Universal Postal Union (UPU)

UPU's contribution to the Draft Declaration of Principles and Draft Action Plan.

General comments

Both draft documents reflect quite satisfactorily the richness and the variety of ideas and opinions expressed during the consultative process on different levels.

The only critical suggestion that UPU would like to make at this stage concerns the closer and more direct linkages that need to be established between the Declaration of Principles and the Action Plan, the latter being able to clarify the key roles to be assigned to all stakeholders and the funding sources in order to ensure its full implementation.

This idea was also developed during the recent HLSOC meeting in Paris.

The UPU welcomes the references, under para. 19 "Community access points of the Declaration of Principles and para. 3 of the Action Plan", to the role played by the postal sector. In fact, the post offices worldwide provide an effective, affordable range of basic communication services enabling individuals as well as the public and private sector organizations to communicate. In this way they facilitate access to information and knowledge, particularly, in rural and remote areas.

Specific proposals

With regard to Section I(A), of the Declaration of Principles, we would suggest that a small para. be added to emphasize the importance of the physical, paper-based communication in the process of creating the new information society.

This small para. should be read as follows:

"**We also recognize** that the development of the future technologically driven information society can not be fully achieved without integrating into the process other forms of communication and information infrastructures such as postal and paper based information services including correspondence, books, magazines, newspapers and other printed material."

I take this opportunity to attach two documents prepared by the UPU for WSIS. The first one with a specific emphasis on physical communication was circulated among the participants to the PrepCom - 2 meeting in February 2003. The second document, dated May 2003, emphasizes a more ICT- driven approach.

I would appreciate it if the two documents be considered as the UPU contributions to the PrepCom 3.

I thank your for your continuous cooperation.
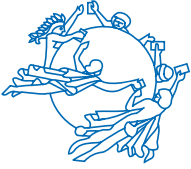
UNIVERSAL POSTAL UNION

Contribution of the Universal Postal Union to the preparatory process of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) – Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005

The role of postal services in shaping the information society

An information document for the WSIS Summit outlining the UPU's strategic position in the context of the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of action

BERNE

14 February 2003

Rationale for UPU involvement in the WSIS

International framework

1.   The UN Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are powerful tools for economic and social development.

2.   The right to communicate is recognized as a fundamental human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

3.   The UN General Assembly resolutions on WSIS recognize the pivotal role of the United Nations system in promoting development, particularly with respect to access to and the transfer of information and communication technologies. As a specialized agency of the United Nations system, the UPU participates actively in the effort to promote cooperation among the various information and communication technology initiatives.

4.   The UN General Assembly resolutions on WSIS also encourage all relevant UN bodies to make contributions to and to participate in the preparatory process of the Summit and in the Summit itself.

UPU postal framework

1.   The UPU Constitution and Convention highlight the fundamental role of the Universal Postal Union in developing communication between peoples through the efficient operation of postal services.

2.   The UPU's long-term global postal strategy makes reference to the dramatic changes taking place in the worldwide communications environment and to the role of ICTs in adapting to those changes.

3.   UPU member countries and regional postal organizations have also developed their postal strategies following the same or similar trends.

4.   The UPU and many of its member postal administrations have taken on an advocacy role in promoting postal services as an essential part of the current and future information society.

Background

The communications and information revolution – the term «revolution» is not too strong in this context – is affecting every area of human life, in every part of the world. Information and communication technologies (ICT) have enormous potential to reshape and transform the ways in which people organize their lives, interact with each other and participate in the various spheres of society. The world is still at the very beginning of the process of transformation, and the future will certainly provide its share of new and challenging ICT discoveries.

The dramatic changes in the communication marketplace have also had an impact on the Universal Postal Union. UPU member postal administrations are major players in the global paper-based communication industry, providing a vast array of services to the population.

The postal services of the UPU's 189 member countries form the largest physical distribution network in the world. Almost six million postal employees work in more than 700.000 postal outlets to ensure that some 430 billion mail and other paper-based products are processed and delivered each year to all corners of the world. The network is even larger if we add the people who prepare and print the magazines, newspapers, books, advertising and other printed material that the postal administrations deliver, as well as the other providers of physical communication services.

Therefore, in spite of the rapid growth of electronic communication services, the existence of physical communication infrastructure, as provided by postal services, remains an essential element in the exchange of information in both developed and developing countries. In developing countries the postal service is, in some areas, the only communications link that serves the entire population. Business and commerce also depend upon and benefit from physical communication. UPU and other studies indicate that the physical communication network will remain a viable alternative and a reliable means of exchanging information for a long time to come.

The UPU vision of the future holds that substantive and sustainable development in the information society of the 21st century cannot be conceived and achieved on a worldwide basis without integrating **all** existing and future communication infrastructures and services, including postal and other physical communication services.

The new ICTs have enormous potential, but they should not be seen as a universal *vademecum* that can cure all possible «information and communications diseases» in the world. The physical component is also necessary. In this view, postal services are not part of a sunset industry, but rather will continue, well into the future, to play a significant role in the world's economy and in the world's information society.

Universal Postal Service

The worldwide postal service has a unique set of assets – universal coverage, full service capacity, a trained workforce and prime locations. The UPU helps to meet global information expectations through the concept of universal postal service, which means the provision of quality communication services allowing citizens and businesses to send and receive messages and other paper-based goods from any point in the world to any other point.

With this fundamental principle the UPU clearly reaffirms its goal of connecting within each country and around the globe, the senders and receivers of postal communication. The UPU will continue to assign high priority to universal postal service, considering that this is a unique and efficient strategy to respond to the needs, requirements and aspirations of all segments of the information society.

Postal services and ICTs

Even though the core postal business will remain for a long time the delivery of paper – based traditional products, the world's postal services have come to realize the benefits of applying information and communication technologies to improve the quality of these and other new products, to meet growing needs for reliable, affordable and rapid services with a high level of technological added value. Hybrid mail combining electronic transmission and a physical delivery, and the range of diversified on-line services based on Internet can be given as examples.

By extending their universal delivery commitment to the on-line world, postal services can ensure that citizens have better and easier access to internet connectivity and e-mail. A growing number of UPU member postal administrations have intensified their cooperation with the telecommunication sector to develop tele-kiosks and communications centers in particular in developing countries.

The UPU, a specialized agency of the United Nations

The UPU itself, as a specialized agency of the United Nations, is seeking on a continual basis to further develop and maximize the effectiveness of its information and communication technology strategies. It has put in place in its Berne Headquarters a technology center with experts engaged in developing and implementing member country ICT projects. This effort is supported by a Telematics Cooperative, with over 100 countries as members, and a region-based support service.

The UPU has also sought to develop new partnerships with the private sector involved in the postal business and willing to invest in joint communications projects. It has doubled its efforts to seek new financial arrangements for ICT projects and to strengthen existing commitments with UPU member countries and with other stakeholders in the postal industry.

Finally, the UPU organizes on a regular basis international conferences and other fora for discussion and exchanges of experience in the area of ICT. Member postal administrations are in this way encouraged to contribute to raising the international postal community's awareness of the strategic importance of the new information and communication technologies.
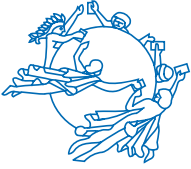
Contribution of the Universal Postal Union to the preparatory process of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) – Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005

The role of Posts in the future information society

An information document for the WSIS outlining the UPU's strategic position in the context of the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of action

BERNE

1 May 2003

Rationale for UPU involvement in the WSIS

International framework

1   The UN Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals (MDSs) are powerful tools for economic and social development.

2   The right to communicate is recognized as a fundamental human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

3   The UN General Assembly resolutions on WSIS recognize the pivotal role of the United Nations system in promoting development, particularly with respect to access to and the transfer of information and communication technologies. As a specialized agency of the United Nations, the UPU participates actively in the effort to promote cooperation among the various information and communication technology initiatives.

4   The UN General Assembly resolutions on WSIS also encourage all relevant UN bodies to make contributions to and to participate in the preparatory process of the Summit and in the Summit itself.

UPU postal framework

1   The UPU Constitution and Convention highlight the fundamental role of the Universal Postal Union in developing communication between peoples through the efficient operation of postal services.

2   The UPU's long-term global postal strategy makes reference to the dramatic changes taking place in the worldwide communications environment and to the role of ICTs in adapting to those changes.

3   UPU member countries and regional postal organizations have also developed their postal strategies following the same or similar trends.

4   The UPU and many of its member postal administrations have taken on an advocacy role in promoting postal services as an essential part of the current and future information society.

«The Post's potential value as a basic communications provider and its relevance as part of the growing Knowledge Economy are greater than ever before. In fact, market liberalization, globalization, and the rapidly advancing digital technologies that challenge the Post today should be viewed as excellent opportunities for increasing our sector's contribution to economic well being and progress."
                              Thomas E. Leavey, Director General, International Bureau, Universal Postal Union

Introduction

The 1999 Beijing Postal Strategy, the Universal Postal Union's strategic plan for 2000–2004, challenges Posts to seize the opportunities offered by new technologies, new customer demands and new institutional options. One of its objectives is to ensure, through the process of postal reform and development, that postal customers draw maximum benefit from technological, economic and regulatory changes in the postal environment.

        The new information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer enormous potential to consumers, governments, and business, including Posts. In the face of an information revolution still in progress, Posts are learning to reinvent themselves to remain viable means of communication and continue to play a significant role in the world's economy and in the world's information society. Bound by an obligation to provide universal service at affordable prices, Posts can facilitate the access to the society of knowledge in those places where others can't.

A long experience of transcending borders

When the Internet revolution took root in the early 1990s, many detractors predicted the demise of the postal service. E-mail and the Internet, it was felt, would replace traditional paper-based communication and quickly render Posts irrelevant. This narrow vision failed to take into account the possibilities the new information society would offer to Posts, and their contribution to its development.

In its 2,000-year-old history, the postal service has reinvented itself time and time again to respond to economic and social changes, and meet the needs of customers. And it is doing it again. Since the mid-1990s, Posts around the world have harnessed the power of the Internet to develop innovative services that are at the forefront of the anticipated communication needs of customers. These include electronic stamps, electronic bill presentation and payment, secure e-mail and trusted third-party certification. But even before that period, postal entities were developing or taking advantage of new technologies to improve – even expand – existing services, as well as strengthen the distribution networks they manage day-to-day. Barcodes, track-and-trace technology, delivery performance monitoring systems and hybrid mail (converting electronic files into printable matter) constitute a few examples.

The challenge for Posts today is to effectively merge the possibilities of cyberspace with their physical distribution capabilities.

Challenges of the new information society

For all the speed and convenience they offer, the information and communication technologies are by no means without challenges. For businesses and governments making a foray into the world of cyberspace, ensuring access, trust and security, privacy, and distribution logistics have quickly become key issues. Posts are uniquely positioned to meet each one of these challenges.

Access

While the Internet has become a widely used tool, it remains a mystery to a majority of the worldwide population. Statistics show that there are more than 500 million Internet users worldwide. Eighty percent of them are in the developed world. Two out of five people in the developed world have access to the Internet, compared to one in 50 in the developing world. The network of close to 700,000 postal outlets that exists worldwide provides a natural opportunity for helping people access the Internet, as well as other communication technologies. Some postal administrations are already facilitating this access by drawing customers to kiosks in their outlets, and partnering with other communication firms to offer convenient products and services. Such is the case for citizens of Bhutan, where everyone holds a free, unique e-post address they can use to send e-mails from any post office. They can also send e-post messages, which are printed at the destination post office for local delivery. Other postal administrations, such as Sweden and India, have also given their citizens their own personal e-mail, or invited them to obtain one through their post offices. Finally, for all these reasons, Posts are often seen as attractive partners in the provision of e-government services.

Trust and Security

As traffic on the information highway becomes heavier, people expect to deal with a trusted party that will protect the sanctity of their messages and their right to privacy. For years, people have trusted the postal service and its employees to securely and confidentially deliver information to the four corners of the world. In fulfilling their obligation to provide universal postal service, Posts have a reputation as neutral third parties. Regulations on employees' conduct and legal guarantees enhance customer confidence and trust. Posts will continue to honor that role through innovative and secure services and products. The electronic postmarks used by some Posts, for example, protect the integrity of electronic data through the use of auditable time stamps, digital signatures and hash codes. These postmarks allow third-parties to verify the authenticity of electronic content and provide evidence to support nonrepudiation of electronic transactions.

Privacy

In accordance with the "consumer choice" policies they have adopted for direct or advertising mail delivered physically, some postal administrations propose to electronically deliver such mail to customers who specifically request targeted information only. This practice, supported by state-of-the-art security features and a guarantee that distribution lists will not be shared with other parties, reduces the amount of unsolicited messages a consumer might receive otherwise in an information age where privacy can quickly be compromised.

Distribution logistics

E-commerce offers an unprecedented level of convenience. But beyond an attractive retail Web site and secure online transactions, businesses must be able to rely on a delivery infrastructure that is efficient, dependable and fast. Posts offer an extensive network of processing and delivery facilities to meet that need, and international mail agreements mean that packages and documents can be delivered to any destination in the world using a range of cost-effective products.

"A strong postal network reaches all residents, many of whom have no other means of communicating with the outside world. By providing this universal level of communication, Posts can also provide the increased access to information that is essential to poverty reduction in the Information Age. But postal services do much more: they connect people and raise their level of social development and cohesion."

Nemat Shakif, Vice-President, Private Sector Development and Infrastructure,

The World Bank Group

The role of the UPU in the information age

As a specialized agency of the United Nations, the UPU plays a leadership role in promoting the continued revitalization of postal services. Developing social, cultural and commercial communication between people through the efficient operation of the postal service is at the heart of its mission.

The UPU views the prospects of the new information society with enthusiasm, convinced that, in solidarity, Posts can play an important role in breaking the communication barriers between people – in the physical and electronic worlds. The sustainable development of quality, universal, efficient, accessible postal services is an important part of the solution necessary to bridge the digital and information divide that currently exists. With 161 of its 189 members considered developing countries by the United Nations, the UPU is committed to the principle of technical cooperation to help these countries modernize their postal systems, thereby increasing their participation in the Knowledge Society and their chances of fully benefitting from it. Technical cooperation is a key element of the agency's Constitution, and the three permanent bodies of the UPU – the International Bureau, the Postal Operations Council and the Council of Administration – have each established structures that provide strategic and technical direction on this matter.

At times, however, the pace of progress can only be met successfully through a dramatic transformation of the postal entity, where a focus on service quality and meeting customer needs can lead to competitiveness and financial viability. As such, the UPU has adopted a strategy that promotes postal reform in countries where the postal service continues to be a protected government organization. The UPU is working in partnership with the World Bank Group and other financial institutions to convince governments that a restructuring and modernization of the postal service can lead to economic and social development.

Conclusion

The Universal Postal Union recognizes that its strength and that of its members comes from a collaborative and shared approach. The agency watches closely its members' progress in developing or adapting to information and communication technologies, and looks at how notions can be transferred to other countries for the benefit of their domestic and international customers. Progress, knowledge and expertise are shared regularly with all members through various forums, including the Universal Postal Congress, which will next be held in Bucharest in September 2004.

Given the timeframe for the World Summit on the Information Society – with phases taking place before and after its Congress – the UPU is confident that it can contribute positively to the main themes of the Summit: providing access to ICTs for all, using ICTs as a tool for economic and social development, and increasing confidence and security in the use of ICTs.

As the most extensive means of communication available to people, the post has always served as an important learning center – a place where people can confidently deal with postal officials and rely on their advice for the most effective ways of connecting with loved ones, business, government, and others. In this sense, the postal service can play an active and important role in the Knowledge Society by facilitating access to information and communication technologies and furthering their appreciation.