available at the links:

1. <https://reg4covid.itu.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ITU_COVID-19_and_Telecom-ICT.pdf>
2. <https://reg4covid.itu.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ICTsector-response.jpg>

2.3 ITU Secretary-General Mr Houlin Zhao was invited to UN Chief Executive Board (CEB) session (14 May 2020), G20 Health Ministers Meeting (19 April 2020), Extraordinary Meeting of G20 Ministers responsible for the digital economy (30 April 2020), 73rd session of the World Health Assembly (18-19 May 2020). Mr Zhao also delivered Opening Remarks at a number of high-level meetings, including the G20 Finance Ministers Meeting (17 September 2020), Sixth BRICS Communications Ministers Meeting (17 September 2020), and LLDCs Ministerial Meeting (23 September 2020). In his recent speaking opportunities, the ITU Secretary-General highlighted that he appreciates the efforts of ICT experts to support the world fight against COVID-19, and the world recognition of the importance of ICT contributions to the social and economic development and fight against COVID-19. He has called on ITU members to the positive contribution of ICT to the world and the negative consequences of digital divide; efforts need to be sped up to connect those not connected yet; and more investments in ICT must be encouraged, in particular to bring ICT benefits to those not connected yet sooner rather later. He encourages Members to review their strategy and national plan with lessons learnt, and to explore new ways to do business.

# 2.4 In April 2020, ITU joined the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development in adoption of an [Agenda for Action](https://broadbandcommission.org/COVID19/Pages/default.aspx) outlining immediate measures that governments, industry, the international community, and civil society can take to reinforce digital networks, strengthen capacity. In September 2020, the Broadband Commission published a [Commission Manifesto and called on world leaders to prioritize universal connectivity as fundamental to sustainable development & global recovery](https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/PR20-2020-broadband-commission.aspx).

2.5 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. A [Digital Development Joint Action Plan and Call for Action](http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/788991588006445890/Speedboat-Partners-COVID-19-Digital-Development-Joint-Action-Plan.pdff) were launched.

2.6 ITU jointly organized a number of forums including the USG/Special Advisor Fabrizio Hochschild’s office [webinars](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Pages/seminars/2020/DigitalCooperation/default.aspx), under the overall theme: “Digital Cooperation in the crisis of COVID19”, to assess the situation of connectivity in different regions, direct focus to actions required in response to the COVID-19 emergency and further reduce the digital gap.

2.7 Within the framework of the UN75 Global Governance Forum, ITU convened the Partnership Dialogue for Connectivity, comprising the EMEA Satellite Operators Association (ESOA), Facebook, GSMA, Loon, Microsoft, SpaceX, UN Global Compact, UNICEF and the World Economic Forum, which agreed concrete actions to [Accelerate Digital Connectivity in the Wake of COVID-19](https://reg4covid.itu.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/UN75_Partnership_Statement_PD_final.pdf). In particular, the Partnership Dialogue agreed to collaborate to amplify the impact of individual initiatives of partners; support digital connectivity efforts of others by leveraging partner experiences; and identify and promote good practices on accelerating connectivity, including through an upgraded REG4COVID platform.

2.8 ITU and WHO, with support from UNICEF, are working with telecommunication companies to [text people directly on their mobile phones](https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/20-04-2020-itu-who-joint-statement-unleashing-information-technology-to-defeat-covid-19) with vital health messaging to help protect them from COVID-19. This initiative builds on the joint WHO-ITU BeHealthy, BeMobile initiative.

2.9 ITU has launched [new guidelines](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Emergency-Telecommunications/Pages/Publications/Guidelines-for-NETPs.aspx) to assist countries in developing national emergency telecommunication plans.

2.10 The [AI for Good Global Summit](https://aiforgood.itu.int/) has gone fully virtual as an all-year round event, featuring weekly programming across multiple formats and time-zones, including keynotes, expert webinars, project pitches, Q&As, performances, demos, interviews, networking and more. The Summit identifies practical applications of AI to accelerate progress towards the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/) and builds collaboration to assist these applications in achieving global impact.

2.11 Each week, [Virtual WSIS TalkX](https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2020/Home/WSISTalkX) explored an aspect of the global response to COVID-19, providing WSIS Stakeholders with a platform to create partnerships for on-the-ground action. The WSIS Forum 2020 also went fully virtual over 2.5 months from June 2020, concluding with the final week in September 2020. More than 80 workshops at the WSIS Forum 2020 were indicated by Stakeholders as directly linked to COVID-19. As a part of the WSIS Stocktaking efforts to promote the innovative use of ICTs, **the** [ICT Case Repository](https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/stocktaking/Surveys/Surveys/Submit/15863048637525604) **collects projects and activities dedicated to responding to the COVID-19 crisis. A draft zero version of the special** [ICT Case Repository: The Coronavirus Response](https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2020/Files/outcomes/draft/WSISStocktakingICTCaseRepository_TheCoronavirusResponseSpecialReport_DRAFT.pdf) **is now available.**

2.12 ITU launched CYB4COVID, a comprehensive [repository of cybersecurity expertise](https://www.itu.int/en/action/cybersecurity/Pages/CYB4COVID.aspx) related to COVID-19, to assist countries, businesses and citizens in their response to amplified and new threats in the digital space during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.13 The latest version of ITU’s [Guidelines for Parents, Carers, Guardians, and Educators for Child Online Protection](https://news.itu.int/covid-19-7-key-ways-to-keep-children-safe-online/) offers tips for parents to minimize online risk in the current pressing situation of online safety.

2.14 ITU has also convened a roundtable of leading economic experts to share their views on the impact of COVID-19 on digital infrastructure. A [resulting report](https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/pref/D-PREF-EF.COV_ECO_IMPACT-2020-PDF-E.pdf) provides our Member States and other stakeholders with consolidated insights on both – impact of COVID-19 on the digital infrastructure sector including efforts to bridge the digital divide, as well as a role of the digital infrastructure in helping strengthen resilience to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and similar health crises.

2.15 With support of the Governments of Japan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, ITU has also launched [Connect2Recover](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Pages/connect-2-recover.aspx), which aims to reinforce the digital infrastructure of beneficiary countries and enhance means of utilizing digital technologies (e.g. teleworking, e-commerce, remote learning and telemedicine) to support COVID-19 response and recovery efforts as well as preparedness for the ‘new normal’ and possible future similar health crises.

**3.** **ITU’s transition to the virtual sphere**

3.1 ITU has introduced an extensive number of measures to continue to provide services to its Membership uninterrupted during the pandemic.

3.2 For example, on 31 March 2020, ITU published the Final Acts of the WRC-19 while the updated version of the Radio Regulations was published on 15 September, well within time-frame announced prior to the coronavirus outbreak. The processing of terrestrial and satellite network filings continues apace even though the staff processing these filings are all teleworking. The ITU Regional Radiocommunication Seminar 2020 for the Americas Region (RRS-20Americas) was held virtually in July in collaboration with the Caribbean Telecommunications Union (CTU). The Radiocommunication Seminar for the Asia-Pacific region also takes place virtually in October 2020. ITU also participated in the WRC-23 preparatory meetings for the Africa and Asia-Pacific regions which were held virtually in August and September.

3.3 Following the announcement of COVID-19 as a pandemic, ITU suspended physical meetings at ITU Headquarters in Geneva for as long as necessary and transitioned ITU’s work to virtual platforms. All ITU meetings have gone virtual and a Virtual Consultation of Councillors was held in June 2020 (VCC1). The transition to the virtual sphere has demanded rapid behavioural change and ITU Members, delegates, and staff have embraced this change with impressive resolve. Considering the restrictions still applicable in Switzerland related to the limitation of the number of participants, as well as the restrictions on international travel, meetings organized by ITU at ITU HQ involving external participants will continue to be organized remotely until further notice.

3.4 Video-conferencing services have emerged as the principal platform for organizations to coordinate, communicate and collaborate with staff and external partners alike. On 14 April, the UNISSIG (United Nations Information Security Interest Group) met virtually to discuss the information security implications of organizations’ uptake of video-conferencing services, the risk to the confidentiality of the data and the content of a meeting, risk to privacy and the potential collection of metadata. UNISSIG conducted an assessment of these video-conferencing services from an information security and privacy standpoint, in the light of the recommendations and guidelines that were suggested. The group took into consideration the varied levels of risk appetite in each UN system organization and has adopted these guidelines accordingly.

3.5 In May 2020, ITU developed “Guidelines and Best Practices for Virtual Events and Remote Participation”. This document was submitted to the UN High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM) Digital and Technology Network and shared among UN HLCM members. The document is intended for internal use within the UN family. It provides guidelines and best practices for organizing a virtual conference, meeting, or event and how to support interactive remote participation, based on experience gained since 2010 from ITU and various UN organizations.

3.6 All ITU meetings and events have been held virtually since 16 March 2020, including Radio Regulations Board (RRB), World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD) event, Radiocommunication Advisory Group (RAG), Telecommunication Development Advisory Group (TDAG), VCC1, ITU-R study groups and relevant working parties, ITU-T study groups and relevant focus groups, Expert Group on the ICT Index, Girls in ICT Day, GSR20, WSIS Forum, AI Good Summit, and TSAG. These meetings had a smooth transition to virtual events with, in most cases, higher participation than physical meetings.

3.7 As a result of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, ITU and the Ministry of Information and Communications of Viet Nam have postponed the physical edition of ITU Digital World 2020 until October 2021 in the same venue in Ha Noi, Viet Nam. Meanwhile, ITU Virtual Digital World 2020 will take place from 20-22 October. This event, which will be opened in the presence of H.E. Nguyen Xuan Phuc, Prime Minister, Viet Nam, will comprise three highest level Ministerial roundtables focusing on "The role of digital technologies during and after the COVID-19 pandemic" - and exploring the importance of digital connectivity in national strategies for economic recovery. Alongside these, Forum webinar sessions will explore the policies, technologies and trends driving the digital economy, and a virtual Exhibition enabling online showcasing.

3.8 The following actions have been taken by ITU to allow events and meetings to transition from physical to fully virtual:

* IT infrastructure has been upgraded to support all staff working from home given the substantial increase in virtual events and meetings;
* The remote participation team has been strengthened with more virtual meeting moderators, helping delegates to connect to the web-conference platforms and assisting the chairs, secretaries, and all participants during the virtual meetings;
* A virtual service desk has been established;
* Web-conference tools were upgraded to support multilingual meetings, including using the following software platforms: (1) Interprefy, (2) Zoom, (3) MyMeetings;
* The interpretation booths in rooms Popov, A, C, and L have been integrated with the three web-conference platforms to allow interpreters to continue providing their service from their usual environment, while respecting the social distancing requirement of having one person per interpretation booth;
* Training has been provided to the interpreters on using the Remote Simultaneous Interpretation tool of the web-conference platform to allow them to perform remote interpretation from home, in the event that they cannot come to ITU, due to travel restrictions.

3.9 The first Virtual Consultation of Councillors in June (VCC1) was a successful virtual meeting. Many participants were initially unfamiliar with the web-conference platform (Interprefy) and some faced technical connectivity challenges from their locations. While this affected the flow of the meeting a little at the beginning, the meeting proceeded and concluded successfully, without too many technical difficulties.

3.10 The interpretation booth to Interprefy integration has been used extensively from May 2020, with VCC1 as the first stress-test of the installation. Since then, extensive improvements have been made on both the Interprefy platform as well as the booth-to-platform integration. Zoom multilingual support was introduced in July, followed by MyMeetings in September. The provision of the multilingual support in all these platforms has become smoother over time.

3.11 Following the discussion at VCC1 on support to developing countries, especially the least developed countries, to ensure that their representatives can participate in remote meetings effectively and on an equal footing, a survey of administrations of Members States classified as developing countries, which also include the least developed countries, small island developing states, landlocked developing countries and economies in transition, as well as the State of Palestine was conducted. The purpose of this survey was to determine barriers that may hamper participation in virtual/online meetings. 40 responses were received. A comparative analysis of the participation of least developed countries in 2020 remote meetings as compared to meetings in 2019 was also conducted. On the basis of the survey as well as the analysis of participation, ITU is considering measures to address the barriers identified.

3.12 Since 16 March 2020, access to ITU Headquarter premises has been strictly reserved for persons who need to be in the premises to undertake essential official business that cannot be conducted remotely. The management requested ITU staff to work from home, with the objective of not only protecting staff health but also the health of staff colleagues and families, and also to contribute, as members of the community, to limit the spread of COVID-19. ITU Management has undertaken efforts to equip staff with mobile phones and laptops with second screens. Staff are using Microsoft Teams for telephone calls and work coordination and e-signature was rolled out to all staff who needs it which greatly facilitated the approval process. At all levels, ITU staff have been fully committed and cooperative in achieving these objectives, with dedication and solidarity. Appropriate mitigation actions were taken to ensure staff health and safety when working in ITU, meeting rooms were setup to allow virtual meeting support staff to work together in the room for better coordination, while respecting the social distancing requirements. Various mitigation measures are being implemented to ensure a safe return to office (RTO).

3.13 Already in January 2020, ITU had introduced measures to protect safety of staff and delegates, such as: the suspension of all non-essential travel to or meetings in countries with the highest risk of exposure to COVID-19; to advise all returning staff from private travel to stay at their residences in Geneva and monitor their health daily for 14 days; to request the staff member or delegate to self-isolate for at least 14 days if a staff member or delegate has been in contact with a person confirmed to be carrying the virus; and to request ITU meeting organizers to offer remote participation. All mission travel was restricted for all staff travelling from the ITU HQ and these restrictions were maintained as of the end of September 2020.

3.14 Investments in physical Safety and Security have included specialized cameras and temporary triage health assessment tents, as well as specific video training clips for staff and standard operating procedures for ITU’s HQ premises. In May 2020, ITU procured thermal imaging camera stations and temporary triage tents at entry/access points. In case any person entering ITU is detected with a high temperature, they can be discreetly assessed by ITU Medical Services staff. These cameras and other mitigation measures have reduced risks and mean that there is, to date, no known case of contamination within the HQ premises thus far.

3.15 Further to the request of additional session of Council 2019, internal communications has been strengthened, through establishing an Internal Communications Working Group in the Operational Response Team (ORT), launching an audio-visual campaign on return to office/office presence during COVID-19 and issuing digital newsletters for staff.

3.16 The Secretary-General has allocated nearly CHF1.2 million to meet the expenses related to Covid-19. The main categories of expenses that have been covered by this exceptional allocation can be found in **Table 1** below. The use of teleworking generated additional costs as it was necessary to make the working environment functional for all staff members. Computer equipment and telephony were purchased for loans to staff. It was also necessary to adapt to virtual conferences, which required the purchase of appropriate equipment. Infrared cameras, as mentioned in Paragraph 3.13, masks, sanitizer gel, and others were purchased. The ITU also hired a psychologist to support its staff members who faced difficulties. The medical advisor previously on a part-time basis (50%) has been increased to full-time. The financing of all these expenses was possible thanks to the savings generated by the suspension of official missions as outlined in **Table 2** below. Since 16 March 2020, the SG has suspended all official missions of ITU officials, as mentioned in Paragraph 3.12, as well as face-to-face meetings in ITU premises. Savings have also been generated from the fellowships budget.

**Table 1: Expenses related to COVID-19**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **KCHF** |
| 50% medical advisor + psychologist | 156 |
| Equipment (tents, infrared cameras, furniture,..) | 136 |
| Supplies (Masks, hydroalcoholic gel, …) | 100 |
| Software (security) | 18 |
| Mobile phones (purchase) | 125 |
| Mobile phones (subscriptions) | 250 |
| IT peripherals (laptops, screens, …) | 254 |
| **Total Covid-19 expenses (budget 2020)** | **1,039** |

**Table 2: Travel Savings for COVID-20**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Budget 2020** | **Actuals as at 25/9/2020** | **Variance (savings?)** |
|  |  |  |  |
| Mission and travel Staff (incl. travel for training) | 3,589 | 595 | 2,994 |
| Mission and travel SSA | 515 | 23 | 492 |
| Fellowships | 1,653 | 225 | 1,428 |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Total** | **5,757** | **843** | **4,914** |

3.17 There is some cause for concern with regard to the future revenues of the Union. Even if, for the year 2020, most of ITU’s members have paid their contributions so far, there is still cause for concern with regards to the payment of Member State contributions for next year 2021, should the crisis persist. Some delays have been noted in the payment of contributions in advance, compared with the same period last year. To date, only 4% of the Member State contributions for 2021 have been received, compared to 14% in 2019. It is hoped that this rate will improve by the end of the year and before 31 March 2021, the due date for payment of 2021 contributions. Should the current trend continue, ITU might face a cash flow issue in 2021.

**4. Impact of COVID-19 on Staff**

4.1 The ORMS project approved by the Council in 2017 *created both a Crisis Management and Business Continuity resilience capacity* that has proven to serve the Union well during the pandemic. The Crisis Management Team (CMT) and Operational Response Team (ORT) began putting in place mitigation measures in early February to reduce risks to staff, dependents, and ITU’s assets. These measures have been successful in that to date no known contagion has occurred in the ITU premises.

4.2 Concerning the health and well-being of staff, the pandemic has highlighted that ITU would benefit from implementing the CEB/HLCM Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) framework and Strengthening the preventive functions of its occupational health service: a) Risk assessment of the workplace; b) Risk assessment of the work position; c) Reinforcing a Health Surveillance Program of the Workforce, and allowing medical workforce to bridge the gap of missing medical data; and d) Implementing a Quality Health Safety and Environmental Management software that will cover the needs of digitalization of the medical files and link them to the risk-assessments.

4.3 With respect to staff working conditions during the last seven months of teleworking, members of the Geneva-based organizations’ HR Network have coordinated their approach and guidelines have been established under the auspices of the CEB. CEB/HCLM announced in September, that a UN-wide framework for teleworking is expected in December 2020 for adoption by each executive head.

4.4 While the ITU staff has demonstrated a huge level of engagement and commitment to maintaining ITU’s activities during the crisis, a HR business continuity plan will be developed in anticipation of any similar future crisis situation. It should include an evaluation of the existing jobs and services that can easily be performed off-site on a regular or even permanent basis for significant period of time, taking into account the necessity of ensuring a fair distribution of work between staff whose functions can easily be performed under those conditions, and those whose functions cannot be totally, or even partially, performed in a teleworking mode. Consideration should also be given to ensuring that well-being of staff is preserved by having in place support mechanisms to prevent burn-out or other medical issues because of the high workload during a long-lasting crisis period. That would also include, *inter alia*, consideration of work and family life balance (care to relatives at home, home-schooling, and other family-related constraints), definition of a work-from-home package (IT equipment, office furniture, insurance coverage, etc.), regular surveys for assessing the well-being of staff, and identification of first lines services to address issues identified.

4.5 In summary, ITU staff has performed exceptionally well in the circumstances. Mitigation measures were introduced early and have been successful, and many significant lessons have been learned with regard to flexible working which will prove particularly helpful to cope with the forthcoming building project disruption. Once the global pandemic has ended a *Lessons Learned* exercise will be undertaken to better ready ITU for any other major critical threat event in the future.

**5.** **Conclusions**

5.1 The world is navigating uncharted waters, with a huge shock to health systems, economies, and societies alike, in one of the greatest challenges the world has experienced for over half a century. The pandemic holds mixed opportunities for the telecommunication/ICT sector, which has so far responded well to meet the unprecedented surge in demand.

5.2 ITU adopted a range of early and extensive measures to ensure the business continuity of its services during the pandemic, including remote teleworking, virtual platforms for many key meetings, and measures for the safety and security of staff.

5.3 ITU believes that ICTs can contribute to the social and economic development and recovery and the fight against COVID-19. ITU remains deeply concerned by the impact of the pandemic on its Members and will continue to monitor the situation closely, to help serve the needs and priorities of its Members as best it can. This issue is being mainstreamed into the work of the Union as a top priority.

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