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**World Standard Cooperation Workshop on accessibility and the contribution of International Standards**

An international workshop on accessibility has identified priority areas where the development of International Standards could ease the lives of the estimated 650 million people worldwide with some form of accessibility problem.


Opening plenary of the Geneva workshop on accessibility and the contribution of International Standards. (Photo: ISO/Egger.)

The workshop “Accessibility and the contribution of International Standards” was organized on 3 to 5 November 2010 in Geneva, Switzerland, by the World Standards Cooperation (WSC), which is the focal point for strategic cooperation set up by the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). A core objective of the workshop was to lay the groundwork for a road map of future initiatives on accessibility standards and related support for these standards, with the involvement of the key stakeholders.

After three days of input and discussion, the recommendations were viewed as highest priority for consideration by the WSC organizations:

* Establish a Strategic Advisory Group on "Accessibility” between the WSC organizations
* Develop a common accessibility policy between the WSC organizations
* Encourage national members of the WSC organizations to actively promote the implementation of accessibility standards
* Strengthen WSC organization linkages with the United Nations Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and with disabilities organizations
* Revise ISO/IEC Guide 71:2001, Guidelines for standards developers to address the needs of older persons and persons with disabilities, to ensure consistent concepts in the area of accessibility
* Identify accessibility-related content in proposed new standards of the WSC organizations

The workshop – which was supported by sign language interpretation – explored how International Standards could strengthen accessibility aspects in the design of products, services, environments and facilities. Break-out groups addressed the following subjects:

* Accessibility and everyday products
* Accessibility and buildings
* eAccessibility and eInclusion

The workshop was opened by Rob Steele, ISO Secretary-General; Malcolm Johnson, Director, ITU Telecommunication Standardization Bureau, and  Gabriel Barta, Head of Technical Coordination, IEC Central Office, representing the IEC General Secretary.

Welcoming the participants, Rob Steele, highlighted the importance of identifying and understanding the areas where standards are needed and where the three organizations can work together. He said: “There are particular benefits and opportunities in using the standards process to gather representatives from a diversity of interests who may not usually meet together to discuss and resolve accessibility issues. The issue requires input from government, regulators, policy makers, industry, accessibility equipment providers, civil society NGOs, accessibility organizations, academia and researchers."

“ISO is very active in a number of specific fields of accessibility including: guidelines on how standards should be developed to address the needs of persons with disabilities, user interface considerations in software, building usability and accessibility, ergonomics of office equipment, accessible design of assistive product and graphical symbols. “

He also referred to the launch on 1 November of ISO 26000, which gives guidance on social responsibility. The standard includes reference to international law on human rights, including the United Nations Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities.

Malcolm Johnson, Director, ITU Telecommunication standardization Bureau, declared: “Ending the Digital Divide means the creation of digital inclusion for everyone. And this means closing the divide that separates able-bodied people who can readily harness the wonders of today’s technologies from those for whom ICTs remain out of reach, because their special needs have not been accorded due consideration. Universal Design principles, which make new technologies accessible for persons with disabilities are now becoming more of an imperative with the wide adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). “

Gabriel Barta, Head of technical coordination, IEC Central Office, stated: "At the IEC, the need of persons with temporary or permanent disabilities are taken very seriously. We have issued at free guide that helps standards developers and manufacturers to build those needs into their work. We're delighted at the very positive outcome and the many promising directions that have been identified in the workshop, and look forward to seeing them implemented."

The participants in the workshop agreed that as a background to the recommendations, they wished to underline that “Accessibility” is not limited to addressing the needs of persons with disabilities, elderly people or persons with temporary impairments, but aims at the usability of a product, service, environment or facility by people with the widest range of capabilities.

Accessibility is the degree to which a product, device, service, environment or facility is usable by as many people as possible, including by persons with disabilities. Its importance is underlined by the fact that the number of persons with disabilities, either congenital, acquired or as a result of age is estimated to be around 650 million worldwide. International standardization can be a powerful tool for strengthening accessibility in all the above areas by setting the same standards for use worldwide.

Key stakeholder groups participating in the Geneva workshop included disability organizations and consumer groups, governments and regulators, product designers, manufacturers and industry addressing accessibility needs, and standards developers from around the world. Under discussion were the current and future needs in the field of accessibility, as well as the possible contributions international standardization can make in facilitating the development of accessible solutions around the world.

Among those attending the opening plenary were: Wan Hea Lee, on behalf of Kyung-wha Kang, Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Convention for the rights of persons with disabilities; Imed Eddine Chaker, International Disability Alliance, represented through the Arab Organization of Disabled Persons, Chairman of the Tunisian National Union of the Blind (UNAT); Inmaculada Placencia-Porrero, Deputy Head of Unit, European Commission, Unit for the Integration of People with Disabilities, and Joan Durocher (USA), Executive Director,US National Council on Disability.

The World Standards Cooperation was established in 2001 by the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), as a focal point for their strategic cooperation on strengthening and advancing international standardization. All three develop standards related to aspects of accessibility, but much remains to be done with some 10% of the world population suffering from disabilities of one form or another. The three organizations highlighted the contribution standards can make to accessibility by making it the theme of World Standards Day 2010 on 14 October.