

15th Annual Session of GFHS “Post-Pandemic Recovery and Transformation:
Resilient Cities, Healthy Planet”
Opening remarks, 15 October 2020
Malcolm Johnson, Deputy Secretary-General of ITU

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome all of you to the 15th Annual Session of Global Forum on Human Settlements in these extraordinary times.

ITU is very pleased to once again join forces with GFHS to co-organize this event. Last year, we had the opportunity to organise and participate in multiple panel discussions dedicated to smart sustainable cities in the 14th Annual Session of GFHS in Addis Ababa.

The circumstances are very different this year. But we are still happy to build on the success we had in Addis Ababa and continue to bring attention to important topics that can benefit the global community, including post pandemic recovery, sustainability and climate change.

The global Covid-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges for both cities and citizens around the world. Information and Communication Technologies, or simply ICTs, have been playing, and will continue to play, a crucial role in mitigating these challenges.

ICTs have given millions the ability to connect with their family, continue to work or study from their home and access to essential public services such as healthcare. ICTs also provide the backbone for delivering crucial health information, locating critical health assets and allocating resources based on real-time information. It is not surprising that the demand for broadband and digital traffic has increased exponentially during the pandemic.

However, as we know almost half of the world's population, about 3.6 billion people, remain offline. Having access to affordable Internet remains a prominent challenge for many. The lack of digital skills and awareness are also cited as key barriers to the lack of Internet uptake particularly in developing countries together with lack of relevant content in the local language.

Without access to the Internet, people will not be able to receive the benefits of digital solutions that will give them access to essential goods and services during or after the pandemic.

It is without question that digital infrastructure and connectivity are crucial for building social, environmental and economic resilience in cities in order to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, accelerate post-pandemic recovery efforts and implement the Sustainable Development Goals.

As the United Nations specialized agency in ICTs, we are working closely with our membership and partners to ensure the development of international standards and harmonised spectrum and satellite orbits that can handle the exponential increase in digital traffic driven by the pandemic,

help cities to future-proof their digital capabilities and infrastructure and ensure that digital services are accessible by all.

Early this year, ITU also launched the Global Network Resiliency Platform which aims to bring together regulators, policy makers and other relevant stakeholders to share information and insights on initiatives and measures that have enabled networks operators and platform providers to cope with the huge increase in demand as a result of COVID-19.

Thanks to them, ITU has been able to continue its activities including through virtual meetings and working from home, showing the great flexibility in working methods that is not only possible but highly efficient.

We are fortunate to have a diverse membership of 193 governments and over 900 private sector companies from the telecoms and Internet sectors, academia, SMEs and a range of other regional and international organizations dealing with ICTs. It is a unique strength which is brought together with our colleagues from WHO to develop standards on e-health, including the use of AI for health, so important during this pandemic.

Digital technologies and ICTs are key enablers for accelerating sustainability efforts and climate actions in cities, from enhancing operational efficiency of urban complexities and infrastructure to improving accessibility to essential services and bring the benefits of nature to all people.

To support cities in their digital transformation, we develop international standards that support the sustainable use of ICTs and promote a global transition towards a circular economy. For instance, our standards have provided guidance on enhancing the energy efficiency of ICT infrastructure and methodologies for assess the environmental impacts of ICTs.

ITU has also created a Focus Group on “Environmental Efficiency for Artificial Intelligence and other Emerging Technologies” which is among the first global platform dedicated to studying the standardization requirements for deploying AI, Blockchain, 5G and other new technologies.

The United for Smart Sustainable Cities initiative, or simply the U4SSC, is a UN initiative coordinated by ITU, UNECE and UN-Habitat and supported by other 13 United Nations agencies and programmes to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 11: "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable".

As part of its work and commitment to shape Smart Sustainable Cities, the U4SSC develops deliverables and benchmarking tools to support prospective SSC. The latest deliverables include “A Guide to Circular Cities” and “Accelerating cities’ transformation using frontier technologies”. Most recently, the U4SSC has also created a new thematic group that focuses on examining the economic and financial measures taken by cities in response to COVID-19. I encourage all of you to reach out to the U4SSC and learn more.

Being an optimist myself, I like to think that something good will come out of the pandemic. Among the silver linings, we know that global carbon emissions are projected to be 7% less in

2020 than in 2019 due to the global lockdown. We have also noticed nature coming back in some cities, with huge improvements in air quality.

Yet, we know that this dramatic fall in carbon emissions is not going to have any lasting impact on climate change if we do not act on the lessons learned and build back better.

That is why it is important that we do not lose sight of the climate challenge, the Paris Agreement, the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework and the Sustainable Development Goals.

In the next 2 two days, we will have the opportunity to learn more about how cities can be made more resilient and achieve for a green recovery after the pandemic.

International cooperation and coordination will be the key to ensure that cities are able to meet these challenges by becoming healthier and more resilient than ever.

Once again, I would like to thank GFHS and all of the co-organizers for bringing together this amazing event. It is both an honor and privilege to be able to take part of this Annual Session.

I wish you all a fruitful meeting.

Thank you.