



Contribution from the Internet Society to the International Telecommunication Union Council Working Group on International Internet Public Policy Issues 2016 Online Open Consultation: Access to the Internet for Persons with Disabilities and Specific Needs

The Internet Society (ISOC), a Sector Member of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), is pleased to submit this contribution to the ITU Council Working Group (CWG) on International Internet Public Policy Related Issues 2016 Open Consultation (Open Consultation) for the upcoming Open Physical Consultation meeting on February 15, 2016. The Internet Society commends the ITU for opening their discussion and dialogue to diverse stakeholders in order to share perspectives on the challenges and opportunities surrounding access to the Internet for persons with disabilities and specific needs.

The Internet Society believes that “the Internet is for Everyone,” reflecting the belief that access to the Internet is a fundamental issue, and that “the divide between the connected 3 billion and the unconnected 4.3 billion is not just digital: it is economic, social, and political. Thus, the global Internet Society community, are ever more acutely driven by the imperative of connecting the unconnected.” (Internet Society 2016 Action Plan) This includes people with disabilities.

We note that similar guiding principles exist within ITU Resolutions, specifically, the World Standardization Telecommunication Assembly (WTSA) Resolution 70 (Dubai, 2012) that invites Member States and Sector Members to ‘consider developing, within their national legal frameworks, guidelines or other mechanisms to enhance the accessibility, compatibility and usability of telecommunications/ICT services, products and services.’ Additionally, ITU Plenipotentiary Resolution 175 (Busan, 2014) tasks the ITU with the promotion of ICT accessibility and access to ICTs for Persons with Disabilities and Persons with Specific Needs.

These resolutions provide both a framework for a more inclusive agenda and encourage governments to improve accessibility to ICT. The Internet Society supports the spirit of the ITU Resolutions. We believe, however, that more needs to be done to expand the accessibility work to increase use of the Internet by persons with disabilities. Our contribution offers a reflection on some of the impediments to Internet access for persons with disabilities and highlights some of the practical solutions that are available that can be implemented more broadly.

Challenges and needs

For persons with disabilities, accessibility means parity with a person without a disability in the use of products or services. The Internet makes it possible for people with disabilities to participate actively in the community. However, there are known challenges that need to be considered and addressed in order to achieve the potential benefits that come with access to the Internet.

- **Accessibility to Internet content:** Websites may present barriers due to their design. For example, people with visual impairment use screen-reading software that outputs text to either speech or to Braille. However, they may be confronted by websites with confusing navigation or that lack descriptions of images. There are web accessibility challenges for people with other types of disability.
- **Affordability:** 80% of people with disabilities are estimated by the World Health Organisation to live in developing countries. Regardless of location, people with disabilities often have low incomes and limited educational opportunities. The Internet may then be unaffordable. If people require assistive technologies, the costs are even higher.
- **Availability:** If the Internet has limited availability in underserved rural, remote, and urban areas, there may be a lower priority placed on encouraging use of the Internet by people with disabilities.
- **Lack of awareness by wider Internet community:** The broader community may have limited understanding of how people with disabilities use the Internet. There may be a mistaken belief that making products and services accessible is difficult and costly.

Local Partnerships That Are Making A Difference

People with disabilities make positive contributions to their communities. However, as an untapped labor source, people with disabilities are more likely to have limited employment opportunities placing them at risk for poverty. Once the barriers are removed, the Internet opens up many new work opportunities. People with disabilities will need training in the use of Internet applications and assistive technologies that enhances their ability to use the Internet.

As a global organization, with more than 80,000 members in 97 countries and 113 active volunteer-led Chapters, the Internet Society partners with its community and other experts to support local initiatives that focus on access and development. The Internet Society community understands the gaps and needs within the local context. Our “Beyond the Net Funding Programme,” formerly the Community Grants Programme, supports community-based initiatives that advance Internet access, leadership, education, and development around the world. Through this programme the Internet Society supports innovative ideas that empower persons with disabilities through education and training in the use of Internet applications. For example,

In **Ethiopia** the Orient and Rouse the Blind with Information Technology ([ORBIT](#)) project managed by Together! Ethiopian Residents Charity Organization provided basic computer skills training for visually impaired individuals. With the acquired IT skills and networking efforts several graduates of the training found permanent employment. Additionally, within the project’s “Basic Computer Skill Training at Schools” component more than 300 school age individuals and several teachers with a visual impairment received the opportunity to make use of IT to perform their educational duties independently

Similarly, in **Argentina**, Tiflobros started as a local project and now has global reach. [The Tiflobros](#) project launched the first digital library for Spanish-speaking people with a visual impairment that is not only free but also accessible worldwide. Biblioteca digital

para ciegos - puntos de acceso a la lectura para personas con discapacidad visual (Digital Library for the Blind – Access Points to Reading for Persons with Visual Disabilities) offers more than 50,000 books and reaches over 7,000 people across 5 continents. Tiflolibros also created a reading toolkit for the visually impaired. The toolkit includes programs and documents designed for computer learning and access to reading, and an array of useful tools such as screen reader software that allows blind people to use a synthetic voice reader for information on computer screen and programs that convert text into MP3 digital audio.

In the Asia Pacific Region, the **Australian Chapter** of the Internet Society now known as Internet Australia has been active in promoting Internet accessibility for people with disability over the past 15 years mainly through the leadership of its Director, Gunela Astbrink. Gunela developed a disability awareness training toolkit for Chapter Leaders and delivered this both face-to-face and online. This inspired the **Hong Kong Chapter** of the Internet Society to run its own workshop on accessibility.

Another Internet Society Community Grant enabled the development of capacity-building workshops on Internet accessibility policy development for **Pacific Island** countries. These workshops were delivered as part of the Pacific Islands Chapter's annual conference over a number of years involving regional and national disability organisations.

These projects are just some of the examples of local initiatives that the Internet Society community is engaged with that are empowering people with disabilities. The projects are low cost, have a substantial impact, and are making Internet access possible for persons with disabilities. These projects can serve as practical models that can be replicated more broadly across other communities.

Guiding Principles and Best Practices

Governments, Business, Civil Society and the Technical Community have an important role to play in increasing Internet use for persons with disabilities. Organizations and entities across multiple disciplines have guiding principles and best practices that can be implemented more widely.

- **Universal design** is an example of best practice as described in the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and recognised by the ITU. Universal design means that mainstream products and services are designed so that they are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Products developed using universal design principles have been shown to be more usable by everyone including people with disability.
- **Guide 71 (ISO/IEC 2014)** is a best practice guide in methodologies for developing standards in ICT accessibility. It does not specify technical parameters for the accessibility of any product or service as this is left to the standards themselves.

- **The IETF's specifications for real-time text** conversation are making a difference for people with hearing or a speech impairment to communicate with others. There is related ITU standardization work in text telephony.
- **W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative** has developed a set of guidelines referred to globally for the development of web-based resources. Some of these relate to web content, user agents, authoring tools and mobile accessibility. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 is recognised across the world and is used by many governments mandating that their online services be accessible.
- **The Internet Society paper** on Internet Accessibility offers ideas of what we all can do. For example, it suggests that when developing policy, standards or guidelines, objective criteria be used to determine whether there is an impact on people with disability and if so, to include disability representatives in the development process.

Guiding Principles for policymakers and regulators

Governments and regulators can play an active role by engaging more with persons with disabilities in their communities to understand the gaps and needs. Gradual attitudinal change of the societal benefits of accessibility and availability to the Internet for persons with disabilities may bring a more inclusive approach to the development and delivery of products and services thus providing, in many cases, more user-friendly applications to the broader community. This benefits everyone. Policymakers and regulators can do more to:

- Increase appreciation of the market for accessible Internet products that enhance usability for persons with disabilities.
- Support the multistakeholder model in affirming that all actors in the Internet community should input into a policy-making process. Civil society has a vital role in making this process as relevant as possible to the end-user. This includes involving people with disabilities and their representative organisations as partners in formulating policy recommendations and importantly, providing advice on the most appropriate methods of implementation.
- Implement the Connect 2020 global agenda to shape the future of the ICT sector that was that was unanimously adopted at the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference in 2014. One of the inclusiveness goals to bridge the digital divide is: 'Enabling environments ensuring accessible telecommunication/ICT for persons with disabilities should be established in all countries by 2020.
- Learn more about the W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative and make use of its accessibility guidelines on web accessibility, authoring tools and user agents

Conclusion

This submission has outlined some of the challenges faced by persons with disabilities in accessing and using the Internet and provided some suggestions for solving these challenges. Every part of the Internet community can play a part to build a more inclusive agenda that enables persons with disabilities to actively participate and contribute to the community. The global policies in place along with standards and guidelines should be implemented by government, industry and other stakeholders to increase the usage of the Internet by persons with disabilities in practical ways.

The ITU in cooperation with other international bodies should strengthen support to governments and other stakeholders to affect change. It will make a difference, especially in developing countries, for governments in partnership with the private sector and civil society to implement programs to train people with disability in the use of the Internet, make available accessible and affordable Internet products and services and respond with practical solutions to the challenges faced by people with disability in using the Internet.

When barriers are removed, persons with disabilities can fully contribute to society. Government, industry and other stakeholders should take these barriers into account as a priority to create an enabling environment that can unleash the full potential of the Internet and bring the Internet of opportunities to all.

The Internet Society thanks the ITU of the opportunity to engage a global community of stakeholders in an Open Consultation. We look forward to continued collaboration with the ITU and other partners.