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## May 17, 2008 World Telecommunication and Information Society Day *The Promise of Technology is for Everybody*

On this day, 17 May, in 1865, the first International Telegraph Convention was signed. People across continents marveled at the technology that connected them, allowing them to “write in distance,” as they called telegraphy. Imagine what they would think if they could see us today, writing not a few words, but unlimited pages of text, “in distance.” Connected as never before to colleagues, family, and friends, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) improves how we live and work in countless ways. Technology has become so integral to nearly everything we do that it is simply everywhere, making our lives easier, more efficient, and more meaningful.

All of us working to harness the power of ICT have a responsibility to ensure that its promise is for everybody, not just a select few. That is why the theme of today’s World Telecommunication and Information Society Day is **Connecting Persons with Disabilities: ICT Opportunities for All**. Today the United Nations reminds people in every country that the need to write in distance, to communicate across communities and national borders and to access information is universal.

Yet, the technology that makes that communication possible is too often not accessible to the disabled. That means the benefits of ICT are not equally shared.

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Disabled persons are not only those with physical or mental impairments. The term applies to many different challenges and handicaps people must confront throughout the world, often temporarily. Wars, earthquakes, and tsunamis are natural events that disable too many people of all ages. Physical, sensory, or intellectual impairments, medical conditions, and mental illness are other circumstances people face.

About 650 million people worldwide live with disabilities at any one time. Those working in ICT in both the public and private sector need to raise awareness of the need to remove barriers by making equipment and services accessible to disabled men and women and their families – a group that represents nearly two billion people, one third of the world’s population. Policymakers, regulators, operators, and industry leaders must be guided by the need to create an information society that is truly inclusive. These stakeholders also bear a responsibility to educate their own publics that with the benefits of living in information societies comes the duty of making sure every citizen is granted the right of knowledge and connectivity.

This right in our evolving world is basic and fundamental.

Building ICT for all has been a guiding priority for Qatar’s leadership since the Emir established ictQATAR in 2004. Two years later – one year after ictQATAR opened its doors with the mission of connecting people to the technology that enriches their lives and drives economic development – the World Telecommunications Development Conference was held in Doha. At that event, a Special Initiative was created for the specific purpose of providing access to telecommunications services for persons with disabilities.

We at ictQATAR have taken the mandate seriously. We believe ICT is an equalizer in society – it serves to remove dividing lines between those who have and those who have not. This is true in health care, education, democratic processes, and business. Providing ICT access to the disabled can serve the same role, offering the chance to compensate for physical or functional limitations. The result will be greater participation in the community and greater fulfillment, a goal for our society that every person in Qatar should share.

A powerful example of how technology is helping one of Qatar’s young citizens prepare for her future can be found at Al Wakra Independent Preparatory School for Girls. A student who happens to be disabled is part of her classroom academically and socially because of her Tablet PC. This girl is confined to a wheelchair and cannot speak because of her disability.

Though her hands are very weak, she is able to message with her friends on the screen of her Tablet PC, an electronic notebook packed with materials on science, math and English mapped to Qatari curriculum standards.

Because of ICT, the life of this young girl is as close to normal as possible. That is as much a cause for pride and celebration as the telegraph was in 1865.

Over the years ahead, we look forward to rolling out programs that help secure the right of disabled men, women, and children to have a voice, express their opinion, and be part of the digital age. In order to thoroughly understand the needs of the disabled in Qatar, ictQATAR will over the next twelve months establish a Working Group of local experts to determine how ICT should play a role in improving life for the disabled. We will also host an international expo featuring state-of-the-art ICT technologies and services specifically designed to help the disabled fully participate in mainstream society. All of us in the public sector, as well as those in the private sector, need to learn about the kinds of products and services available. The power of these technologies to transform lives is nothing short of astonishing.

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Because people with disabilities cannot participate in government processes or benefit from government services if they don't know what government offers, ictQATAR looks forward to setting a timeframe in which all public government information is universally accessible. This will include information that the government provides through radio and television programming, kiosks, and websites. And I call upon other government entities to begin incorporating into their websites accessibility functions such as media players, specially designed web browsers, and other assistive technologies.

In the near future, ictQATAR will work to establish a funding mechanism to offset the costs of both individual and organizational adoption of ICT to benefit the disabled. Although the details have yet to be fully developed, we expect that disabled individuals will apply for grants or vouchers to help pay for technologies and/or services that will enable them to benefit from the same opportunities as everybody else. Similarly, government organizations, corporations, and other organizations will be entitled to grants to encourage the universal provision of services and employment of disabled individuals.

Technology has made the world much smaller than it was in 1865 at that International Telegraphy Convention. As humankind continues to remove barriers between countries, reducing the distance between us, we must be sure nobody is left behind.

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