

New Year's message from ITU Secretary-General “The path towards a safer, more sustainable, and better-connected digital future for all”



Houlin Zhao

Secretary-General

International Telecommunication Union

Dear Friends of ITU in Japan,
The year behind us was particularly challenging due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has cost countless lives and placed enormous strain on socio-economic conditions worldwide.

2020 was also a year where information and communication technologies (ICTs) took centre stage. I have seen first-hand how central ICTs were to the important discussions that have taken place in the last several months, be it at the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly, at the G20 meetings of ICT, finance and health ministers or at the Ministerial Council Meeting of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

The new circumstances brought about by COVID-19 have dramatically illustrated the vital importance of ICTs and broadband connectivity for societies and economies everywhere.

But the pandemic has also revealed stark inequalities in access to ICTs, reminding us of the digital divide that still prevents 3.6 billion people around the world from benefiting from the digital technologies and services that have proved so essential during the pandemic.

Now more than ever, ICTs are key to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and tackling the world's most pressing challenges, including COVID-19. And Japan has a prominent role to play in this effort.

I commend the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan for its support of ITU's Connect2Recover initiative, which helps countries recover from COVID-19 by expanding access to affordable and reliable connectivity, with an initial focus on hard-hit and least well-connected African countries.

Japan has been a member of ITU for more than 140 years and has been elected to the ITU Council on every occasion since 1959. We at ITU are grateful for Japan's active participation in our activities, from harmonizing the use of the radio-frequency spectrum and satellite orbits to developing international standards enabling next-generation technologies to assisting developing countries with infrastructure and policy development.

As we look to the year ahead of us, not only do we need to

connect the unconnected, but we also need to upgrade our services with new technologies such as 5G, cloud computing, AI, and many more.

Japan has long been a global source of ICT innovation and a leader in important and emerging areas of ITU's work, from space to AI to 5G. I was pleased to see several operators launch 5G services in Japan in 2020.

5G services will see the advent of new applications in areas as diverse and promising as automated vehicles, telemedicine, smart cities, and collaborative robotics, to name a few. Already during COVID-19, we have seen innovative applications of 5G in fields such as health, education, finance, and transportation.

In these critical and challenging times, Japan serves as an example for other countries to follow.

I would like to thank the government of Japan for its role in the development of ICTs and its significant financial support to ITU. My thanks also go to the many Japanese companies that are Sector Members of ITU, and to our Japanese Academia Members. Both provide ITU with valuable technical expertise. And thank you to the ITU Association of Japan for its continued support to our organization.

In 2021, Japan will host the Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo. I am confident that these Games will showcase Japan's ICT innovation capabilities and will offer the world great hope for the future.

In 2021, ITU will also convene its World Telecommunication Development Conference for the first time on the African continent in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. It will be the opportunity to mobilize the global community around digital transformation in support of the SDGs.

With only 10 years left to achieve these goals and amidst an unprecedented crisis, leveraging ICTs for inclusive development is more important than ever before.

I call on all our Japanese Members and friends of ITU in Japan to rise to the challenge and help us use this moment to build a safer, more sustainable, and better-connected digital future for all.

I wish you all a healthy, peaceful, and happy 2021!