



INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION UNION TELECOMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT BUREAU

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PLENARY MEETING

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DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES FOR THE USE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS

Introduction

As we near the end of the four-year period which began with WTDC-94 in Buenos Aires it is useful to take stock of the trends in rural and remote telecommunications and to address some of the strategies which are being applied to overcome the challenges of serving these areas.

There are four major changes in the past four years which have modified the traditional approach to serving rural (and remote) areas.

First, although telecommunications is the main underpinning of access to these services, there has been a growing recognition that telecommunications is part of a broader picture, i.e. Information and Communications Technologies (or ICTs).

Second, people working in economic sectors that have a stake in rural areas, such as agriculture, health, education and tourism, are becoming partners in contributing to the commercial viability of rural telecommunication-based services.

This is strategically of great importance to the telecommunications sector since new customers will increase the probability of the commercial viability of telecommunications services.

Third, there is now wide acceptance that the provision of telecommunications services in rural and remote areas is generally profitable and that there are a wide range of innovative and entrepreneurial financial approaches that can be used to implement such services.

Fourth, there has been an enormous growth in the choice of technologies and the judicious and appropriate choice of technologies can provide low-cost and viable options for serving rural areas.

While these changes have brought new optimism to the potential of bringing service to rural areas, there has been a worldwide consensus that there is a major policy issue to be addressed. The issue of access has become a major consideration in the ITU development activities and in fora such as ISAD and Global Knowledge 97. It is necessary to build upon this momentum and place access (and its relationship to development) squarely in the centre of the issues to be addressed at WTDC-98.

The situation today

Study Group 2 has made five recommendations for communications for rural and remote areas which form the basis for future strategies in this area. These are:

- 1) the need for models to permit the comparison of technologies suited to rural and remote areas so that appropriate solutions can be determined;
- 2) the need for national rural telecommunication development initiatives as part of a planned, orderly, progressive, multi-year programme - managed on a commercial basis;
- 3) the promotion of the application of telecommunication facilities for developing various sectors of rural infrastructure and rural economy;
- 4) the setting into place of appropriate regulatory structures as a means of encouraging the extension of telecommunication services to remote and rural areas; and
- 5) the need to take advantage of a wide range of innovative and entrepreneurial financial and promotional approaches, to minimize costs and maximize revenue in providing telecommunications to rural and remote areas.

The Global Knowledge 97 Conference, co-sponsored by CIDA and the World Bank contained a number of sessions which strongly endorse these recommendations. There is not a consolidated set of recommendations emerging from this Conference, but certain broad conclusions have been reached which are of direct relevance to the ITU strategic plan for development. Examples of these conclusions are:

- Empowering people with information and knowledge through ICT can be crucial to the development process, but to support sustainable development more attention must be paid to matching ICTs to the needs of the community. The goals of ICT must be integrated with the aims of other sectors of society, and not considered as an end in itself. This necessitates close cooperation between the telecommunications sector and the development sectors, e.g. agriculture, health, education and tourism. Partnering across sectors at both national and international levels is the wave of the future. A direct implication of this for the ITU is the need to invite specialists from these sectors to participate in the ongoing work of the ITU-D, since these are the people who will have the responsibility for implementation.
- Enthusiasm for new technologies must not lead us to forget the existence and usefulness of existing communication techniques. Broadcast radio, for example, is widely adapted to the needs of the developing world and is ideally suited to the dissemination of information and knowledge. Many of these technologies may not be "high-tech", but fit the need of developing countries.
- Institutions in the development sectors are potential participants as major partners in community access projects. In addition, they are ideally situated to undertake the educational and orientation process needed to maximize the value of such projects.
- Governments have new roles to play, in addition to the widely recognized role in the development of policies and regulatory frameworks. For example, governments can bring about the integration of publicly funded activities (education, health, etc.) to maximize the use of access facilities.
- Various rural groups are currently working to establish Multipurpose Community Telecentres, including rural communities, libraries, businesses, NGOs, people's organizations, rural radio and other rural media, and existing traditional communication systems. It is important to work with groups such as these that are predisposed to open and participatory communication.

- Strategic alliances are needed between other stakeholders, including the government, international organizations, the local private sector, NGOs, and the communities themselves. The challenges ahead include: buy-in from local communities, innovative tariff structures, serious commitment, options for partnerships, appropriate content to meet the needs of the community, and training. In this connection, the importance of gender balance, and recognition of the important role of women in development is essential.
- New tools for understanding the role of knowledge and information are beginning to show promise. For example the Information Society Index (ISI) can be used to assess the capacity of individual countries to access, absorb and effectively utilize information. This work offers a number of applications and future extensions that could be of considerable interest for commercial firms and government policy-makers. In addition, some of the methodologies being used for Knowledge Assessment (KA) are useful tools for assisting countries to analyse their capabilities for participating in the knowledge revolution.

Strategies for the future

The ITU Development Sector has made an excellent start in playing its "catalytic" role with respect to telecommunications development for rural and remote areas. The ideas presented above should be reflected in the five major capacity development facets of ITU-D activities, e.g.:

- telecommunication sector reform;
- technologies;
- management;
- finance; and
- human resources development.

Resource constraints will clearly limit the scope of activities within which meaningful results can be achieved. The extension of information and communication technologies to rural areas will clearly be accelerated by most of the ITU-D programmes. Major issues, such as access, must be addressed at a broader level. However, two activities, squarely within the mandate of the Development Sector, have particular promise and should be accorded a high priority in strategies for the forthcoming period. These are:

Proposal

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The continuation of pilot project activities (including evaluation) of community-based, access oriented communications facilities. This might build upon the excellent work already initiated by the ITU, e.g. the implementation of telecentres at all levels ranging from the simplest telephone call box to more sophisticated communications centres.

The continued focus on applications to rural-based economic activities such as agriculture, health and education. In this connection, consideration should be given to the formulation of recommendations to WTDC-98 to engage planners and decision-makers, from other sectors, in the planning and implementation of telecommunications-based solutions to rural problems.

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