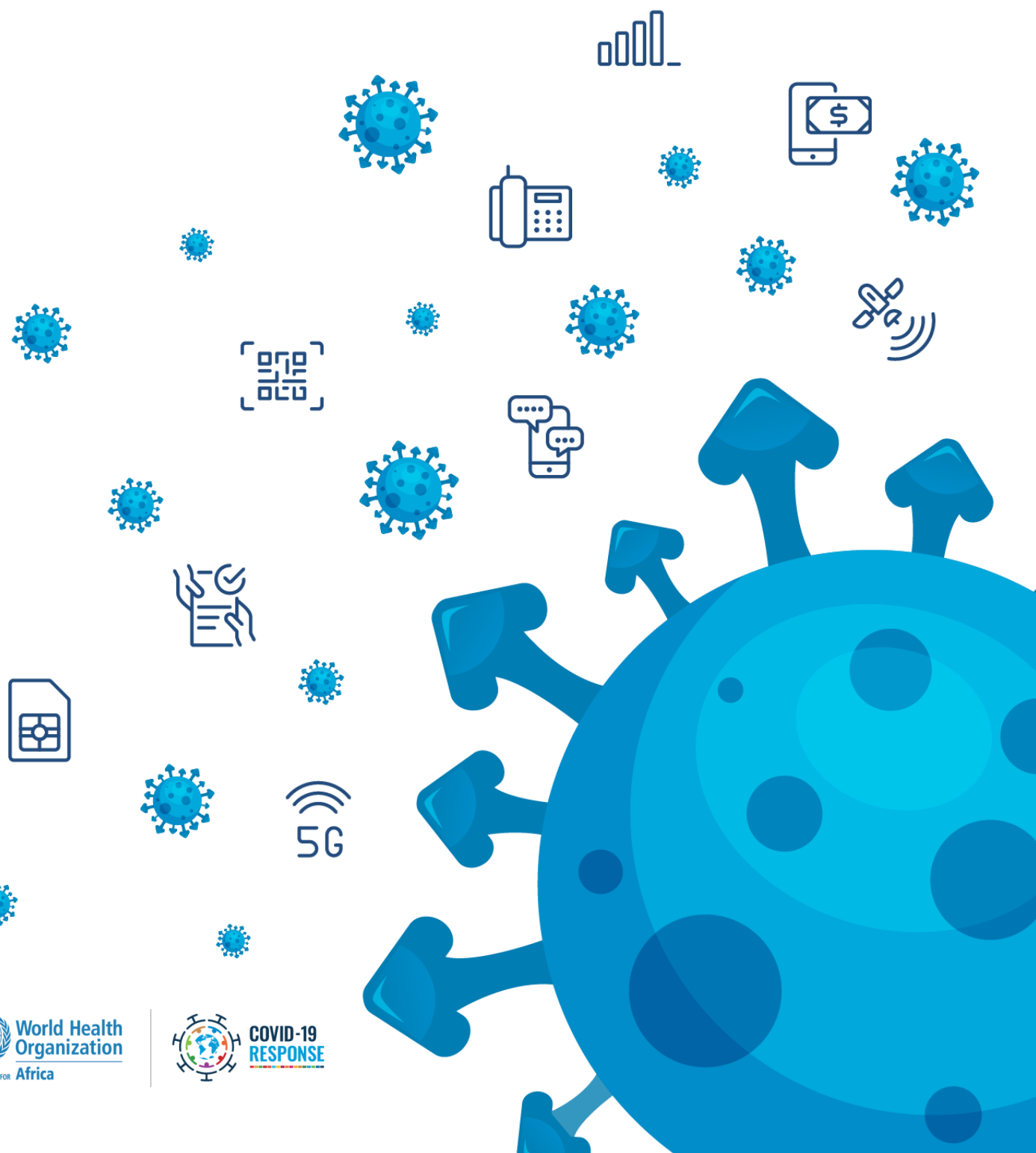


Telecommunications





Telecommunications sector played a critical role during the COVID-19 crisis across the world in fighting the pandemic, in particular accelerating the digitalization of many businesses and services, including teleworking and video conferencing systems, access to healthcare, education, essential goods and services¹ and in keeping governments and societies connected². The sector kept economies moving during the lockdown in terms of providing business-critical connectivity and resiliency; facilitating work-from-home arrangements; and keeping individuals and societies connected and informed, with access to medical, financial, commercial, and other essential services during mandated social isolation³.

Most telecom players including broadband, mobile, data center operators have benefitted from a surge in the traffic of data and voice. As a result, the telecom sector has been performing well compared to other infrastructure sub-sectors. In sharp contrast to many other industries, the telecommunication sector has been generally exempted from major COVID-19-related restrictions, such as stay-at-home orders and quarantine requirements, as it is recognized as an essential service. Some telecom companies have been strengthened by the short-term spike in data traffic and increased use of broadband services, as more people are working from home and rely on video conferencing to hold meetings⁴.

However, COVID-19 has driven the digital divide in the availability and quality of connectivity across the globe. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 49% of the world's population does not access the Internet with 71% of individuals in sub-Saharan Africa not using the Internet, compared to 17% in Europe. The digital divide can be explained in part by the lack of network infrastructure - 15.3% of the world population are not yet covered by 4G networks while 30.1% of households are unserved by fixed broadband. When it comes to 5G, the coverage gap is even larger in the developing world – 96% of the population in the developing world are not served by 5G⁵.

¹ <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/coronavirus/covid-19-revamping-africa%E2%80%99s-telecoms-infrastructure-crucial-digital-health-services>

² https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/1d490aec-4d57-4cbf-82b3-d6842eecd9b2/IFC-Covid19-Telecommunications_final_web_2.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=n9nxogP

³ https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/1d490aec-4d57-4cbf-82b3-d6842eecd9b2/IFC-Covid19-Telecommunications_final_web_2.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=n9nxogP

⁴ https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/1d490aec-4d57-4cbf-82b3-d6842eecd9b2/IFC-Covid19-Telecommunications_final_web_2.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=n9nxogP

⁵ International Telecommunication Union. 2021. The telecommunication industry in the postCOVID-19 world. Report of the 7th ITU Economic Experts Roundtable. Available from: <https://www.itu.int/en/myitu/Publications/2021/05/11/08/10/The-telecommunication-industry-in-the-post-COVID-19-world>



African countries that have made progress with the liberalization of their telecom sector however have a better and widespread availability of broadband infrastructure, and that they were able to reap the benefit in fighting COVID-19. Pre-existing policy and regulatory measures had implications to the affordability, accessibility and use of information and communication technologies in different African countries⁶. In general terms however, in Africa, telecommunication is showing steady growth in terms of service coverage and economic generation. It is expected that by 2025, 4G adoption in Sub-Saharan will double to 28% and 5G (which at its infancy now) will account for 3% of total mobile connections in the region. In addition, 615 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa will subscribe to mobile services and there will be \$155Bn generated by mobile technologies and services⁷.

It is important to also note and assess the negative impact of technology as well especially as misinformation has increased exponentially during the pandemic. Social media has been used by some to jeopardize national, regional and international efforts in fighting COVID-19 which has been one negative side of the use of ICTs. As such, there is a need to examine the situation and do some work in this area by building on earlier work on the negative impact of social media⁸.

⁶ <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/coronavirus/covid-19-revamping-africa%E2%80%99s-telecoms-infrastructure-crucial-digital-health-services>

⁷ <https://www.gsma.com/mobileeconomy/sub-saharan-africa/>

⁸ <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/coronavirus/covid-19-revamping-africa%E2%80%99s-telecoms-infrastructure-crucial-digital-health-services>