Question 20-1/1 – Access to telecommunication services and information and communication technologies (ICTs) by persons with disabilities

1   Statement of the situation

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 600 million persons in the world live with some type of disability. According to WHO, about 80 per cent of persons with disabilities live in low-income countries. Disability appears in different forms and degrees, regarding physical, sensitive or mental aspects. Also, the increase in life expectancy results in elder persons having a reduction in their capabilities. Thus, it is likely that the number of persons with disabilities will continue to increase.

The inclusion in society of persons with disabilities is a policy of Member States. The objective of such policy is to bring about the necessary conditions for persons with disabilities to enjoy the same opportunities in life as the rest of the population. The disabilities policy has evolved, and is not limited to basic healthcare, education of children with disabilities and rehabilitation of persons who have suffered disability during their adulthood. The implementation of the disabilities policy has made urban infrastructure accessible, and has improved health and rehabilitation services for this group. Moreover, the principles of equal opportunity and non-discrimination are common policies of Member States.

With respect to telecommunications, during the World Telecommunication Development Conference (Istanbul, 2002) Member States resolved, by Resolution 20 (Rev. Istanbul, 2002), that access to technologies, facilities and telecommunication services must be provided on a non-discriminatory basis.

Telecommunications/ICTs have been acknowledged as essential for social, cultural, economic, political and democratic development as well as exercising several fundamental rights. Within the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), both the declaration of Principles and the Tunis Commitment emphasized the immense impact that telecommunications/ICT has in almost every aspect of life and are considered an instrument for productivity, economic growth, employment generation, good government, dialogue between persons and nations.

WSIS acknowledged that special attention should be given to the needs of elder persons and persons with disabilities.

In recognition of the accessibility to telecommunications/ICT by persons with disabilities, the ITU Council meeting approved the theme for the World Telecommunications and Information Society Day (May 17) of 2008 to be "Connecting people with Disabilities: telecommunications/ICT Opportunities for All".

On 13 December 2006, the United Nations General Assembly approved the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

The CRPD was opened for signature on 30 March 2007 and, as of 16 February 2009, 137 countries have signed it, while 81 have signed the Optional Protocol. Out of these 48 had ratified the Convention and 28 the Optional Protocol. The CRPD establishes basic principles also a State's obligations to ensure equal access to telecommunications/ICTs including Internet by persons with disabilities.

There is a lack of specific legal provisions for telecommunications/ICT accessibility. Certain countries have anti-discriminatory laws or telecommunication laws. Some have legal provisions from a medical stand point which considers disability as a "defect" rather than addressing disability

with emphasis on ability and integration. Legal provisions should be available to turn good accessibility provisions into reality.

1.1   Accessibility standards

Accessibility standards are essential to make it possible that equipment and services should be usable by the broadest range of persons, are interoperable and provide required quality services. The ITU Telecommunication Standardization Sector (ITU-T) has prepared several recommendations and documents that provide information on a wide range of accessibility standards.

It is also important to consider stakeholder participation where persons with disabilities should be involved in the process of elaborating legal/regulatory provisions, public policy and standards.

It would also be important to consider assistive technologies to be used by persons with various types of disabilities. These assistive technologies should be aimed to overcome or reduce the gap between standard telecommunications/ICTs generally available and those which address the needs of persons with disabilities.

1.2   Information and statistics

It is also important to gather information and data addressing many important issues relating to accessibility to telecommunications/ICT by persons with disabilities. Therefore, a methodology should be developed to assist the information gathering process.

2   Question for study

Analyse policies and strategies to promote, develop and implement the most advanced technological solutions to enable equal access to telecommunications/ICTs by persons with disabilities to that enjoyed by the rest of the population.

3   Expected output

It is proposed that the Question for study should result in a report that will enable Member States, especially developing and least developed countries (LDCs), to design policies and execute strategies for promoting and implementing services and solutions which provide access to telecommunications/ICTs by persons with disabilities. Furthermore, the report will help Member States and Sector Members identify commercial best practices relating to telecommunications/ICT that should apply in relation to persons with disabilities.

The report should contain the regulatory policies necessary for ensuring accessibility to telecommunications/ICT for persons with disabilities, but not limited to:

a)   the principles to be applied by service providers and equipment manufacturers (i.e. equal access, accessibility/compatible devices);

b)   a recommendation on the desirable access to telecommunications/ICT;

c)   suggested schemes for the implementation of policies and strategies;

d)   an economic cost evaluation and a comparison of the available technological solutions;

e)   a recommendation of commercial best practices applied by service providers for overcoming the special difficulties faced by persons with disabilities in accessing telecommunications/ICT.

4   Timing

These activities should be included in the programme of activities of ITU-D Study Group 1 for the period 2010-2014, as a new Question.

4.1   Mid-term report is expected by 2012.

4.2   Final report is expected by 2013.

5   Proposers

Mexico/CITEL.

6   Sources of input

The following stakeholders are encouraged to supply information for the Question: Member States, Sector Members, relevant international and regional organizations, public and private institutions and civil society organizations involved in the design of policies and advocacy for the development of technological solutions to alleviate the difficulties faced by persons with disabilities in accessing telecommunications/ICT.

7   Target audience

Target audience	Developed countries	Developing countries[1]
Telecom policy-makers	Interested	Very interested
Telecom regulators	Interested	Very interested
Service providers/operators	Interested	Very interested
Manufacturers	Interested	Interested

a)   Target audience

The result of the study will serve Member States, and particularly administrations of developing countries and least developed countries, to design policies and to execute strategies and actions for implementing technological solutions that improve accessibility to telecommunications/ICT by persons with disabilities. Moreover, it will enable Sector Members and service providers located in those countries, to design and apply proven and successful commercial practices to meet the needs of persons with disabilities and facilitate their access to telecommunications/ICT.

b)   Proposed methods for implementation of the results

Authorities from Member States could consider designing policies and strategies to implement the most suitable technological solutions in the light of the characteristics of their populations and countries. In this respect, there could be short-term, medium-term and long-term action plans so as to permit implementation in phases.

The report should also be useful for administrations of Member States, Sector Members and service providers to encourage the adoption of commercial practices applicable to meet the needs of persons with disabilities facing special difficulties.

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[1] This includes least developed countries (LDCs), small island developing states (SIDS), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) and countries with economies in transition.

8 Proposed methods of handling the Question or issue

Within Study Group 1, in close cooperation with ITU-T Study Group 16 (Question 26/16).

9 Coordination

Coordination is recommended with relevant international organizations, and with service providers that have adopted best practices to meet the needs of persons with disabilities and facilitate their access to telecommunications/ICT.

10 Other relevant information

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