The Secretary-General

Geneva, 17 September 2013

To: The President of the United Nations General Assembly and the co-facilitators of the High-Level Meeting on Disability and Development

Subject: **ITU's call to the High Level Meeting on Disability and Development: ICTs are instrumental to enable a disability-inclusive development framework**

Dear Sirs,

On 23 September 2013, the international community will meet in New York at the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on Disability and Development (HLMDD) to agree on concrete actions to be undertaken to ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the post-2015 development framework.

To contribute to this historic opportunity, the Council of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) agreed at its latest session, held in Geneva from 11 to 21 June 2013, to issue an official statement in support of HLMDD. The statement herein (Annex I), agreed by unanimity, highlights the critical role of telecommunications and ICTs in the building of a society in which persons with disability are both beneficiaries and agents of development efforts.

In my capacity as the ITU Secretary-General, I would like to bring this statement to your attention and invite you to take this message into consideration when preparing the meeting. By incorporating references to the role of ICTs to the outcome of the HLMDD, we can contribute to further expand the ICT opportunity for persons with disabilities, while addressing the barriers that may be limiting the benefit that these technologies bring to this significant group of the global population.

I take advantage of this letter to also share with you the results of the global ICT consultation in support of the HLMDD, which ITU conducted together with the Broadband Commission, the Global Initiative for Inclusive ICTs (G3ICT), the International Disability Alliance (IDA), Microsoft, the Telecentre.org Foundation and UNESCO. The consultation, organized as an additional contribution from ITU to the meeting, gathered over 150 expert inputs from relevant organizations and experts representing various categories of stakeholders. Contributions stemmed from over 55 countries, regional and international organizations. The findings of this undertaking, attached in the executive summary presented in Annex II, further emphasize actions needed to further leverage the ICT opportunity for all persons with disabilities.

Let's work together to successfully designing a disability-inclusive development agenda using all the opportunities currently available, including the transformational power of ICTs.

Relevant documentation about ITU's involvement at the HLMDD is available at ITU's website on ICT accessibility for persons with disabilities: www.itu.int/accessibility. Should you have queries or need additional details, please contact Mr Jose Maria Diaz Batanero, Coordinator, Intersectoral activities, at: accessibility@itu.int.

Yours faithfully;

Dr Hamadoun I. Touré

Annexes:

- Annex I. Communiqué from ITU Council, *"ITU's call to the High Level Meeting on Disabilities and Development: ICTs are instrumental to enable a disability-inclusive development framework"*, 20 June 2013.

- Annex II. Broadband Commission, G3ICT, IDA, ITU, Microsoft, Telecenter.org Foundation and UNESCO (2013) *"The ICT Opportunity For a Disability-inclusive Development Framework"*, Executive summary, September 2013.

Annex I - Communiqué from ITU Council

Council 2013
Geneva, 11-21 June 2013

20 June 2013

Communiqué

ITU's call to the High Level Meeting on Disabilities and Development: ICTs are instrumental to enable a disability-inclusive development framework

Geneva, 20 June 2013 — The Council of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), in accordance with Article 14 (I) of the United Nations Resolution 65/186 and in the context of the 2013 High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly on Disability and Development (HLMDD), welcomes the opportunity to send a message concerning the important role that telecommunications and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can play to enable a post-2015 disability-inclusive development framework.

The HLMDD presents an excellent occasion for the UN system to work together towards the achievement of the United Nations common goal: inclusive development and a society in which persons with disabilities are both agents and beneficiaries.

ITU is the UN specialized agency for telecommunications and ICTs, with a global Membership that includes 193 Member States and more than 700 Sector Members and Associates. In accordance with Resolution 175 from the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference (Guadalajara, 2010), ITU is committed to assist in this effort and has already mobilized its Membership, as well as other relevant stakeholders to ensure that ICTs are accessible for persons with disabilities, and to promote access to ICTs to persons with disabilities.

With ICTs increasingly integrated into every aspect of the modern world, they have become a positive force of transformation and a crucial element of any institutional framework for inclusive development. ICTs can provide access to key public services, such as health, education and government services, with widespread implications on social, environmental and economic progress aimed at eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable development.

Based on this experience, ITU would like to invite the delegations participating at the HLMDD that will take place in New York on 23 September 2013 to acknowledge the key role that ICTs are already playing to promote the social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities, and to consider including in the outcome document of the meeting specific recommendations to further expand access to ICTs to persons with disabilities, while addressing the barriers that may be limiting the benefit that these technologies may bring to this important group of the global population, which

encompasses more than 1 billion persons worldwide.

The inclusion of such references in the outcome of the HLMDD should encourage all governmental, civil society and private sector stakeholders, to be proactive and contribute to the work of the aforementioned organizations, and to implement the agreements reached within these organizations for the benefit of persons with disabilities.

Let's work together to achieve a disability-inclusive development agenda using all the opportunities currently available, including the transformational power of ICTs.

(I) A/RES/65/186 "Realizing the Millennium Development Goals for persons with disabilities towards 2015 and beyond"

Annex II. Executive summary of "*The ICT Opportunity For a Disability-inclusive Development Framework*"

Across the globe, persons with disabilities still face significant barriers that limit their access to key public services such as health, education and information, reduce their opportunities to access the labour market and diminish their opportunities for independent living. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), increasingly integrated into every aspect of our lives, have become a positive force of transformation and a crucial element of any personal development, empowerment and institutional framework for inclusive development.

This paper, produced as a result of an extensive expert consultation organized from May to June 2013 in the context of the High Level Meeting on Disability and Development (HLMDD), aims to complement previous work on the use of ICT as an enabler of the economic, social and political inclusion of persons with disabilities by further exploring specific contributions that ICT can make in achieving a disability-inclusive development agenda.

When ICT are available, affordable and accessible, they significantly improve the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of society. Web services constitute the accessibility technology with the greatest impact in promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities, according to the expert's view. This contribution is closely followed by mobile devices and services, which, despite being one of the newest technologies from the ICT assessed, constituted the second-most valued ICT during the consultation. In particular, the use of mobile phones is instrumental in allowing the independent living of persons with disabilities. Television is the third-ranked ICT in the assessment, specifically for its use as a tool to access government services and information.

However, even with this positive force of transformation, key challenges remain to be addressed if persons with disabilities are to fully benefit from the use of ICT. Some barriers are pervasive - they affect all areas of social and economic development. The experts consulted for this report stated that the cost of assistive technologies, which is comprised of the cost of the technology as well as the cost of assessment, training and support services, is still one of the main barriers that prevents persons with disabilities from fully accessing healthcare services, benefitting from educational opportunities at all levels, being competitive on the labour market and living independently. Another key barrier identified is the lack of ICT accessibility. The lack of ICT accessibility remains a significant barrier which is observable in all areas of development. Even when ICT are accessible, they are only available in a fraction of the thousands of languages that are spoken and signed all over the world, another barrier to be taken into consideration if this challenge is to be addressed effectively. Empirical evidence shows that this barrier is further maintained by the lack of policies which foster widespread availability of accessible ICT and the lack of effective implementation of the aforementioned policies.

Another relevant barrier is the fact that among State Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), few national governments have translated the provisions of Article 9 of the Convention into their legislative frameworks. In many cases, policies promoting accessibility may be in place, but they lack the accompanying laws, legislations and regulations that ensure those policies are effectively implemented. Lastly, limited availability and use of ICT in general greatly constrain the potential of ICT as a solution to tackling development challenges. Addressing these barriers requires collaboration of main stakeholders involved in each sector, as well as the definition of cross-sectorial policies and strategies that maximize the positive impact that investments made to improve access and accessibility of ICT can have in other sectors.

There are also potential risks that should be taken into consideration to avoid the introduction of new barriers associated with the generalized use of ICT in development efforts. These include: i)

creating the expectation that accessible ICT alone can remove the barriers faced by persons with disabilities; ii) worsening the digital divide by not addressing the challenge of global access to ICT; and iii) not taking into consideration that the rapid pace of technological change requires frequent revisions of accessibility-related guidelines and standards to support all users, a process which requires focused and regular collaboration of international organizations and entities.

Experts contributing to this report were also requested to propose a set of concrete actions to be undertaken by each group of stakeholders and possible indicators to monitor progress. The recommendations gathered suggest that governments can play a key role in stimulating the introduction of ICT-enabled solutions adapted to the needs of persons with disabilities, increasing the availability of accessible ICT and promoting the affordability of assistive technologies in social, educational, economic and other domains. These benefits can be achieved through the promotion of national innovation systems that foster private-public collaboration, as well as development and diffusion of knowledge, accessible products and content as well as assistive technologies.

Private sector organizations can contribute by increasing research and development efforts, incorporate universal design principles at the earliest stage possible and recruit persons with disabilities in product development departments so as to successfully develop accessible ICT. Another priority action identified for the private sector is to contribute to addressing the shortage of information technology professionals with ICT accessibility skills (in-house training, industry gatherings and publications). Lastly, the sector can further remove attitudinal barriers towards hiring persons with disabilities and promote accessible workplaces. Through these contributions employers can greatly contribute to a society where persons with disabilities have a productive and independent life.

Civil society organizations can play a key role by raising policy-makers' awareness of the remaining accessibility barriers, and by becoming more active in the work conducted by international standards organizations. Civil society organizations also have the ability to bring about social progress and economic growth by raising the awareness and building the capacity of persons with disabilities and their personal circles (including family and friends) regarding what ICT can do to facilitate their economic and social inclusion. Finally, advocating for the mainstreaming of the use of the universal design principle in all development efforts is crucial for ensuring that the international development framework is disability-inclusive.

Regarding the contribution of the UN system and other international organizations, the consultation highlighted that the most urgent action to be undertaken by the UN system is the implementation of operational activities to meet the disability-inclusive development goals. Furthermore, that these activities should be complemented by the monitoring and evaluation of development efforts at the global, regional and national scales along with the performance review to assess whether development policies, programmes and projects are effective and results-driven. In this respect, it is important to ensure that the analysis of results is quantitative and supported by consistent data. Equally important is to ensure that such analysis is designed with the participation of persons with disabilities so that the correct factors are effectively measured. Lastly, the UN must continue to implement awareness-raising activities and mobilization campaigns in order to create a demand for national governmental action.

International standards organizations can also play a special role in enabling a disability-inclusive development agenda by providing a neutral platform from which to develop and harmonize international standards and provide recommendations related to accessible ICT. To achieve this, standards development bodies have the responsibility to facilitate the participation of relevant experts and delegates with disabilities in their activities. Furthermore, these organizations can contribute to the promotion of research and development focused on developing specific ICT-

enabled solutions for persons with disabilities. Lastly, international standards organizations bear the responsibility to raise policy makers' awareness of accessibility barriers to be addressed.

These are the experiences, challenges and recommendations gathered as a contribution to the HLMDD. By further presenting the ICT opportunity for persons with disabilities, identifying the remaining challenges and barriers to be overcome and proposing a roadmap of actions, this paper invites all stakeholders to acknowledge the role of ICT as critical enablers of a disability-inclusive international development agenda.