



# COVID-19 HIGH-LEVEL MESSAGING

**20 May 2020**

*ITU has a dedicated [COVID-19 Updates](#) webpage highlighting all ITU initiatives, events, products and partnerships related to COVID-19.*

## **1. ICTs AT THE HEART OF THE GLOBAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

- COVID-19 is the first pandemic in human history where information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social media are being used on a massive scale, driving the global collective response to the disease and digital transformation across the world.
- COVID-19 has highlighted the fundamental importance of ICTs to economies and societies everywhere. From teleworking and e-commerce to telemedicine and remote learning, digital technologies are supporting continued access to education, healthcare, essential goods and services and family and friends.
- ITU is committed to providing reliable and trustworthy digital services for all those around the world who rely on them to continue to work, study, care for others, and keep in touch with loved ones.
- ITU is committed to continuing to leverage ICTs to help defeat COVID-19 and make us safer, stronger, and more connected.

## **2. DIGITAL DIVIDE & SDGs**

- COVID-19 has shown that nobody is safe until we are all safe. At a time when just over half of the world is using the Internet, we will not be able to use the full potential of ICTs until we are all connected. It is at times like these that we need to ensure that the digital infrastructure, services, and applications that have proved fundamental in this crisis are beneficial to all so that we leave no one behind as we recover from the pandemic.
- The COVID-19 crisis we are in today calls for solidarity. As the COVID-19 pandemic is making in-roads in the developing world and threatening all of humanity, we need to take immediate action to ensure no one is left behind.
- ITU has long advocated for universal, reliable, and affordable connectivity. ITU will continue to push on all these fronts until everyone is connected, steadfast in its mission to connect all the world's people to a better world, wherever they live and whatever their means.

- On May 19, ITU released its new statistical report, [Measuring Digital Development: ICT Price Trends 2019](#). “In the face of COVID-19, keeping telecommunication and digital services as affordable as possible is more vital than ever,” said ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao. “People who do not have access to the Internet may not be able to access information about how to protect themselves from coronavirus, telework, learn remotely and connect with families and friends during quarantine.”
- On 17 May for [WTISD-20](#), ITU Secretary-General said: “There will be a before- and after-COVID-19. We must seize this opportunity to speed up the development of digital society. That means creating better environments for investment in ICT infrastructure, facilitating the development of new technologies like 5G, and using these technologies to help achieve the SDGs.”

### 3. COLLABORATION

- The COVID-19 pandemic is creating isolation, but it is also strengthening connection and collaboration. ITU has been calling on the ICT community and others to rise to the challenge and strengthen the collective digital response to this unprecedented crisis.
- ITU has launched the [Global Network Resiliency Platform \(REG4COVID\)](#) to 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 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 has 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 and WHO, with support from UNICEF, are set to work 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 are not able to connect to the Internet for information. This initiative builds on current efforts to disseminate health messages through the joint WHO-ITU BeHealthy BeMobile initiative.

- On Earth Day, 22 April, ITU released in partnership with several other UN sister agencies a report on [“Frontier technologies are key tools to combat climate change”](#). “COVID-19 has made clear that we are all interconnected and that our response must be collective, across countries and sectors and that ICTs have an important role to play in accelerating solutions. How we respond to climate change, as one humanity, must follow the same principles,” said ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao.
- ITU and WHO are committed to identifying and scaling best evidence-based digital health solutions and to leveraging frontier technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data to diagnose, contain and predict outbreaks better and faster.
- 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.
- ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao addressed the Extraordinary Meeting of G20 Ministers responsible for the digital economy on 30 April. He 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 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 has joined the COVID-19 [Global Education Coalition](#) led by UNESCO to ensure that learning continues for the more than 1.5 billion students and youth across the planet affected by school and university closures. With most of the world’s students now at home due to COVID-19, the pandemic is revealing startling divides in digitally-based distance learning. Half of all students currently out of the classroom – or nearly 830 million learners globally – do not have access to a computer. Additionally, more than 40% have no Internet access at home.
- ITU launched in collaboration with the office of UN Undersecretary General and Special Advisor Fabrizio Hochschild a series of webinars on [“Digital Cooperation during COVID-19 and beyond”](#) that focuses 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 began on 15th April 2020 were concluded on 13th May 2020. More information can be found [here](#).

- Building on ITU's Digital Transformation Centres Initiative, ITU, in collaboration with Cisco, will offer a free-of-charge [programme](#) providing trainers with tools and skills on how to conduct remote teaching.
- 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 has launched [new guidelines](#) to assist countries develop national emergency telecommunication plans.
- ITU recognizes the value of the Amateur Radio Services for working with emergency services to provide essential communication links in times of crisis, linking responders with those in need of humanitarian assistance or helping to keep supply chains open. In these days of social isolation, amateur radio offers a unique way for individuals and families to maintain social contacts while remaining physically separate from each other.
- Bringing trusted news and facts about COVID-19 is paramount. During times of crisis, such as those we are living through now, citizens turn to independent Television and Radio broadcasters for reliable and trustworthy news and information. As the COVID-19 outbreak escalates, radio and television news bulletins are doubling their audience while online news services have tripled their reach in key markets.
- On claims about 5G technology and the spread of COVID-19: viruses cannot travel on radio waves and mobile networks. These 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.
- The [AI for Good Global Summit](#) has gone virtual. ITU is 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.
- Each week, [Virtual WSIS TalkX](#) delves into an aspect of the global response to COVID-19. Building on the expertise of the WSIS community, this podcast series provides 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 ICTs in making social impact, the [ICT Case Repository](#) collects projects and activities dedicated to responding to the COVID-19 crisis.
- Cities house over half of the world's population and risk amplifying the COVID-19 pandemic. The [United for Smart Sustainable Cities](#) – 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](#) is 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 are able to access important messages from the Ministry of Health regarding prevention and diagnosis of COVID-19.
- To help build a secure and trustworthy environment for those relying on ICTs during the COVID-19 crisis, ITU is 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.
- For many parents, the question of how to ensure their children’s online safety is now more pressing than ever before. The upcoming updated version of ITU’s [Guidelines for Parents, Carers, Guardians, and Educators for Child Online Protection](#) offers tips for parents to minimize online risk.
- An [Agenda for Action](#) launched by 8 UN agencies, including ITU, places children’s protection from violence as top priority for Governments and provides concrete recommendations to safeguard children’s well-being. Young people are natural adopters of technology. ITU, as member of the UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development, contributed to the [Statement on COVID-19 and Youth](#).
- Several innovations 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 is, *Rethinking the digital economy’s value chains during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Deadline for submission is 31 July 2020.

#### 4. VIRTUAL SPHERE

- Following the announcement of COVID-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020, the Crisis Management Team of ITU decided to suspend all physical meetings at ITU Headquarters in Geneva for as long as necessary and transition work to virtual platforms. All ITU meetings have gone virtual except ITU Council. The transition to the virtual sphere demanded rapid behavioural change and ITU Members have embraced this change with impressive resolve.
- As a result of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, ITU and the Ministry of Information and Communications of Viet Nam have taken the difficult decision to postpone [ITU Digital World 2020](#), the global tech event for government, industry and SMEs. This is to ensure the well-being and safety of all event participants and guarantee a successful event. The event will now take place as ITU Digital World 2021 in September 2021 in the same venue in Ha Noi, Viet Nam.