# Widening our tent for post-COVID standardization

**By Chaesub Lee,** Director of the ITU Telecommunication Standardization Bureau

Innovative applications of information and communication technologies (ICTs) across a growing array of industries and sectors call for continually updated technical standards, purpose-built or adapted to meet the latest requirements.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend, linking global hopes for the future to successful, sustainable digital transformation.

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## Tackling today's challenges

At our recent Global Standards Symposium (GSS), policymakers and industry leaders shared their ambitions for, and concerns about, a digitally transformed future. They also delved into how technical standards can support sustainable development, whether in the realm of climate and environmental action, energy efficiency, health, financial inclusion, road safety, or smart cities and communities — all topics accounting for a rising share of ITU standardization work.

The symposium emphasized the importance of international standards in the context of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out by the United Nations for 2030. Standardization for sustainable economies and societies is also our focus for World Standards Day on 14 October, a focus we will maintain in the years leading to 2030.

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ITU members at the governing conference of ITU standardization arm (ITU–T), the World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly (WTSA), also came together behind some notable new directives, requesting ITU to: (a) consider establishing a "5G observatory" to share lessons from the rollout of 5G mobile networks around the world; and (b) help African countries adopt the ITU-recommended common emergency numbers 911 and/or 112.

The spirit of cooperation among ITU members at WTSA has helped set a constructive tone for other upcoming ITU governing conferences, including the World Telecommunication Development Conference (WTDC) in June, ITU's overarching Plenipotentiary Conference in September and October, and the World Radiocommunication Conference late next year.

## Envisioning and shaping the future

ITU standards are fundamental to the vision of a sustainable 5G world – where a high-performing, versatile digital environment supports a vast and most importantly trustworthy Internet of Things (IoT). Building trust in these new technologies became a key priority for ITU in the run-up to 2020, when ITU standards for mobile telecom services marked the beginning of the global 5G era.

Continued global progress in this regard, moreover, remains high on the ITU standardization agenda today. Global experiences of the pandemic have only underscored the need to continue connecting the unconnected, keep boosting confidence and security in the use of ICTs, and invest wisely and ambitiously in our collective digital future.

ICTs must address people's needs meaningfully, as well as become more intuitive for everyday users. As the last two years have shown, security and access to reliable information are nothing less than matters of public safety.

People around the world, without necessarily knowing it, rely on ITU standards to connect, do business, express ideas, and share experiences every day. Already, 95 per cent of international data traffic runs over fibre-optic networks built to ITU standards. Video services – enabled by Primetime Emmy-winning video-compression algorithms developed jointly by the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), International Organization for Standardization (ISO), and ITU – now account for over 80 per cent of Internet traffic.

We have pushed beyond a new frontier in recent years, with ICTs forming a nexus among a growing range of business and regulatory jurisdictions, and ITU standardization thereby gaining a host of new stakeholders. ITU standards now enhance agriculture and transportation along with other key sectors, helping all of them capitalize on advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning.

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## How we do it

International standards represent voluntary commitments and the widest possible participation. Inclusive dialogue helps to clarify how everyone can contribute, creating the conditions to develop impactful standards.

Open platforms, such as ITU–T focus groups, help determine the way forward, while membership-driven ITU–T study groups develop international standards that let us all move forward together. Collaborative frameworks like AI for Good, United for Smart Sustainable Cities, the Financial Inclusion Global Initiative, the Digital Currency Global Initiative, and the new AI for Road Safety initiative bring multiple perspectives to timely global industry and policy challenges.

With this inclusive approach, we can each identify where our specializations are most needed and thereby maximize the impact of our collective expertise.

I am proud to see the comprehensive support that ITU standards are providing to 5G, network 2030, IoT, and trust building. I have been honoured to head ITU's standardization arm when AI has captured imaginations worldwide — becoming a symbol of hopes and fears for our high-tech future — while ITU convened broad and growing partnerships to ensure that AI proves a force for good.

If you haven't already, we welcome you to join us.

## Sustainable standards in demand

Ongoing ICT advances keep raising new possibilities going forward. ITU standards must meet the latest requirements on a global scale. The world's demand for standardization work, therefore, will continue to grow.

As we look ahead to 2030, we will need increasingly diverse expertise to understand the full implications of new ICT applications in different sectors.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to ITU members for their dedication, and especially for their resolve over the past two years in tacking the challenges brought on by the pandemic. Our standardization work has continued online, we have welcomed new members and partners, and we have continued to build consensus.

We can only achieve this together, the ITU way, where all voices are heard and every step forward is decided inclusively.

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### ITU–T focus groups

The focus groups augment the ITU Standardization Sector (ITU–T) study group work programme by providing an alternative working environment for the quick development of specifications in their chosen areas.

- ▸ Testbeds Federations for IMT-2020 and beyond
- ▸ Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Internet of Things (IoT) for Digital Agriculture
- ▸ AI for Natural Disaster Management
- ▸ Autonomous Networks
- ▸ AI for autonomous and assisted driving
- ▸ Environmental Efficiency for AI and other Emerging Technologies
- ▸ Artificial Intelligence for Health
- ▸ Vehicular Multimedia

See all focus groups.