Making ICTs accessible to people with disabilities

IT IS ESTIMATED THAT MORE THAN one billion people —around 15% of the world's total — are living with some type of disability, physical or cognitive.[1] A high percentage live in developing countries, while the number of elderly people is rapidly rising in populations elsewhere. To achieve a truly inclusive information society, everyone must be able to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) with confidence. This means that improving the "accessibility" of ICTs must be high on the agenda for providers of services and equipment.

It has been proposed that a new article covering this issue should be added to the International Telecommunication Regulations (ITRs) when they are reviewed at the 2012 World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT-12). The new provision would encourage national governments to provide global telecommunication and ICT services based on technical standards that ensure accessibility. This is in line with Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which promotes the use of ICTs to enable everyone to participate fully in society, on an equal basis with others.

This aim is also one of the priorities of ITU, which works on the issue through, for example, the ITU-T Focus Group on Audiovisual Media Accessibility, formed under the auspices of Study Group 16 of ITU's Telecommunication Standardization Sector.[2] Other activities in the Sector include standardization of relay services to help deaf people use telecommunications. It has also issued a Telecommunications Accessibility Checklist, which helps experts developing technical standards take into account the needs of those for whom accessibility is restricted.

Work in this domain carried out by ITU's Radiocommunication Sector and Telecommunication Development Sector focuses on such topics as captioning of television broadcasts; wireless communication systems for people with impaired hearing; supporting training initiatives, and sharing information on best practice in accessibility. In addition, an online "Toolkit on e-Accessibility and Service Needs for Persons with Disabilities" has been produced that offers guidance to policy-makers and regulators.[3]

The central importance of the Internet has been recognized too. In 2007, at the second meeting of the Internet Governance Forum, ITU organized a workshop on accessibility in emerging technologies and the Web, which brought together experts from around the world. It led to the formation of the Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability, which aims to ensure that the topic is included in key debates concerning the Internet.

Links to the coalition, and to ITU's work on accessibility, are at www.itu.int/accessibility. And examples of exactly how profound a difference ICTs can make in the lives of people with disabilities can be seen here: www.itu.int/themes/accessibility/stories/index.html.

Several innovations that we take for granted today – from automatic door openers to touch-sensitive computer screens – were originally created as assistive technologies. Improving accessibility to ICTs is not limited to addressing the needs of people with disabilities; it is a responsibility that the sector should consider tackling comprehensively. The ultimate aim is to make sure that products, services and facilities are usable by as many people as possible. It is an issue of importance to us all.

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[1] World Report on Disability (2011). WHO, World Bank (www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/en/index.html)
[2] Further details are at www.itu.int/en/ITU-T/focusgroups/ava/Pages/default.aspx
[3] The toolkit was developed in partnership with the Global Initiative for Inclusive ICTs, or G3ict