

Guiding Theme of HLPF2021:

“Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development”

The HLPF in 2021 will also discuss Sustainable Development Goals: **1** no poverty, **2** zero hunger, **3** good health and well-being, **8** decent work and economic growth, **10** reduced inequalities, **12** responsible consumption and production, **13** climate action, **16** peace, justice and strong institutions, and **17** partnerships in depth. The Forum will consider the integrated, indivisible and interlinked nature of the SDGs.

General introduction:

The Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development was established in 2010 by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with the aim of boosting the importance of broadband on the international policy agenda and expanding broadband access in every country as key to accelerating progress towards national and international development targets. The Commission is led by President Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Carlos Slim Helù of Mexico, and co-chaired by ITU's Secretary-General, Houlin Zhao and UNESCO's Director-General, Audrey Azoulay. It comprises over 50 Commissioners who represent a cross-cutting group of top CEO and industry leaders, senior policy-makers and government representatives, and experts from international agencies, academia and organizations concerned with development.

More information is available on the site: <https://www.broadbandcommission.org/Pages/default.aspx>

a. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the SDGs under review in the 2021 HLPF from the vantage point of your intergovernmental body, bearing in mind the interlinkages with other SDGs;

After a decade of high-level advocacy, policy recommendations, numerous working groups with research reports, and the incubation of several significant partnerships, the Broadband Commission had grown to become one of the leading global advocacy groups working towards universal broadband connectivity. Its objective is to ensure that the broadband ecosystem is being leveraged for broader development underpinning the SDGs.

However, much work is still needed to achieve this goal. Digital inequalities, in addition to uneven access and adoption of the Internet is prevalent not only between countries, but also within countries. While these inequalities existed before the current COVID-19 crisis, the pandemic has further highlighted the disparities in access to high-speed connectivity and also brought to the forefront, online safety issues as many people shifted to work, learn, and communicate online. This global health crisis has also significantly underscored humanity's growing reliance on digital connectivity for business continuity, employment, education, commerce, banking, healthcare, and a whole host of other essential services. With the

emphasis on and vital need for connectivity, the crisis has led to an accelerated response in improving telecommunication/ICT infrastructure and access to services globally.

In retrospect, while even with the increased use of ICTs in various sectors, during the pandemic, 3.7 billion people remain offline. Lack of affordability, constrained access to infrastructure and devices, poor digital skills and/or the absence of relevant content mean they, and billions of other marginalized people struggling with poor connectivity, are unable to leverage the power of digital transformation in a way that could catalyze seismic shifts in development outcomes.

The Broadband Commission is convinced that achieving affordable universal connectivity is essential for achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and making good on its pledge to 'Leave No-one Behind'. The Broadband Commission reaffirmed its commitment to help achieve **universal connectivity as a fundamental element of an inclusive and sustainable world**. In the [Universal Connectivity Manifesto](#), the Commission called on leaders and heads of industry to put universal connectivity at the very forefront of sustainable development efforts and recognize its central role in 2030 Agenda.

b. Actions, policy guidance, progress, challenges and areas requiring urgent attention in relation to the SDGs and to the theme within the area under the purview of your intergovernmental body;

The Commission's flagship publication - [2020 edition of the State of Broadband report](#), states that :

- COVID-19 has simultaneously underlined the importance of connectivity and need to reduce digital inequalities. COVID-19 has demonstrated the unquestionable centrality of connectivity as many adults and children have shifted towards remote work, learning, and communication. At the same time, the pandemic is highlighting inequality among and within countries along a contour line between those with access and those without.
- Commitment towards a more inclusive and sustainable recovery is needed. At this pivotal point for the world, it is important to redouble the commitment to the advocacy targets of the Broadband Commission, promoting universal broadband, if the SDGs are to be within reach. Collaboration, partnership and the development of inclusive and sustainable models are more essential than ever as we leverage the power of broadband to promote a faster and better recovery for all.
- Enabling policies are essential. While some countries have successfully implemented a number of policy reforms echoed by the Broadband Commission to advance broadband universality, the opportunity remains for countries to further their efforts to improve the broadband ecosystem in their countries by continuing to adopt more of the recommendations put forth by the Commission, with a focus on implementation.

[The 2020 State of Broadband report](#) provides a global overview on progress towards the SDGs as far as the digital infrastructure is concerned. With less than 10 years left to deliver the SDGs the report's assessment of the Broadband Commission's advocacy targets provides a direction for essential actions that need to be taken to spur achievement of the 2030 sustainable development agenda:

- 1) Advocacy Target 1 - Making broadband policy universal: By 2025, all countries should have a funded national broadband plan /strategy or include broadband in their universal access and service (UAS) definition. Assessment: Currently, 174 countries worldwide have a broadband plan, with several countries currently in the process of adopting one. This is an increase from 102 countries in 2010.
- 2) Advocacy Target 2 - Making broadband affordable: By 2025, entry-level broadband services should be made affordable in developing countries at less than two per cent of monthly Gross National Income (GNI) per capita. Assessment: Data from ITU and the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) policy brief on “The affordability of ICT services 2020” show that broadband in developing countries had a median price of 2.5 per cent of GNI per capita, compared with only 0.6 per cent in developed countries. Over the past year, the number of economies that met the 2 per cent affordability target increased by six: Out of 190 economies, 106 have achieved the target, while 84 economies have prices above the target. For a fixed-broadband service, the median price in developed countries stood at 1.2 per cent of monthly GNI per capita, while in developing countries the median price was much higher, at 4.7 per cent. Out of the 178 economies for which these data were collected, the price was below 2 per cent in 67 economies and above this threshold in the other 111.
- 3) Advocacy Target 3 - Getting people online: By 2025, Broadband-Internet user penetration should reach: i) 75 per cent worldwide; ii) 65 per cent in developing countries; and iii) 35 per cent in Least Developed Countries. Assessment: According to latest ITU data, overall global Internet user penetration stands at 51 per cent. That figure drops to 44 per cent in developing countries, and to just 19 per cent in the world's Least Developed Countries (LDCs), falling well below the Broadband Commission's advocacy Target 3.
- 4) Advocacy Target 4 - Digital skills and literacy: By 2025, 60 per cent of youth and adults should have achieved at least a minimum level of proficiency in sustainable digital skills. Assessment: Less than half of the world's population even have the basic skills for computer-based activities, including sending e-mails with attachments, moving files, using copy and paste, and transferring files between devices. The figure demonstrates that across the world in 2017, less than 30 per cent of the world's population was proficient in standard ICT skills (using basic formulas in a spreadsheet; and finding, downloading, installing and configuring software).
- 5) Advocacy Target 5 - Digital financial services: By 2025, 40 per cent of the world's population should be using digital financial services. Assessment: Currently, two billion adults are still without access to a bank account, but some 1.6 billion in this group have access to a mobile phone, presenting the opportunity to explore strategies that leverage the widespread use of mobile phones to offer financial inclusion options. According to the World Bank's Global Findex database, the number of people worldwide who have utilized digital financial systems in the previous 12 months increased from 41 per cent of the global population (above the age of 15) in 2014 to 52 per cent in 2017 (with women representing 46 per cent and men 54 per cent).
- 6) Advocacy Target 6 - Getting businesses online: By 2025, improve connectedness of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) by 50 per cent, by sector. Assessment: Data from the World Bank's Enterprise Surveys shows that worldwide, on average, 44.5 per cent of enterprises have a

website and 68 per cent utilize e-mail, however, this ranges widely by country and between regions.

- 7) Advocacy Target 7 - Achieving gender equality in access to broadband by 2025: By 2025, gender equality should be achieved across all targets Assessment: ITU's comparisons of the gender gap in Internet adoption around the world and the progress between 2013 and 2019, shows that the gender gap appeared to have widened significantly. Currently, 52 per cent of men are connected, whilst only 46 per cent of women can benefit from access to digital connectivity.

In the spike of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Commissioners and their organizations urgently highlighted the resultant challenges in the [Agenda for Action for Faster and Better Recovery](#) and disseminated a repository of tangible actions based on three pillars , namely:(1) resilient connectivity, (2) affordable access, and (3) safe use of online services for informed and educated societies. The actions were directed at mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and easing the immediate adverse impacts for economies and societies. The three pillars are elaborated below:

1. Resilient Connectivity: Sustain and extend resilient, stable and secure infrastructure to support all populations, including emergency responders. Increase bandwidth, restore service access where this has been restricted, strengthen network resilience, manage network congestion, prioritize connections to critical government functions, vital services and strategic connectivity points (such as hospitals, pharmacies, emergency centres, transportation hubs...), and ensure continuity of public services, which may require temporary relaxation of regulations and other policy measures necessary to fast-track response.
2. Affordable Access: Increase affordability, availability and accessibility of services and devices to ensure business and service continuity, support digital connectivity to ensure access to information and to promote social cohesion during confinement, and to help with financial hardship and economic challenges, through measures like price reductions and discounts on capacity, airtime and devices. Support alternative funding models for complimentary access solutions.
3. Safe use of online services for informed and educated societies: Support safe use of online services by all, especially children and vulnerable population; respect the right to privacy; promote trust and security in the use of data; enable safe digital content sharing to support e-education, e-health, digital agriculture, e-financial services and mobile payments, and e-government platforms; empower youth, ensure and promote child safety online; promote the use of broadband to provide distance-learning programmes for all ages; empower people with quality journalism and evidence-based and scientific information about COVID-19; promote media and information literacy to detect disinformation and to advance understanding on the dangers of sharing false facts about COVID-19.

The Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development also issued a [Global Goal of Universal Connectivity Manifesto](#), in which it called on world leaders and heads of industry to put universal

connectivity at the very forefront of sustainable development efforts and recognize its central role in 2030 Agenda. The Commission is convinced that achieving affordable universal connectivity is essential for achieving the 17 SDGs. The pandemic and its socio-economic impacts have underscored the urgency of concrete, coordinated actions across all sectors and geographies. With less than ten years remaining until 2030, now is the time to establish digital connectivity as the foundational pillar for the world's shared Global Goals. This goal of universal connectivity will require collective, collaborative efforts by all stakeholders. This Broadband Commission's Manifesto is a rallying cry, calling for collaboration in:

- *Establishing a baseline for universal digital connectivity;*
- *Identifying and supporting public-private financing of universal broadband, pioneering innovative hybrid and/or complementary, replicable and sustainable financing and investment models for all types of networks, and catalyzing impactful partnerships;*
- *Advocating for enabling ICT regulatory environments, ICT capacity building and online safety and security, especially for children, as integral to efforts to achieve the Global Broadband Targets 2025 and the SDGs.*

c. An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “ensuring that no one is left behind” at the global, regional and national levels against of background of the COVID-19 pandemic in achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, within the respective area addressed by your intergovernmental bodies;

While much progress has been made globally over the past ten years in expanding access to, and adoption of, broadband infrastructure and services, significant challenges remain in tackling digital inequalities, addressing the current widespread impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in accelerating efforts towards achieving the SDGs by 2030. The COVID-19 crisis has dramatically illustrated the vital importance of broadband networks and services in driving robust, resilient and well-functioning societies and economies.

Today, 3.7 billion still have no access to the internet. Lack of affordability, constrained access to infrastructure and devices, poor digital skills and/or the absence of relevant content mean they, and billions of other marginalized people struggling with poor connectivity, are unable to leverage the power of digital transformation in a way that could catalyze shifts in development outcomes.

According to latest ITU data, overall global Internet user penetration stands at 51.4%. That figure drops to 44.4% in developing countries, and to just 19.5% in the world's Least Developed Countries (LDCs), falling well below the Broadband Commission's advocacy Target 3, for broadband Internet user penetration to reach 75% worldwide, 65% in developing countries and 35% in LDCs, by 2025.

Digital inequalities, as well as uneven access and adoption of the internet is prevalent not only between countries, but also within countries. These inequalities existed before the current COVID-19 crisis, and the pandemic has further highlighted the disparities in access to high-speed connectivity and online safety issues as many, if not most, adults and children on the planet in some way shifted towards remote work, learning, and communication activities.

d. Cooperation, measures and commitments at all levels in promoting sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic;

The Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, the UN's high-level public-private partnership, is committed to putting digital cooperation into action, to keep economies and societies working, and to support the world's vulnerable populations (the elderly, refugees and internally displaced populations, persons with disabilities, children, rural dwellers, indigenous communities, and those residing in the most vulnerable countries). The Commission believes that building, reinforcing and scaling digital cooperation around three key broadband pillars will help accelerate our collective response to COVID-19 and lay the groundwork for a better and faster recovery built on a broadband internet enabled world.

The Broadband Commission stands ready to spearhead global efforts for a digitally-enabled and digitally-driven pandemic response, recovery, rebuilding, and resiliency effort. Already the Broadband Commission has released an [Agenda for Action for Faster and Better Recovery](#) underpinned by the three strategic pillars supporting 1) resilient connectivity; 2) affordable access; and 3) safe use of online services for informed and educated societies, with a number of short-term actions for impact committed to by Commissioners and their organizations.

Commissioners commit to champion and implement the Agenda for Action and invite all parties – intergovernmental, regional, national, industry, civil society and technical and academic communities – to join with us to leverage the power of broadband for more effective emergency response and to promote faster and better recovery.

The Commission will continue its efforts towards the 2025 Advocacy Targets and support the Decade of Action towards the SDGs by focusing on its core capabilities and strengths. These include:

- 1) Continued high-level advocacy efforts and high-quality research on key topics related to the 2025 Broadband Commission Targets and the impact of broadband on accelerating progress towards the SDGs, in particular SDG 9c;
- 2) Leveraging the momentum and reach of the Broadband Commission to support other related initiatives, such as the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel and Roadmap for Digital Cooperation; and,
- 3) Continuing collaboration among Commissioners and their organizations to incubate highly effective and impactful partnerships (such as EQUALS, GIGA, Child Online Safety Universal Declaration and others), and commitments to moving forward the achievements of the UN's 2030 SDGs.

e. Various measures and policy recommendations on building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development;

The world in 2020, and continuing into 2021, is in a state of unprecedented flux because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the virus rages around the globe infecting millions and resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths, connectivity has emerged as one ally in the fight against COVID-19. The broadband ecosystem has proven its scalability and resilience to keep health, education and financial systems, and economies, operating. Once again broadband has demonstrated its essential role in fueling the achievement of the SDGs. But COVID-19 also uncovered how the lack of connectivity especially among marginalized communities is widening the gap between rich and poor, and further growing the digital divide. Building back better and faster with broadband will require an attention on expanding digital infrastructure and technologies in the pandemic response, recovery, and resiliency-building efforts to prepare against such future shocks, but more importantly to spur achievement of the SDGs.

In April 2020, at the Special Emergency Session, the Commission released an [“Agenda for Action”](#) underpinned by the three strategic pillars supporting 1) resilient connectivity; 2) affordable access; and 3) safe use of online services for informed and educated societies, with a number of actions committed to by Commissioners and their organizations. This framework outlined **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.

1- Resilient connectivity

Sustain and extend resilient, stable and secure infrastructure to support all populations, including emergency responders. Increase bandwidth, restore service access where this has been restricted, strengthen network resilience, manage network congestion, prioritize connections to critical government functions, vital services and strategic connectivity points (such as hospitals, pharmacies, emergency centres, transportation hubs...), and ensure continuity of public services, which may require temporary relaxation of regulations and other policy measures necessary to fast-track response.

2- Affordable Access

Increase affordability, availability and accessibility of services and devices to ensure business and service continuity, support digital connectivity to ensure access to information and to promote social cohesion during confinement, and to help with financial hardship and economic challenges, through measures like price reductions and discounts on capacity, airtime and devices. Support alternative funding models for complimentary access solutions.

3- Safe use of online services for informed and educated societies

Support safe use of online services by all, especially children and vulnerable population; respect the right to privacy; promote trust and security in the use of data; enable safe digital content sharing to support e-education, e-health, digital agriculture, e-financial services and mobile payments, and e-government platforms; empower youth, ensure and promote child safety online; promote the use of broadband to provide distance-learning programmes for all ages; empower people with quality journalism and

evidence-based and scientific information about COVID-19; promote media and information literacy to detect disinformation and to advance understanding on the dangers of sharing false facts about COVID-19.

The Broadband Commission presented recommendations for medium- and long-term impact to tackle digital inequalities. Figure 29 presents concrete actions identified by the Commission in its Agenda for Action, focused on immediate actions, and activities for the medium term.

Figure 29. The Immediate Actions in the Commission’s Agenda for Action²

	Resilient and secure connectivity	Affordable access	Safe use of online services for informed and educated societies
Industry / private sector	<p>Ensure connectivity and network continuity, increase bandwidth capacity and network resilience and security, including for vulnerable populations in LDCs and in refugee camps</p> <p>Manage capacity to ensure rational use of the network</p> <p>Provide vital/emergency services to support general population as well as emergency responders</p> <p>Lease spare satellite transponder capacity at very nominal costs during emergency crisis</p> <p>Provide temporary royalty-free software licenses for capacity augmentation, and Intellectual Property rights for related vital service delivery</p>	<p>Provide in-kind support through donation of ICT services, cloud services, software, equipment and end user devices, and support working from home</p> <p>Identify solutions for liquidity and financial shortage to ensure service continuity</p> <p>Offer special tariffs for related health, education, humanitarian and emergency workers/services</p> <p>Offer free SMS and zero rating for access to health, educational content and government information services</p>	<p>Make available broadcasting capacity for education and health</p> <p>Make available safe and secured digital platforms and open source software for health, education, food security, financial and governmental services, including sharing open-source Digital Public Goods</p> <p>Promote quality education and information content and services; enhance policies against disinformation, increase transparency</p> <p>Provide online training and safe digital tools to parents and teachers to keep children safer online</p> <p>Share data on a voluntary basis and use AI to perform analytics for prevention and monitoring purposes, ensuring data anonymization</p> <p>Use AI to support medical institutions</p>

	Resilient and secure connectivity	Affordable access	Safe use of online services for informed and educated societies
Government / policy makers / regulators	<p>Implement policy and regulatory actions to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - temporarily relieve network capacity constraints and keep networks running and operational (including decreasing taxes and fees, offering wholesale services, temporarily freeing up additional spectrum which can be immediately deployed, infrastructure sharing, using existing USF funds, promoting cross border roaming etc) - maintain internet access - support urgent requirements to expand bandwidth and connectivity, inclusive of marginalized groups and vulnerable populations, including refugees - streamline customs processes and classify network equipment as essential infrastructure to ensure supply chain continuity 	<p>Facilitate delivery of (and remove barriers to) industry commitments, and general provision of ICT services</p> <p>Use USF funding to support affordable access to health, education, humanitarian and emergency services and people and communities with special needs</p>	<p>Provide guidance to consumers and the general population in areas including child online safety, data protection and cybersecurity measures</p> <p>Increase proactive publishing to promote access to information, support learning institutions to conduct distance classes, take actions to foster media and information literacy</p>
UN / IGO / international financial institutions	<p>Mobilize expertise, foster better coordination and international technical support</p>	<p>Finance national digital connectivity initiatives, and electricity generation, transmission and distribution vital for digital service provision</p> <p>Create pricing strategies and financing/investment documents to help finance national connectivity in schools, to be extended to health centres, emergency hubs, etc.</p>	<p>Promote and nurture innovative partnerships among organizations and with the private sector</p> <p>Support norms and provide resources to educational and media institutions</p>
Academia / NGOs / non profits / civil society	<p>Provide support with expertise, research, innovation and thought leadership</p>	<p>Provide online educational content in local languages, training in health care and emergency services, and training for (non-IT) teleworkers</p>	<p>Provide digital skills training programmes, programmes to promote online safety</p> <p>Monitor and promote open educational Resources, enhance online capacity building around issues relating to information and disinformation</p>

In addition, in September 2020, the Broadband Commission launched a [Manifesto](#), calling on the global community to recognize digital connectivity as the foundational element of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Manifesto affirms the commitment of the Broadband Commission to mobilize efforts to achieve the 'Global Goal of Universal Connectivity' in support of the [UN Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#) and other connectivity initiatives.