

2009 Internet Governance Forum at Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt

Message on Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities by the Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability (DCAD)

Introduction

The Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability (DCAD) was formed at the Internet Governance Forum to ensure that information and communications technology (ICT) accessibility is included in the key debates around Internet Governance. The DCAD seeks to build a future where all sectors of the global community have equal access to the Information Society.

We are convinced that the entire community can benefit from an "accessible ICT world," as people can be permanently or temporarily disabled due to personal, environmental (e.g., a phone call in a noisy environment) or cultural (e.g., spoken language diversity) conditions. Moreover, we will all grow old and lose abilities that we take for granted now, thus enlarging the part of the population that would benefit from accessible communication. We cannot allow isolation of a part of the population due to lack of appropriate functionality that also prevents the use of ICT resources by everyone to the fullest possible degree.

For these reasons, this Message is aimed at all IGF participants, including Governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations and offers practical steps for consideration and implementation.

Rights

This Message supports the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities¹ whose purpose is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. These rights include equal access to the Internet, to information, communications and other services, including electronic services and emergency services. ICT accessibility for persons with disabilities is a significant obligation of the Convention.

As stated in the Tunis Commitment of the World Summit on the Information Society:

We shall strive unremittingly, therefore, to promote universal, ubiquitous, equitable and affordable access to ICTs, including universal design and assistive technologies, for all people,

¹ See Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, sixty-first session, resolution A/RES/61/106 of 6 December 2006 at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/rights/convtexte.htm>.

especially those with disabilities, everywhere, to ensure that all the benefits are more evenly distributed between and within societies, and to bridge the digital divide in order to create digital opportunities for all and benefit from the potential offered by ICTs for development. (WSIS 2005, Paragraph 18)

Internet Standards and Accessibility Support

This Message promotes the use of internationally recognized and open standards that support accessibility and result in the benefits detailed in this Message. Technical design standards play a critical role in the implementation of accessible ICT. Standards represent a consensus in the industry on the components needed to implement accessibility. They also provide certainty for users with disabilities so they can participate in society.

One chief concern is the prevention of barriers to participation by persons with disabilities where the barriers are created by proprietary protocols. Another concern is the need for industry to implement the standards and to address gaps in accessibility support. For example, it was not only until recently that a global inventory of accessibility standards was mapped by JTC1 Special Working Group on Accessibility (SWG-A)² – an effort established in 2004 by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC).

Standards supporting accessibility are voluntary unless they are part of a regulatory or statutory effort. The current crisis has highlighted the need for outreach, education and training on accessibility standards and support. This crisis has also led to significant ICT obligations in the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities that require the accessibility of mainstream technology, interoperability with assistive technology, and equal access to information and communications.

Accessible web design promotes affordability, increased competition, better consumer choice, better security and improved sustainability. As convergence of real-time voice, text and video becomes a reality through Internet innovation, accessibility support and interoperability must remain a priority. This message calls for all standards setting organizations to ensure that cross-disability accessibility features and support are included in every technical requirement.

Benefits

This Message recognizes that Internet standards and accessibility support provide tangible and measureable benefits including:

- A. Improved access for older adults, people with low literacy and people lacking technology skills;
- B. Improved access for persons with disabilities using mobile devices so that all mobile device features can be operated by the varying abilities of persons with disabilities;
- C. Improved access for persons with disabilities due to the accessibility features for digital TV and IPTV;

² See JTC1 Special Working Group on Accessibility, standards inventory at <http://www.jtc1access.org/TR29138.html>.

- D. Improved access for people using low bandwidth connections and those using older hardware and/or software because they can turn off Internet images, download content quickly and benefit from backwards compatibility for older devices;
- E. Reduction in web site development and maintenance costs due to the efficiency of the Internet standards, accessibility support , and search engine capabilities;
- F. Increased capability to reach a wider group of people with varying abilities will lead to customer satisfaction, and an increase in market share; and
- G. Decrease in legal challenges by persons with disabilities for failure to address accessible ICT.

Universal Design

This Message adopts the definition of Universal Design as found in Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities:

“Universal design” means the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. “Universal design” shall not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities where this is needed.

In addition, this Message notes that signatories to the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities have the obligation under Article 9 to “promote the design, development, production and distribution of accessible ICT and systems at an early stage, so that these technologies and systems become accessible at minimum cost.”

Training

This Message recognizes that education and training for designers, developers, testers, managers, senior executives and other practitioners is crucial to the production of accessible ICT. This includes:

- A. Raising awareness of the benefits of Universal Design at all organizational levels;
- B. Raising awareness of accessibility barriers and the availability of easily implementable technical solutions;
- C. Enabling web developers to acquire accessible technical design skills and to acquire a knowledge base of accessible ICT techniques;
- D. Providing on-going education and training at universities and other educational bodies to ensure adoption of state-of-the-art best practices for accessible ICT;
- E. Dispelling myths and misunderstandings by learning from the experiences of persons with disabilities; and
- F. Providing procurement training on how entities can procure and maintain accessible ICT products and services.

Practical Steps

This Message proposes the following practical steps for IGF participants:

- A. Provide education and training on the accessible ICT provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
- B. Encourage implementation of Internet standards and accessibility support;
- C. Educate managers and technical staff on the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative Guidelines,³ the Joint ITU/G3ict eAccessibility Toolkit for Policy Makers;⁴ Total Conversation ITU-T Rec. 703,⁵ the ITU Telecommunications Accessibility Checklist;⁶ and the DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System) standards;⁷
- D. Consult stakeholders, including persons with disabilities and older people, throughout all stages of the design and development of Internet applications and ICT products and services;
- E. Ensure that information is available in accessible formats and is collected from users using accessible methods;
- F. Ensure that ICT procurement policies and practices address the procurement of accessible ICT and the maintenance of accessibility features in products and services procured;
- G. Ensure that public and private meetings and consultations are accessible, including online conferencing systems and web-based captioning for remote meeting participants; and
- H. Raise the profile of accessibility in industry, government, educational and private sector products, facilities, programs and services so that accessibility is mainstreamed in all of society.

³ See W3C Web Accessibility Initiative at <http://www.w3.org/WAI>.

⁴ See Joint ITU/G3ict Initiative, eAccessibility Toolkit for Policy Makers at http://g3ict.com/resource_center/toolkit.

⁵ See ITU-T SG 16 Work on Accessibility, Total Conversation, at <http://www.itu.int/ITU-T/studygroups/com16/accessibility/conversation.html>.

⁶ See ITU Telecommunications Accessibility Checklist at <http://www.itu.int/ITU-T/accessibility/index.html>.

⁷ See DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System) standards at www.daisy.org.