The Director-General

To Permanent Delegates and Observer Missions to UNESCO

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13 March 2020

Sir/Madam,

The health crisis caused by the COVID-19 coronavirus has already had a major impact on the work of the UNESCO Secretariat, at Headquarters and in the field.

At the start of this crisis, we implemented a number of measures directed primarily at protecting the health and safety of UNESCO staff and the health and safety of all those we work with, while maintaining our activity in forms appropriate for each local context.

In particular, we set up a crisis unit chaired by the Assistant Director-General for Administration to coordinate the actions of all services, in liaison with our host country and the other United Nations agencies in France. I have called frequent meetings of the Strategic Management Board with a view to taking appropriate steps.

Within this framework, we have implemented various measures, of which you have been informed: enhanced hygiene measures at all sites; the cancellation of group visits at Headquarters; the creation of a dedicated Intranet page updated regularly with all necessary information and an email address for all queries; the cancellation or postponement of events at Headquarters and international travel as appropriate; appropriate measures for field offices enhanced on a case-by-case basis; and the progressive implementation of telework.

In light of the evolution of the pandemic and the measures announced by our Organization’s host country, especially the closure of schools and universities, we are stepping up our response, which will have inevitable consequences for our activities. Today, I met with the President of the General Conference and the Chairperson of the Executive Board to inform them of these steps.

From Monday, 16 March, and until further notice, telework has been generalized, while taking into account the need to assure for the continuity of some critical functions.

We will also systematically reduce the number of large meetings taking place, with decisions to hold meetings with less than 50 participants being made on a case-by-case basis.
We have also sought to help respond to this crisis by offering UNESCO’s expertise in its fields of competence.

The global education system is experiencing a major upheaval. On 10 March, we convened a videoconference for education ministers and officials from more than 70 countries to share best practices in distance learning. We also created a UNESCO-COVID-19 Emergency Task Force, which will provide support to governments while focusing on the most vulnerable countries: https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures.

Naturally, we will continue to adapt our arrangements as the health situation evolves, with our priority being the protection of health and safety.

Together, we must face this extraordinary situation with calm and determination, in line with the values of cooperation and mutual respect upon which our Organization is founded.

I have every confidence in our collective ability to rise to this challenge, in full compliance with the values and missions of our Organization. During these trying times, I would like to assure you all of my solidarity and my hope that this test will be soon behind us.

Accept, Sir/Madam, the assurances of my highest consideration, and of the full mobilization of the Secretariat in these exceptional circumstances.

Audrey Azoulay