Digital Development Joint Action Plan and Call for Action

COVID-19 Crisis Response

April 2020

In this unprecedented fight against COVID-19, digital technologies offer the only opportunity for governments, individuals and businesses to cope with social distancing, ensure business continuity and prevent service interruptions.

Immediate action is needed especially to leverage digital technologies to respond to challenges presented by COVID-19, from governments and regulators around the world, supported by the private sector and the digital development community. Fostering knowledge-sharing, notably through the ITU's Global Network Resiliency Platform (**#REG4COVID**) and the World Economic Forum's COVID Action Platform (the COVID Digital Response Network and the Digital Transformation for the Post-COVID World group), the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development's Agenda for Action, and other platforms and fora, **this call for action has been developed as part of a fast-tracked collaboration initiated by the World Bank, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), GSMA and the World Economic Forum**.

> " Governments, regulators and the telecom industry must do all it takes to deploy affordable, reliable, and safe digital technologies. As soon as the crisis hit, we have been working hand in hand with, the ITU, GSMA, and the World Economic Forum on a joint action plan to help governments cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and increase connectivity access. We are committed to work together to achieve the promise of new technologies for all and keep the world connected.
>
> Makhtar Diop, the World Bank's Vice President for Infrastructure

Our high dependency on digital infrastructure and increased reliance on secure online services have never been greater. However, many of those who remain unconnected to digital services risk being left further behind in these times and beyond:

– Today there are 3.9 billion internet users globally, leaving almost 50% of the world's population still excluded from digital technologies. In addition, there is also a "usage gap" with 3.3 billion people covered by mobile broadband networks but who are not using mobile internet services. Of the 25 least connected countries in the world, 21 are in Africa.
– African countries and fragile, conflict and violence-affected states with relatively high prices for mobile broadband connectivity, high voice and data taxes, and limited penetration will be most affected by the digital divide.
– Socially marginalized groups, including rural communities, persons with disabilities young people and children, and women and girls who are often excluded from digital development opportunities, will be disproportionately affected.
– Since the start of COVID-19:
  – Over 1 billion students are now out of school and in need of online/distance learning and safe environments to learn and communicate.
  – Voice calls have almost tripled in some countries while the use of some communications apps has more than doubled, causing increased congestion and the need to support network resilience.
  – Data traffic has increased by at least 20% and cyberattacks on the health sector infrastructure and mobile networks have increased by 150% in the last two months.

During this ongoing pandemic, affordable and reliable broadband access is the lifeblood of our economies:

– As countries impose extreme social distancing measures, maintaining connectivity is of paramount importance to ensure individual and economic interactions continue happening, and better prepare countries for future crises.
– At this crucial time, telecom operators are addressing how to strengthen digital infrastructure to enable remote working at scale and facilitate business continuity, despite the numerous challenges to ensure that the communities they support are able to overcome the crisis.
– In addition, satellite operators are supporting pandemic response by supporting Wi-Fi hotspots and telemedicine platforms backhauled by satellite.
– Healthcare workers, hospitals and first responders are in need of quickly deployed, dedicated and highly secure network capacity and tools.
– Scarcity of broadband access will continue to compromise economic activities, cash transfers and remittances, while limiting distance learning and weakening health coordination response. Landlocked countries could be at risk if the countries that they rely on for transit give excessive priority to their own traffic needs.

The time is now – we must do all it takes to help people, businesses and countries stay connected and connect the unconnected.

Objectives of the call for action

This call for action seeks to pursue five objectives:

Objective 1: Increasing bandwidth, strengthening resilience and security of networks, and managing congestion

– Telecom operators in many countries are experiencing an unprecedented surge of traffic as a result of more people working from home and accessing digital services. Operators are investing in added capacity in order to ensure their networks remain as robust and secure as ever. In general, networks are performing robustly and meeting current needs. In some cases, however, temporary measures could help alleviate pressure on networks, including providing regulatory flexibility and certainty for operators to manage types of network traffic and quality of services parameters. This will ensure network resilience and access to the full range of services by consumers and businesses.

– Governments should quickly address the development of contingency and emergency telecommunication plans, using the ITU guidelines to develop national emergency telecommunication plans (NETPs) – through a multistakeholder approach at a national or local level. This will include using telecom networks to deliver early warning alerts to end users.

Objective 2: Connecting vital services and ensuring the continuity of public services to safeguard the welfare of populations

– Many countries do not have the ability to use digital as the "new normal" for work, schooling and government services, and risk being left further behind if the crisis expands or repeats.

– While some telecom operators are voluntarily offering solutions to those suddenly facing financial hardship, such as flexible payment options and the lifting of data caps, the operators themselves are subject to regulatory restrictions, taxes and fees that deeply affect the cost of service provision. This calls for special measures to ease the financial pressure on operators, minimize liquidity issues in the short term, and improve affordability for end users.

– In a global health emergency, connecting health centres and hospitals is an absolute priority, enabling services such as remote diagnostics and telemedicine. It is expected that regulations will be temporarily relaxed in some markets to allow operators to prioritize connections to emergency services and, where there is no coverage or extreme congestion, quickly deploy readily available technologies and dedicated networks.

Objective 3: Powering fintech and digital business models to support the most impacted businesses and communities

– Economies are increasingly relying on fintech and digital financial services to stay afloat, and demand for services such as mobile and digital payments, telework platforms, food delivery and e-commerce will grow exponentially.

– Governments and operators should consider new approaches or adaptive business models to facilitate deployment of these services.

Objective 4: Promoting trust, security and safety online

– Given the number of students out of school and in need of online/distance learning and safe environments to learn and communicate, this urges governments to define programmes defining innovative solutions to reach out to children and test their digital skills preparedness.

– Given rising cybersecurity threats targeting health centres, telecoms networks and critical infrastructure, governments should enhance their cybersecurity capabilities, including through national computer incident response teams (CIRT), national cybersecurity plans and public-private cooperation.

Objective 5: Leveraging the power of mobile big data

– The use of mobile big data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) can play a key role in monitoring and containing disease outbreaks.

Accurate and up to date information on aggregated and anonymized mobility patterns could potentially be useful for monitoring, predicting outbreaks, and planning future resource needs such as testing kits, beds, medical staff, or equipment. Appropriate privacy and ethics measures must be carefully considered at all times.

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> It is a credit to the world's ICT community that the huge surge in traffic caused by COVID-19 has not crippled our connectivity. But let us also remember that the power to stay connected remains a huge privilege. ITU figures reveal that 3.6 billion people remain totally cut-off from the internet. Billions more struggle with connectivity that is woefully insufficient. COVID-19 has thrown into sharp relief the connectivity chasm we call the digital divide. And it has refocused our minds on why bridging this chasm and bringing affordable access to all is so crucially important to ensuring no-one is left behind.
>
> Doreen Bogdan-Martin, Director of the ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau

Operational response

As a result, this initial action plan proposes the following sequencing of activities over the immediate (0-3 months) and short (3-6 months) terms:

Promote network resilience

In the immediate term (0-3 months):

1. Allow voluntary infrastructure sharing between operators – for the purpose of meeting the exceptional demands for expanded connectivity.

2. Facilitate access to spectrum resources during the crisis for the purpose of relieving congestion, expanding or improving broadband access and enabling diverse technology solutions. Consistent with national spectrum management principles, options may include providing short-term emergency spectrum licenses; facilitating access to backhaul spectrum; extending deadlines for license renewals; and considering spectrum fee reductions for existing allocations in return for reduced broadband prices to users.

3. Allow temporary flexibility in the management of types of network traffic and quality of service rules – for the purpose of supporting continuity of digital service. Prioritize connections to critical communications and services, including encouraging local governments to expedite permitting for infrastructure deployment.

4. Work together with content providers to help alleviate temporary congestion on networks – options include adopting a lower video bit rate and defaulting to standard-definition videos.

5. Remove regulatory constraints that may hold back the deployment of innovative business models, such as unlocking dark fibre holdings.

6. Ensure the continuity of the digital industry supply chain by streamlining customs and logistical processes and classifying network equipment as essential infrastructure. Options include fast-tracking innovative network technology solutions and procurement of connectivity equipment to ensure business continuity.

In the short term (3-6 months):

7. Streamline planning processes to enable rapid approval of installation of additional capacity on existing network sites and approval of new sites and installations. This can be addressed by providing access to public-sector sites for mobile installation.

Ensure access and affordability of digital services

In the immediate term (0-3 months):

8. Promote smart and responsible use of network resources during times of crisis with the general public without generating systemic distortions.

9. Support operator initiatives in support of vulnerable consumers by relaxing regulatory barriers and maintaining commercial flexibility to offer special tariffs and zero-rated access, while acknowledging the importance of robust, sustainable, mobile networks.

10. Authorize the distribution and purchase of pre-paid mobile services in essential commercial premises for top-up customers, who otherwise would not be able to buy broadband access where usual facilities are under lockdown policies (approximately 5.7 billion pre-paid/top up users globally)

In the short term (3-6 months):

11. Reduce, waive or defer payment of sector-specific taxes, duties and fees on mobile communications, public and data communications services, mobile money services and international gateways to encourage digital communications and transactions in support of social distance and social cohesion objectives.

12. Implement policies to relieve financial hardship of end users, and potentially provide bridge loans/guarantee mechanisms to telecoms operators or repurpose existing universal service funds.

Support compliance with social distance principles while continuing to provide vital connectivity

In the immediate term (0-3 months):

13. Support the pre-purchase of broadband internet access for government officials and other targeted groups under home-based work to ensure continuity of government and support operators' finances at a time of crisis.

14. Categorize workforces responsible for network performance and customer support as eligible for freedom of movement in regions with strict lockdown policies.

Leverage e-health, telemedicine and big data to address the health crisis

In the immediate term (0-3 months):

15. Leverage telemedicine, digital services and apps to foster e-health and support healthcare systems.

16. Ensure close dialogue between national authorities and operators on requests to use mobile operators' data to monitor the spread of the virus and adhere to relevant privacy guidelines.

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Thanks to large and ongoing investments from operators, networks are proving well equipped to handle the unprecedented surge in traffic as more people rely on digital services to work from home, manage their businesses and communicate remotely with friends and family. Response to COVID-19 has demonstrated the strategic importance of robust, resilient and secure digital infrastructure to the social welfare of everyone in society and the continued functioning of the economy. We urge governments and regulators to work together with the industry to ensure they can meet the demands on networks, while at the same time supporting affordability and access to the full range of services by consumers and businesses.

Mats Granryd, Director General GSMA

In the short term (3-6 months):

17. Expand existing telemedicine and e-diagnostic services to rural areas and enhance remote medical care capabilities.

Ensure institutional frameworks are fit for purpose

In the immediate term (0-3 months):

18. Support ICT/telecom ministers to develop emergency action plans.

In the short term (3-6 months):

19. Support telecom ministries to develop a detailed action plan to achieve universal access, involving finance ministries to address relevant bottlenecks with regard to mobilizing private-sector investments and defining universal access strategies and financing.

Beyond the immediate and short-term responses to the crisis, recognition of the power of digital technologies to enable and enhance essential services and social cohesion remotely and effectively must bring a new urgency to the digital inclusion agenda of governments worldwide.

Concerted government action, in consultation with the ICT industry, is needed to achieve universal, affordable and quality broadband access, and to mobilize private financing to invest in digital inclusion. Prioritizing digital strategies that leverage e-government solutions (including digital identification), best practices in digital infrastructure regulation (e.g. predictable and cost-effective spectrum allocation, independent regulation and infrastructure sharing), as well as digitalization of vertical industries, will ensure better preparedness for future crises.

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From getting the latest information to supporting health services or adapting supply chains across the globe, we have never been so acutely aware of how critically we depend on digital connectivity. As the international organisation for public-private partnership, we look forward to continuing to work with the World Bank, ITU, GSMA and all our partners to ensure that we not only act urgently to keep our global connective lifeblood of information flowing to tackle our current crisis but that we sustain that urgency to extend internet access to all.
Derek O'Halloran, Head of the Future of Digital Economy at the World Economic Forum

About

About the World Bank Group

The World Bank Group, one of the largest sources of funding and knowledge for developing countries, has launched its first set of emergency support operations, to help save lives, detect, prevent and respond to coronavirus in developing countries. Given the unprecedented challenges that COVID-19 poses, the World Bank Group expects to deploy up to $160 billion over the next 15 months to help countries protect the poor and vulnerable, support businesses, and bolster economic recovery. For more information, visit: www.worldbank.org

About the ITU

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is the specialized United Nations agency for information and communication technologies (ICTs), driving innovation in ICTs together with 193 Member States and a membership of over 900 companies, universities, and international and regional organizations. Established over 150 years ago in 1865, ITU is the intergovernmental body responsible for coordinating the shared global use of the radio spectrum, promoting international cooperation in assigning satellite orbits, improving communication infrastructure in the developing world, and establishing the worldwide standards that foster seamless interconnection of a vast range of communications systems. From broadband networks to cutting-edge wireless technologies, aeronautical and maritime navigation, radio astronomy, oceanographic and satellite-based earth monitoring as well as converging fixed-mobile phone, Internet and broadcasting technologies, ITU is committed to connecting the world. For more information, visit: www.itu.int

About GSMA

The GSMA represents the interests of mobile operators worldwide, uniting more than 750 operators with almost 400 companies in the broader mobile ecosystem, including handset and device makers, software companies, equipment providers and internet companies, as well as organizations in adjacent industry sectors. The GSMA also produces the industry-leading MWC events held annually in Barcelona, Los Angeles and Shanghai, as well as the Mobile 360 Series of regional conferences. For more information, please visit the GSMA corporate website at www.gsma.com.

About the World Economic Forum

The World Economic Forum is the International Organization for Public-Private Cooperation. The Forum engages the foremost political, business, cultural and other leaders of society to shape global, regional and industry agendas. It was established in 1971 as a not-for-profit foundation and is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. It is independent, impartial and not tied to any special interests. The Forum strives in all its efforts to demonstrate entrepreneurship in the global public interest while upholding the highest standards of governance. Moral and intellectual integrity is at the heart of everything it does. Our activities are shaped by a unique institutional culture founded on the stakeholder theory, which asserts that an organization is accountable to all parts of society. The institution carefully blends and balances the best of many kinds of organizations, from both the public and private sectors, international organizations and academic institutions. We believe that progress happens by bringing together people from all walks of life who have the drive and the influence to make positive change. For more information, visit: www.weforum.org

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

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the state of the world, is the
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