



High-Level Political Forum 2020
ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao
7 July 2020 (date tbc)

GENERAL DEBATE STATEMENT

As the world faces uncertain times during the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of technology has never been so great. From teleworking and e-commerce to telemedicine and remote learning, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are supporting continued access to education, healthcare, essential goods and services, and family and friends. And the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), as the UN specialized agency for ICTs, is on the frontline.

Since the onset of the pandemic, ITU's multi-stakeholder response has taken a holistic approach, from our Global Network Resiliency Platform to the Broadband Commission's Agenda for Action to common projects with sister UN agencies – including our work with UNESCO on e-learning, with the World Health Organization and UNICEF on health messaging, and with the International Labor Organization on digital skills for youth, starting with young people in Africa. Cooperation between government and industry has driven the work of ITU for 155 years and is at the core of the important work that ITU is doing to harmonize the use of the global radio-frequency spectrum and satellite orbits, develop global standards on communication technologies and services, and assist developing countries with infrastructure and policy development.

ITU is pleased to see voluntary national reviews feature ICTs more prominently with each passing year, and we stand ready to support countries on their digital transformation journeys. As underlined in this year's reviews, the great digital challenge before us today is to meet the expectations and aspirations of people everywhere not only with more connectivity but also with more safety, better digital skills, and improved affordability.

As calls for 'Building Back Better' grow louder in the wake of COVID-19, ITU calls on those inside and outside the UN system to 'Build Back Better With Broadband'. In the face of the many challenges and needs facing broadband development, we are encouraged that this year's reviews stress the need for greater investment in digital infrastructure. Having a new investment strategy and policy for ICT at the national and global level is more necessary than ever before. ITU is also encouraged to see countries develop 5G networks, artificial intelligence, FinTech, digital health, energy efficiency technologies, Intelligent Transport Systems, and many other emerging technologies. These technologies are laying the groundwork for tomorrow's digital future and are powerful tools to help achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Leaving no one behind is at the core of this agenda. Yet today, only half of the world's population is using the Internet. While hundreds of millions of new users have come online every year during the last decade, most of them in the emerging world, overall growth is slowing, women's Internet use in developing countries is falling behind and, even as average prices are broadly continuing to fall, broadband services are still too expensive for the poorest consumers. In total, 3.6 billion people around the world still have no connectivity at all, deprived of the digital lifeline that has been instrumental in keeping economies and societies going since the beginning of the pandemic.

With 10 years left to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the world needs the SDGs and the

SDGs need ICTs more than ever before. This moment calls for solidarity and ITU welcomes the UN Secretary-General's newly launched Roadmap for Digital Cooperation. The world has entered the Decade of Action. We must seize this moment in history to accelerate the development of digital society and leave no one offline. No virus, no matter how powerful, can make us deviate from this goal. Join ITU in making this Decade of Action a decade that counts – a decade where ICTs will continue to make the world safer, stronger, and more connected.