



A message by

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eTrade for all Leadership Dialogue

**Connecting the Dots
for more Inclusive Development**

**eCommerce
Week**



Digitalization as the cornerstone of the recovery and tomorrow's economy

Despite the phenomenal challenges posed by COVID-19, the pandemic has also brought with it opportunity by accelerating the pace of digitalization. Our challenge now is to build on this momentum and harness the potential of new and emerging technologies together for an equitable, inclusive and sustainable digital future.

By Malcolm Johnson, ITU Deputy Secretary-General

As the pandemic swept the globe, governments and industry hastened to meet its many challenges, from changing network traffic patterns to shifting services online. This period saw the largest annual increase in the number of Internet users globally in a decade. To cope with the surge in Internet traffic and ensure that all communities remain connected, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) responded swiftly with the launch of the Global Network Resiliency Platform (#REG4COVID), the first of many steps taken since by ITU to make digitalization a cornerstone of the recovery and tomorrow's economy.

As the world returns to some form of normality, we cannot risk seeing a slowdown in the pace of digitalization—not when the ability to connect remains profoundly unequal around the world, with 96 per cent of the 2.9 billion people still offline living in developing countries.ⁱ

Meaningful, secure connectivity

Infrastructure is the first building block of digitalization. As the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies (ICTs), ITU works with governments and partners across the industry to support essential connectivity. For example, ITU and UNICEF have launched Giga, a joint initiative to connect every school to the Internet. Progress has been steady and more than 1 million schools have already been mapped. Giga is now proposing a US\$5 billion Giga-sourced capital to accelerate critical infrastructure investments to fund connecting the remaining schools.ⁱⁱ

In addition to connectivity, people need the skills, training, along with local language content and affordable devices to thrive in the digital world. This 'usage gap' must be bridged via a concerted approach involving governments, industry and international organizations. Projects like ITU's Digital Transformation Centres initiative showcases this in action, working in partnership with tech conglomerate Cisco, to provide essential digital skills training to people in underserved communities.ⁱⁱⁱ

With an increased proliferation of devices and push to bring services online, cybersecurity concerns are mounting. The United Nations World Summit on the Information Society entrusted ITU with leading the effort on building confidence and security in the use of ICTs long before the pandemic. ITU has been at the forefront of this crucial work ever since—from strengthening cybersecurity capacity building, to promoting child online protection, to developing international standards, including standards for secure digital finance and the associated support offered by ITU's Security Lab for Digital Financial Services.

Advancing new technologies

Emerging digital technologies promise to transform people's lives on a scale unseen in our time. Already they are powering innovative applications in areas ranging from healthcare to education, offering great potential not only as major drivers of the global digital economy, but as important enablers for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The development of these technologies and ITU are inseparable. For example, ITU plays a central part in the development of mobile broadband networks by both managing the radio spectrum and developing globally applicable standards for International Mobile Telecommunications (IMT). ITU Members recently approved another radio interface technology as part of ongoing standards development for 5G services,^{iv} which will support several uses leveraging the advantages of 5G in healthcare, autonomous vehicles, smart cities, and other areas.

Fostering partnerships and collaboration on AI for sustainable development is the aim of our AI for Good initiative and its new AI for Good Neural Network,^v designed to accelerate exchanges among government and industry and foster partnerships to achieve the SDGs. ITU also has a number of technical groups supporting AI's contribution to progress in areas as diverse as health, environment, agriculture, natural disaster management, and road safety.

Now more than ever, the keywords are collaboration, coordination and cooperation. In December 2021, over 400 top representatives from the public and private sectors gathered for ITU's sixth World Telecommunication Policy/ICT Forum (WTPF-21).^{vi} They adopted a set of five non-binding 'Opinions' that affirm the need to align ICTs and rapidly evolving new and emerging technologies with global priorities for sustainable development.

Smart, sustainable future

We live in a time of enormous challenges, marked by urgent and looming crises. Climate change is one of them. ITU is well placed to work with the private sector and others to create all the necessary conditions to put the planet on a path to net zero, including by helping to reduce the growing environmental footprint of ICTs.

For example, ITU has collaborated with the Global Enabling Digital Sustainability Initiative (GeSI) and other partners to develop a new ITU standard detailing the emission-reduction trajectories needed to cut the ICT sector's greenhouse gas emissions by 45 per cent. These are the first ICT specific targets approved by the Science based target initiative, allowing ICT companies to set targets in line with the latest climate science.

With high population concentrations, cities must digitally incorporate energy, buildings and mobility to achieve a sustainable digital transformation. They need actionable data to gauge progress in key areas. The United for Smart Sustainable Cities initiative (U4SSC), supported by ITU together with another 16 UN partners, has developed a set of key performance indicators based on ITU standards that already provides over 150 cities with a practical framework to assess their progress towards the SDGs and net-zero emissions.

Moving towards 2030

Without doubt, the pandemic has spotlighted the importance and impact of digitalization and the foundational role of digital technologies in modern economies and societies. It has ushered in a momentum for transformation and put it at centre stage.

We must take the lessons learned over this period and focus on the technologies, partnerships and skills needed to drive growth. 2022 will be an important year for setting the global technology agenda, with no less than three world conferences happening at ITU. By working together, we can ensure that digital technologies boost socio-economic, sustainable development and meet the shared promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to leave no one behind.