

ITU Standards as a pillar for progress in building the Information Society

*Remarks by Mr. Yoshio UTSUMI, ITU Secretary-General,
on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of CCITT / ITU,
Geneva, 20 July 2006*

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to welcome you to Geneva for this celebration of the first 50 years of the history of the ITU's Telecommunication Standardization Sector.

In reality, ITU has been working towards the interoperability for the telecommunication industry since its inception in 1865. But the year 2006 takes on heightened significance because it marks the 50th anniversary of the date on which standardization within ITU was brought under a single, specific entity. Fifty years ago, in 1956, two technical committees were merged to create the International Telephone and Telegraph Consultative Committee (known under its French acronym, as CCITT). In this manner, all of ITU's standards-setting activities for wired networks were consolidated into a single body.

This move represented an acknowledgement of the significance of standardization in telecommunications. The CCITT was transformed into the ITU Telecommunication Standardization Sector (ITU-T) in 1993, as part of an overall reform which created the ITU's current structure.

For most of ITU's history, standardization activities remained relatively simple. They were dedicated to establishing agreed protocols to ensure the interoperability of networks. During the monopoly era, when telecommunications were primarily provided by state-owned incumbent operators, interoperability meant ensuring cooperation among nation states for the provision of telephone and telegraph services. However, today, after the onset of liberalization and competition in most parts of the world, the picture is much more complicated and interoperability needs the cooperation of thousands of separate operators, serving global markets with multiple and diverse services.

Typically, a new technology might first be introduced in a national market. But the economic imperative means that it must soon be extended to the regional and global level if it is to prosper.

Consequently, it is necessary to reconcile, on the one hand the desire for innovation and very quick progress of technology, and on the other hand the need for ensuring interoperability and global harmonization. Similarly, it is necessary to cooperate at the level of research and development and standards-making while at the same time encouraging competition for the sale of products and services.

Today's players in the information and communication technologies (ICT) industry have to find the right balance between serving the global market in developing standards and making profit by implementing newly-invented technologies quickly.

ITU has a responsibility to its membership to find the best way of achieving this balance, while ensuring the development of an inclusive information society. Therefore, I firmly believe that ITU should continue to take the lead in developing the global vision and planning for standards. But it must do so in cooperation with other standards-setting bodies, at national, regional and international levels, in particular the International Organization for Standardization and the International Electrotechnical Commission (ISO/IEC), the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), as well as other key forums and consortia. The ultimate objective is to have common recognition of an appropriate role for each standards-setting body so that, together, we can develop useful ICT standards and ensure global interoperability.

Celebrating the achievements of the past 50 years is an excellent opportunity to examine the ITU's role in future standards-development. As we celebrate today with some of the top executives from the world of ICTs, we must also develop a vision that will help ensure that ITU standards remain a pillar of progress. This is crucial as standardization can help in bridging the broader digital divide that exists both among and within countries.

So let us celebrate today not only the achievements of the last 50 years of the ITU's Standardization activities, but also our confidence in its future.