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**Contribution by the Secretariat**

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE FUNCTIONING AND ACTIVITIES OF ITU

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| Summary  This 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 required  The Council is invited **to take note** ofthis document.  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  References  [Document VC/13](https://www.itu.int/md/S20-CLVC-C-0013/en), [Document VC/13(Rev.1)](https://www.itu.int/md/S20-CLVC-C-0013/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 launched a number of new initiatives in response to COVID-19 and work programmes 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 over 400 submissions received, ITU has 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 In his recent speaking opportunities, the ITU Secretary-General has highlighted the importance of ICT contributions to the social and economic development and the fight against COVID-19. He has called the attention of ITU members to the positive contribution of ICT to the world and the negative consequences of digital divide; efforts need to be redoubled 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.

2.4 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.

2.5 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.

2.6 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).

2.7 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.

2.8 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.

2.9 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.

2.10 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.**

2.11 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.

2.12 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 situation of online services.

2.13 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. 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.

3.2 Since 16 March 2020, ITU staff have worked from home and 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. ITU staff have been fully committed and cooperative in achieving these objectives, with dedication and solidarity. Various mitigation measures are being implemented to ensure a safe return to office (RTO). Community transmission of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus responsible for COVID-19) is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. During 2021, for persons who need to be in ITU premises on essential official business, transmission inside ITU premises might still occur. ITU has implemented various mitigation measures (i.e. low presence inside premises, “stay home when sick” policy, self-reporting of symptoms, temperature-screening at points of entry), which have so far proven effective.

3.3 In January 2020, ITU suspended all non-essential travel and mission travel was restricted for all staff travelling from ITU HQ and these restrictions have been maintained to date. COVID-19 vaccination campaigns are expected to start early 2021. ITU staff members will be invited to participate in the national campaign of their duty station. In later stages, when vaccine single doses become available, COVID-19 vaccination is expected to be a condition for international air travel. For ITU official trips to resume, ITU will follow the developments of COVID-19 vaccines procurement and procure single doses if possible or organize care pathways to get official travellers vaccinated.

3.4 Video-conferencing services have emerged as a key platform for organizations to coordinate, communicate and collaborate with staff and external partners alike. In 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.

3.5 In May 2020, ITU developed “Guidelines and Best Practices for Virtual Events and Remote Participation”, which were submitted to the UN High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM) Digital and Technology Network and shared among UN HLCM members.

3.6 On 1 December, Zoom Video Communications Inc. informed UNESCO that U.S. authorities have issued general licenses allowing Zoom to provide services to sanctioned countries for services on official business of the UN, specialized agencies, Programmes, Funds and related organizations. Zoom can hence allow the unrestricted use of its platform for ITU statutory / intergovernmental / official meetings. Cisco has advertised the new version of WebEx for Q1 2021 forEnabling fully remote and hybrid legislative bodies to convene via WebEx. WebEx functionality includes: a) Meeting, debating, and voting remotely. b) Live interpretation, including American Sign Language (ASL) c) Video lobby and participant ID management and verification d) Closed captioning.

3.7 All ITU meetings and events have been held virtually since 16 March 2020, including three meetings of the Radio Regulations Board (RRB) in March, July and October 2020, World Telecommunication and Information Society Day (WTISD) event, Radiocommunication Advisory Group (RAG), Telecommunication Development Advisory Group (TDAG), two Virtual Consultations of Councillors in June and November 2020, 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, ITU Virtual Digital World 2020, three ITU Satellite Webinars, and TSAG. These meetings had a smooth transition to virtual events with, in most cases, higher participation than physical meetings. ITU and the Ministry of Information and Communications of Viet Nam postponed the physical edition of ITU Digital World 2020 until October 2021 in the same venue in Ha Noi, Viet Nam.

3.8 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 the timeframe announced prior to the coronavirus outbreak. The processing of terrestrial and satellite network filings continues. The ITU Regional Radiocommunication Seminar 2020 for the Americas Region (RRS-20Americas) and the Asia-Pacific region, and the ITU World Radiocommunication Seminar 2020 (WRS20) took place virtually. The WRS20 was expanded to two weeks and, for the first time ever, the WRS plenary sessions held in the 1st week were open to non-ITU members, while the workshops held in the 2nd week were provided as an ITU-R Members-only event. In addition to seeing a significant increase in participation in these events, it was notable that 33% of the participants in the WRS20 plenary sessions were women, which is significantly higher than for any of the ITU-R's physical events.

3.9 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;
* 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 social distancing requirements;
* Training has been given to interpreters for the Remote Simultaneous Interpretation tool of the web-conference platform to allow them to perform remote interpretation from home.
* Events have been reorganized to be more accommodating to the global virtual audience, including reducing the number of hours per day and increasing the number of days as compared to physical events. The WRS20 sessions was presented twice a day to allow participants from all regions to attend during reasonable local times.

3.10 In times of COVID-19, to ensure business continuity of the Union‘s governing bodies, Councillors agreed to hold Virtual Consultations of Councillors to discuss the most urgent topics for the Union, and draw proposed conclusions to be approved either by a next physical session of the Council or by correspondence for those calling for an urgent decision by the Council. The first one (VCC-1) was held in June. A second one (VCC-2) was organized from 16 to 20 November 2020. These virtual consultations have allowed Member States to address most of the items initially included on the agenda of the annual 2020 physical session of the Council.

3.11 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.

3.12 Further to the request of additional session of Council 2019, internal communications have 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.

3.13 The Secretary-General has allocated nearly CHF1.2 million to meet 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. Teleworking generated some additional costs as it was necessary to adapt to virtual conferences, which required the purchase of appropriate equipment. 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 savings outlined in **Table 2** below. Savings have also been generated from the fellowships budget.

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

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|  | **KCHF** |
| 50% medical advisor + psychologist | 156 |
| Equipment (tents, infrared cameras ..) | 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**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Budget 2020** | **Actuals as at 30/11/2020** | **Variance (savings?)** |
|  |  |  |  |
| Mission and travel Staff | 3,589 | 595 | 2,994 |
| Mission and travel SSA | 515 | 23 | 492 |
| Fellowships | 1,653 | 225 | 1,428 |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Total** | **5,757** | **843** | **4,914** |

3.14 There is some cause for concern with regard to the future revenues of the Union. However with regards to the payment of ITU’s members contributions the figures to date tend to show that the rate of payments is similar to previous years. 94% of the current Member States contributions have already been received and 40% as far as the 2021 contributions are concerned. A strict follow up of debtors is always done, but to date the ITU is optimistic in term of cashflow forecast for 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 served ITU 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 secondary transmission has occurred in the ITU premises, despite the known confirmed cases for ITU staff.

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 A HR business continuity plan will be developed in anticipation of any similar future crisis situation. Consideration will be given to ensuring support mechanisms are in place to prevent burn-out or other medical issues because of the high workload during a long-lasting crisis period.

**5.** **Conclusions**

5.1 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 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.

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