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Contribution to Consultation on GSR-20 Best Practice Guidelines

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It is observed that there is a global need to strengthen the development of telecoms and ICT environment in response to a crisis in health and socio-economic sphere created by COVID-19. There is a new challenge that we all meet around the world - substantial demand for higher speed connectivity and advanced digital services during the pandemic. According to the recent surveys, peoples' daily lives have been rocked by COVID-19 and a great number of consumers have increased their Internet usage. With more and more activities being carried out online, and greater numbers of hours spent connected to both fixed and mobile broadband, the Internet has become a fundamental part of daily lives and businesses. The fastest-growing Internet usage categories during the COVID-19 period have been those related to health, remote working, education/e-learning and entertainment. The pandemic situation has clearly shown that resilient connectivity, business continuity and service delivery is of great importance.

Now, the connectivity and overcoming the digital divide is crucial more than ever. It will be important to ensure that consumers gain access to adequate broadband which will support them in daily remote activities and business. Furthermore, the resilient connectivity should be based on reliable networks, preferably on very high capacity networks which guarantee uninterrupted operation of the network and ensure stable transmission. They are capable of dealing with increased needs of a household in the era of pandemic. These advanced fixed networks can be complemented by mobile 4G and new 5G technology. In some countries mobile networks are extensively used and have proved to work efficiently during the pandemic. Also, many customers are positive towards the development of 5G technology and the role it could have played during the crisis. Some of them wished 5G technology had been rolled out faster to benefit from providing higher speeds in mobile networks. Specialists could have used 5G to control medical equipment via remote centres across the country. It is also believed that for the future possible wave of pandemic and forthcoming crisis, 5G could offer better network capacity compared to 4G and support new services, e.g. virtual reality to enable access to online education.

In reference to the question on **demonstrating regulatory thought leadership for digital transformation**, broadband connectivity is now absolutely crucial for governmental institutions and businesses to continue to provide essential services. Regulators' actions should concentrate on facilitating digital transformation, providing guidance for the telecommunications sector during transformation and supporting the roll-out of high-speed broadband infrastructure. It is widely believed that the changed circumstances in the COVID-19 world mean that telecommunications services now create what economists call more "utility" for society – telecommunications now delivers greater social welfare benefits than previously. The regulators need to explore urgently and thoroughly the innovative ways in which the continued investment in telecommunications can lower the economic cost and increase the effectiveness of responses to the virus. This should include roll-out of robust high speed broadband infrastructure and delivery of digital services, support for implementation of trusted digital payment systems and the ability to digitise SMEs and start-ups, not just larger corporations.

In terms of the second question on **transformative regulatory approaches which are at hand to enhance the inclusiveness, agility and resilience**, it is important to underline that the telecommunications sector can significantly facilitate the COVID-19 recovery phase. Thus far, the regulatory measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain functionality of the network and quality of services have been successful. Many regulators introduced a monitoring mechanism and cooperated actively with industry to ensure service continuity and prevent the effect of network congestion. There were also joint initiatives related to the connectivity and best practices exchange at regional and international level. Also, due to increased usage of digital services there is still need to support further the development of the digital competences and take actions on the protection of users in on-line environment. It is crucial to increase consumer awareness urging the use of digital services as well as informing about their potential risks, for instance on-line fraudulent incidents.

Current situation shows the need to concentrate regulatory actions on **agility and resilience of telecommunications networks and access to Internet service**. Any failure of the network is an obstacle to equal access for everyone and may cause real economic losses. Policy makers, regulators, the industry and all other stakeholders need to be prepared for similar situations and unexpected events in the future.

The theme of GSR-20 invites us also to reflect on the importance of the growing need for cooperation among stakeholders. Such cooperation should be constant and across borders and across sectors. Events organized by ITU play such a role and give a good opportunity to exchange best practices, provide insightful opinions on recent actions and deliver positive market and consumer outcomes. Today, higher speed connectivity and advanced digital services have become the foundation for every economic sector and a sine qua non of business performance and national growth. The discussion during GSR-20 and insightful analysis encompassed in the Best Practice Guidelines could support regulators in shaping an enabling environment.

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