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Leveraging Information and Communication Technology as an enabler for the education sector, including in times of pandemic

***Explanatory memorandum submitted by the co-Rapporteurs
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Information and communication technology (ICT) increasingly permeates our societies in all fields of life – including the education sector. This development brings new opportunities in teaching and learning, affecting the way in which we access, transmit, and process information. While technological development creates new opportunities, it also brings new challenges in terms of equity and inclusion, data security and privacy, and the financing of expensive digital capacities. The resolution seeks to determine how to make the best use of the ICT possibilities available to us in actual learning.

There is no doubt that ICT can benefit societies in education. It is a medium used to provide educational programmes and expand educational opportunities. It can also be a pedagogical tool for teachers and learners to improve the relevance and quality of teaching and learning processes and can also help users develop digital skills. Technology should be used to facilitate education, enable access to information, develop connections, and create better organized teaching and learning processes. However, teaching and learning should not be driven by technology. Teachers and learners should be at the core of any technological learning applications.

The world had been facing a learning crisis long before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. According to the statistics of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in 2016, over 600 million children and adolescents were estimated to be not reaching minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics even though they were going to school. The World Bank introduced the concept “Learning Poverty” to define the inability to read and understand a simple text by age 10.

With school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of millions of children have been out of school, many for prolonged periods. This has further contributed to the learning crisis as schools have been trying to find ways of organizing teaching remotely. Some countries have been more successful than others and some schools have responded to the situation better than others, and even some classes within the same school have found better solutions than others. The digital divide in the field of education is happening and in a pandemic, like the one we are presently experiencing, it is only being intensified.

Digital divides reflect and amplify existing social, cultural and economic inequalities. There are gaps in digital capacities between countries, regions, social classes, gender, age groups, different minority groups, and the list goes on. Building digital capacities is expensive and those who have the resources, have the possibility to make the necessary investments. It is precisely for this reason that it is absolutely essential that parliaments and governments make special efforts regarding equity and inclusion when they design education policy. No-one should be left behind.

One major factor in equity, but also in societal development as a whole, is investment in girls' education. Investing in girls' education transforms communities, countries and the entire world. Girls who receive an education are less likely to marry young and more likely to lead healthy, productive lives. They earn higher incomes than less educated girls, participate in taking decisions that affect them most, and build better futures for themselves and their families. Girls' education strengthens economies and reduces inequality. It contributes to more stable, resilient societies that give all individuals – including boys and men – the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Nevertheless, when introducing ICT and artificial intelligence (AI) tools and algorithms it is important to be aware that they may be gender biased and every effort should be made to eliminate such bias. Also, implementing expensive ICT education programmes should not jeopardize funding for more basic learning needs. The resolution also focuses on the importance of optimal learning conditions, such as adequate numbers of teaching staff, including staff assisting teachers, limited size of classes to ensure teachers have enough time for each pupil, and on meals provided by the school to make sure pupils have the energy they need for learning.

Finally, it is crucially important to set up proper strategies for monitoring and evaluating the progress of education results. Such strategies would be the basis for directing education policies and methods in the future.

The draft resolution aims to formulate an opinion on questions such as:

- How best to leverage ICT in the education sector.
- The state of education globally and what is the starting point for increasing the use of ICT.
- Measures that must be taken into consideration when building competences in the education sector.