## COVID-19 Crisis Response:
## Digital Development Joint Action Plan and Call for Action

**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 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 WEF's COVID Action Platform (the *COVID Digital Response Network* and the *Digital Transformation for Post-COVID World* group), the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development's Agenda for Action, and other platforms and forums, **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.**

**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 one 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 percent and cyberattacks on the health sector infrastructure and mobile networks have increased by 150 percent 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 WIFI 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 multi-stakeholder 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.

- o In a global health emergency, connecting health centers 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**
  - o 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.
  - o 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**
  - o 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 programs defining innovative solutions to reach out to children and test their digital skills preparedness.
  - o Given rising cybersecurity threats targeting health centers, 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**
  - o The use of mobile big data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) can play a key role in monitoring and containing disease outbreaks.
  - o 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.


## 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 fiber 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.

*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.