Partnership Dialogue for Connectivity

JOINT-STATEMENT

Accelerating Digital Connectivity in the Wake of COVID-19

17 September 2020

The Partnership Dialogue for Connectivity comprises representatives of key providers of digital infrastructure and services, together with international organizations working to promote digital connectivity, who within the framework of the preparation to the UN75 Global Governance Forum agreed to collaborate in accelerating digital connectivity as per this Statement.

Specifically, through the Partnership Dialogue for Connectivity, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has brought together:

- Aarti Holla Maini, Secretary General, EMEA Satellite Operators Association (ESOA)
- Robert Pepper, Head of Global Connectivity Policy and Planning, Facebook
- Laurent Bodusseau, Senior Director Spectrum, GSMA
- Julie Kearney, Global Head of Communications Regulation and Policy, Loon, an Alphabet company
- Ben Wallis, Regulatory Policy Analyst, Microsoft
- Patricia Cooper, Vice President of Satellite Government Affairs, SpaceX
- Sue Allchurch, Chief of Outreach and Engagement, UN Global Compact
- Sunita Grote, Innovation, UNICEF
- Isabelle Mauro, Director, Head Telecommunications & Digital Communication Industry, World Economic Forum

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We, the Partnership Dialogue for Connectivity, find as follows:

A. Recognizing that:
- COVID-19 has laid bare the realities that underpin our globalized economies, with a key lesson that not being connected to the Internet increasingly means not having access to employment opportunities, education, health care, public services, as well as the power of information and digital transformation. It means, in short, being shut out of full economic and social participation in the modern world and related benefits;
- Evidence emerging from research regarding the contribution of digitalization to mitigating the impact of pandemics suggests that countries with top connectivity infrastructure can mitigate up to half of the negative economic impact resulting from pandemics;
- Despite the importance of digital economies and broadband, 3.6 billion people, are not fully participating online due to lack of access to high-speed internet or a compatible device, affordability of both, or the relevant skills or content;
- Connecting the unconnected will require all stakeholders, in particular governments, providers of digital infrastructure and digital services, as well as investors, to work together in a complementary and collaborative manner to tackle the barriers to connecting people;
- The ability to participate in the economy and society, or benefit from public services is now highly dependent on broadband connectivity. Broadband connectivity for individuals,

homes, businesses, schools, and healthcare institutions among others, recognizing changing usage patterns, is therefore not just a convenience, but rather, an essential requirement to access numerous services including education, health care, business and financial transactions, and public services, among others;

- The uptake of broadband services does not just depend on the supply-side variables like the coverage, availability and affordability of service. It also depends on demand-side elements including digital skills (both to use and produce digital products), relevant content, and sufficient access to network devices, particularly among populations in poor communities and among disenfranchised groups;
- Investment in digital technologies is a key part of sustainable and 'green' recovery given the critical role they can play in reducing humanity's carbon impact and managing ecosystems;
- In order to secure a genuinely sustainable recovery, companies are encouraged to adhere to core responsible business practices by committing to the Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact, which are derived from key UN Conventions and Declarations in the areas of human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption;
- The UN Secretary General António Guterres, in his launch of the Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, emphasized that "Effective digital cooperation is instrumental in achieving the future we want and the ambitious goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development";
- There is a need for policy makers, regulators and other stakeholders to adopt and promote good practices and experiences while facilitating, and removing barriers to, the deployment of broadband access in their respective countries;
- This COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that connectivity for all is essential and key digital challenges cannot be overcome by one stakeholder group alone. In response, a broad array of stakeholders has been working, and closely collaborating, to ensure that digital infrastructure, services and applications are deployed so that people may continue living their lives as normally as possible during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- A lot of significant work has already commenced to support digital connectivity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to aid the recovery, including the initiatives noted in the Annex to this Statement;

B. In our determination to respond to Secretary General Guterres' call to "build back better", and with our firm belief that it is important to go further and "build back better with broadband", we have agreed to work together to:
   1) Further pursue (and, where appropriate, re-tool) initiatives to accelerate access to broadband connectivity for everyone in the post-COVID world, and where appropriate and without prejudice to applicable legal and regulatory frameworks to collaborate to maximize the joint impact of such initiatives;
   2) Leverage experiences of the members of the Partnership Dialogue for Connectivity as well as best practices developed as part of the ITU Global Symposium for Regulators (GSR), to support the development of a repository of good practices and case studies (on the basis of REG4COVID, the Global Network Resiliency Platform), and serve as ongoing resources to help policy makers, regulators and other stakeholders to tap into good practices and experiences with the aim of facilitating, and removing barriers to, the deployment of broadband access in their respective countries in the wake of COVID-19.

C. We invite other stakeholders, especially development finance institutions, global and regional organizations concerned with digital infrastructure, national governments and other potential partners join us in the effort to build back better with broadband.

D. Public and private sector initiatives should involve and drive the sustainability of local digital ecosystems with an appropriate priority in the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic assigned to support the connectivity and digitalization of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Companies engaged in these initiatives are encouraged to adhere to the Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact, as taking a principles-based approach to driving recovery is foundational to ensuring these efforts are aligned with achieving SDGs by 2030.

E. National governments should:
- Give due recognition to the crucial role of network infrastructure and services in underpinning the global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, especially through involving investors in digital infrastructure and service providers in the design and implementation of their recovery strategies, and by supporting the development of such infrastructure through economic stimulus packages, as necessary;
- Ensure that their digital development plans are updated to take into account post-COVID-19 imperatives, including short and medium-term considerations (such as appropriate emergency and disaster relief frameworks; special infrastructure planning and construction provisions; and changes in the use of connectivity when isolation measures are in place);
- Take a holistic multi-sectoral and pragmatic approach to expanding connectivity, so that policymaking includes all relevant government agencies and departments, recognizing
  (a) the key role that all digital technologies play in the provision of health, education, financial and public services in the wake of COVID-19;
  (b) the role for supporting infrastructures, especially energy, in the development of digital infrastructure, and
  (c) the fundamental need for digital inclusion to be an integral part of an overarching social and economic inclusion, including financial, health and educational inclusion;
- Reduce existing and refrain from erecting new and unnecessary barriers to investment in, development, deployment and use of digital infrastructure, such as:
  o the imposition of new taxes or license fees that could alleviate short term financial pressures but would be at the expense of the sustainable long-term recovery; or
  o the imposition of unnecessary speed and latency obligations that could result in excluding vital connectivity solutions for areas where today there are none and that are not required for all broadband applications;
- Support digitalization efforts of local businesses, especially Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), as a strategic approach to supporting the recovery and adjust to the 'new normal'.

We recognize that many challenges we will be facing in accelerating digital connectivity, especially in the wake of a global health pandemic, will be new. Innovative thinking, willingness to experiment, openness to learn, broad collaboration and a strong vision are needed to address those challenges. Nevertheless, a more connected, resilient, prosperous, inclusive and sustainable world is definitely worth this effort. We will therefore continue working – individually, with each other, as well as with other willing partners – to bring the benefits of digital connectivity to everyone – without duplicating the efforts of already established fora, but ensuring that those efforts are tracked, bound together and amplified, especially in the context of implementation of the UN Secretary General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation.

ANNEX: Key Initiatives Supporting Connectivity in the Response to and Wake of COVID-19

- *Agenda for Action for Faster and Better Recovery of the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development* outlining immediate measures that governments, industry, the international community, and civil society could take to shore-up digital networks, strengthen capacity at critical connectivity points like hospitals and transport hubs, and boost digital access and inclusion;

- *Connect2Recover* – an ITU initiative to help less connected countries strengthen their digital infrastructures and ecosystems so that they are able to better cope with COVID-19, reinforce their recovery efforts and better prepare for the 'new normal';

- *COVID-19 Crisis Response Digital Development Joint Action Plan and Call for Action* by ITU, World Bank, World Economic Forum and GSMA outlining a number of immediate and short-term measures to make affordable and better use of digital technologies and connectivity for citizens, governments and businesses during global lockdowns;

- *EDISON (Essential Digital Infrastructure and Services Network)* - the World Economic Forum public-private cross-sector initiative which aims to help businesses and governments accelerate digital technology adoption in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and which has co-created the Playbook for Accelerating Digital Inclusion in the New Normal;

  EQUALS Global Partnership for Gender Equality in the Digital Age - a committed group of corporate leaders, governments, businesses, not-for-profit organizations, academic institutions, NGOs and community groups around the world dedicated to promoting gender balance in the technology sector by championing equality of access, skills development and career opportunities for women and men alike.

- *GIGA* – a joint initiative of UNICEF and ITU to connect every school to the internet, and every young person to information, opportunity, and choice;

- *- "Global Connectivity" Implementation Plan* under UN Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation - Recommendation 1A, Global Connectivity;

- *Global Network Resiliency Platform (REG4COVID)*, launched to enable policy makers, regulators and other relevant stakeholders to swiftly exchange information crucial in keeping networks running and extending connectivity to those that needed it most in response to COVID-19;

- *SDG Ambition by the UN Global Compact* - a Global Impact Initiative to scale business impact for the Decade of Action. The programme provides tools, guidance and training to help and encourage companies to set goals that align to social and environmental needs, in addition to creating plans to deliver and track progress;

- *UN Global Compact Action Platform on Sustainable Infrastructure for the Belt and Road Initiative to Accelerate the SDGs* - a public-private partnership to drive responsible business practices in companies involved in the Belt and Road Infrastructure initiative, which engages businesses alongside UNIDO, NEPAD, UNOSSC, ICRC and ILO and takes a sectorial approach starting with health tech infrastructure.