Close the Digital Divides: Global Declaration on the Digital Response to COVID-19

This is a crisis like no other. It is the greatest global challenge since the Second World War. The number of coronavirus cases and deaths continues to increase, health systems are under great strain and the impact of the pandemic on societies and economies is felt across the world.

The IMF estimates that the current crisis is the deepest recession since the Great Depression of 1929. ILO notes that 81% of global workforce live in countries with lockdowns, and estimates that there is a risk of losing the equivalent of 195 million jobs in the second quarter of 2020 alone. World trade is set to plummet by between 13% and 32% in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The UN warns that children could be among the greatest victims of the crisis. According to estimates, an additional 42-66 million children could fall into extreme poverty. UNESCO analysis shows that 91.3% of the world’s students are affected by school closures, and more than 1.5 billion students in 191 countries have trouble continuing their studies normally. This will lead to increased educational gaps and serious damage to the prospects for a better future.

The COVID-19 crisis affecting the whole world has provided also an opportunity — an opportunity to build stronger societies that can withstand devastating social, economic and political emergencies. It is a chance to introduce innovative, flexible solutions to increase our resilience to crises and ensure sustainable development.

The crisis underlines once more that digital transformation is crucial for strengthening resilience of affected societies. At the same time, accelerated digitalisation could cause the widening of digital divides. This has to be avoided, leaving no one behind. We need strong political will, vision and a systematic approach to make digitalisation a reality. Creation of the Internet led to a revolution; similarly, the digital transformation of societies could bring a global breakthrough. To mitigate the effects of the crisis, the following ten recommendations should be considered as priority:

1. **Rapid reinforcement of digital capabilities of health care systems**

   e-Health solutions would help manage the acute crisis as well as strengthen health systems in the long term. Digitalising health data, telemedicine, digital patient portals, electronic prescriptions, electronic health records, using robots, modern information systems of hospitals etc. would help take health systems to a new level. Smart solutions help follow the progress of the disease and project how it would spread, not just in case of an individual patient but also on national and global scale. There is a need to create the possibility of sharing information on existing e-health solutions and the mechanisms for accelerated implementation. The use of e-health data for research can lead to better disease models and important innovations that advance medicine, but such data should be used while respecting the right to privacy and protection of personal data.

2. **Implementing e-education and digital distance learning solutions**

   The pandemic has paralysed many school systems, created obstacles and sometimes even made it impossible for students to continue their education. The situation can be alleviated by distance learning platforms, digital databases and digital textbooks, e-learning materials and digital examination solutions that would enable the continuation of normal communication between students, teachers and parents. Governments can develop e-education in a collaborative manner and actively participate in and support the activities of the UNESCO’s Global Education Coalition that offers direct support to countries in organising digital learning.

3. **Ensuring safer digital space**

   Unfortunately, during the coronavirus pandemic, cyberattacks against hospitals and other medical institutions as well as other forms of online cybercrime have increased. It is crucial to improve exchange of information on cybercrime threats and ensure that states meet their responsibilities according to international law. It is also crucial to emphasize the importance of international efforts to combat cybercrime through bilateral and multilateral platforms, as well as international agreements. We should support the development of cyber hygiene capacities in all countries.
4. Building modern e-governance systems
E-governance makes public services available remotely and constantly around the clock, therefore helping people and businesses carry on their activities during the crisis. More broadly, e-governance supports efficient, accountable and inclusive public institutions that are vital for addressing the long-term effects of the pandemic. It also improves the business climate and saves time and money. We should collectively prioritize the development of modern e-governance systems and look for ways to enhance international cooperation in this field.

5. Providing affordable connectivity everywhere
According to the ITU, only 53% of the world’s population has Internet access, which means that many people do not have daily access to health information in crises, essential public services and the possibilities of the digital economy. Development of critical digital infrastructure and increasing Internet access are preconditions for digital transformation. Improving connectivity has to be prioritized in sectors that already have analogue services, such as schools and hospitals, but have no Internet access.

6. Protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, Internet freedom
The same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, including the right to privacy. Free, independent and diverse media have an important role in providing the public with reliable and accurate information about the pandemic, including through unhindered Internet access. We must promote an open, secure, stable and accessible Information and Communications Technology (ICT) environment. Unlawful surveillance, unjustified Internet blocking and filtering and moderating put societies at risk, undermines trust in public authorities and limits the availability of public e-services. In cooperation with all the stakeholders, including civil society, the potential negative effects of digitalisation have to be addressed, including online violence, harassment, cyberbullying and disinformation.

The process of digitalisation should pay particular attention to privacy (including online privacy) and data protection. The application of e-health, e-education, e-governance and other solutions involves processing sensitive data, which has to be done in accordance with relevant requirements and legislation.

7. Improving digital skills and literacy
Improving digital skills and literacy of the population is the key to addressing the long-term negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis and preventing the widening of the digital divides. Particular consideration should be given to vulnerable social groups. Developing digital skills creates sustainable jobs, supports innovation, increases productivity and helps to create a modern digital economy. Improving the availability and quality of ICT education is of key importance. A coordinated global approach would make it possible to compile and exchange best practices and lessons learned.

8. Re-focussing resources to support digital transformation
Addressing the long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis requires redirecting the focus of international cooperation to the implementation of digital transformation and application of digital services. Particular consideration should be given to most vulnerable societies to avoid a further widening of the digital divides. It is necessary to find ways to ensure quick, flexible support to the implementation of validated and working digital solutions, including smart and innovative applications developed by the private sector.

9. Boosting e-commerce
The lockout measures during the pandemic and the need to reduce direct social contacts have also opened up new potential for digital commerce and the digital economy. Due to the development of virtual platforms and digital supply networks, it has been possible to bring together the supply and demand in different sectors of the economy and to provide security of supply for both parties. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the e-commerce environment globally and enhance the capacity of all stakeholders to take advantage of its possibilities.

10. Strengthening international cooperation
Fighting the pandemic requires international collaboration and globally coordinated actions. The crisis creates a new impetus for digital transformation, which should be guided by Sustainable Development Goals and carried out in international cooperation, to include the best practices from across the world. Multilateral and multistakeholder cooperation with UN in the heart of coordinated global effort is crucial for achieving results. Digitalisation of international organisations themselves is also a priority. This would increase their effectiveness, flexibility and credibility as well as transparency.