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| **Abstract:** | This document provides the report of workshop session on Telecom Relay Services held on the WSIS Accessibility Day, 8 April 2019. |

Related links:

* [Workshop on Telecom Relay Services](https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2019/Agenda/ViewSession/171#intro), 8 April 2019 ([webcast archive](https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2019/Agenda/RemoteParticipation/171) | presentations)

# Introduction

The recent World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Forum 2019 (8-12 April 2019) highlighted accessibility. On the 1st day of the Forum, an Accessibility Day was organized for the first time with a set of workshops on accessibility. For this occasion, a workshop session on Telecom Relay Services was jointly organized by The Nippon Foundation and ITU-T Q26/16 to promote telecom relay services worldwide, especially developing countries. International Sign interpretation and captioning services were kindly sponsored by The Nippon Foundation.

# Discussion

Speeches and presentations are summarized below.

Ms **Tomoko Tsutsui**, The Nippon Foundation, Japan, gave a welcome speech. She firstly reported that their research has showed that only 25 countries in the world have an official telecom relay service, and those countries have different standards of service.

Then Ms Tsutsui explained that The Nippon Foundation has been providing telecommunication relay services as a pilot project in Japan since September 2013, as there was no telecom relay services as part of the public infrastructure. The Nippon Foundation advocates institutionalization of these services.

She explained why there was no official telecom relay services in Japan, an economically and technologically developed country. The first reason is an insufficient level of awareness on ICT accessibility in Japan, compared to physical accessibility, including infrastructure such as public transports and buildings that are well developed. ICT accessibility is still to be further considered on a policy level.

For example, Sign Language Interpretation (SLI) has been addressed by the Ministry dealing with welfare, not the Ministry for telecommunications. Thus there have been two Ministries concerned, and the responsibility has not been clear for making TRS with SLI as public communication services[[1]](#footnote-1).

Secondly, there is a lack of understanding of the fact that telephony is the essential communication means even though there are text based communication means such as emails and chat, for hearing people AND for deaf/hard of hearing people.

Thirdly, there is an excessive expectation for AI and voice recognition technology. These technologies are not yet at the sufficient level for practical use, as the World Federation of the Deaf, International Federation of Hard of Hearing People, and European Federation of Hard of Hearing People have stated. To address this issue, Ms Tsutsui suggested ITU-T to start a discussion on the development of possible standards to specify usable levels for voice recognition.

Ms Tsutsui then highlighted that one of the biggest issues is a large financial cost to implement, maintain and operate TRS. She explained a possible solution as an example that the Foundation makes use of a web-based technology called Web Real-Time Communications (RTC) that is not an expensive system.

Ms Tsutsui concluded her speech by suggesting ITU-T to study on TRS technologies to develop a new standard. She expressed her expectation that the experience gained by The Nippon Foundation with their pilot project and their advocacy work would help countries to implement and improve TRS.

**Mr Masahito Kawamori**, ITU-T Q26/16 Rapporteur, Keio University, Japan, presented accessibility standardization work at ITU-T and especially about [ITU-T F.930](https://www.itu.int/rec/T-REC-F.930-201803-I) “Multimedia telecommunication relay services”. Then, he highlighted that despite the advancement of Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR), it cannot replace Communication Assistants (CA) who translate speeech to Sign Language, or text, and vice-versa in TSR communication. Mr Kawamori also emphasized the need of standardization on quality of Communication Assistant (CA), to globally ensure a sufficient reliability and quality of service of TRS, as Ms Tsutsui suggested earlier.

**Ms Abeer Shakweer**, Advisor the Minister for Social Responsibility and Services, Egypt shared experiences and challenges in establishing their national relay centre that is currently being developed in a comprehensive support centre for persons with disabilities. Egypt’s ICT accessibility policy was announced in May 2017, and this was developed with the support of the ITU. Then the modified law for the rights of Persons with Disabilities and its executive bylaws were approved in December 2018, and it considers ICT accessibility and assistive technologies as rights of Persons with Disabilities in Egypt for the first time. And in July 2018, the Government announced the establishment of the first Egyptian national relay centre, and efforts are being made for the first relay call supposed to be made in July 2019.

**Ms Shakweer** explained challenges in five areas in initiating TRS: regulatory framework; social; technical; operational; and financial challenges. These challenges would be faced by those countries considering the implementation of TRS. 1) Firstly, regulatory framework needs to address consistent, unified approach in the entire ecosystem to provide services and it should address data privacy. It is also necessary to consider about third parties involved in the services, as Government agencies need to talk through IP relay services, and need to provide a third party with information. 2) Secondly, in Egypt there are different sign languages in different governorates or sometimes within the same governorate, which is a challenge for interpretation. Unified sign language is being taught in the schools but elder generations’ sign languages are still different. Awareness raising in the use of the relay services is very important for general public to get used to such services. A lack of official body in Egypt that certificates interpreters may lead to mistrust in interpreters. 3) Thirdly, technical challenges include the coverage of the Internet as an essential infrastructure for VRS. It is also an issue that smartphones are not widely utilized by persons with disabilities in Egypt. 4) Then, operation challenges include again the lack of organization that qualify interpreters, thus there is a shortage of qualified interpreters. And code of ethics needs to be considered for relay centres. It is also necessary to establish a governance structure with a clear complaint and inquiry mechanism to improve continuously the service. 5) Last but not least, financial challenges are important. Funding should be secured for the operational cost as well as education and awareness programmes.

**Mr Henry Mejía Roget**, Director General, Federación Nacional de Sordos de Colombia (FENASCOL), Colombia presented their project called “Centro de Relevo”, a public-private partnership between Government and national federation of the deaf, launched in 2001 with the agreement of FENASCOL and funded by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies. Started with TTY at the beginning, and VRS was started in 2009 to respond to the basic communication needs of persons who are deaf. Mr **Mejía Roget** explained that TTY does not fully cover their needs, as in Latin America deaf persons don’t have always good reading/writing skill, due to the deprivation of Sign Language on the education that has been given to them in the past. Their VRS is operational for 24 hours a day and 7 days a week now. The users can call via land lines, mobile phones, and via the project’s webpage from all over the world. The project includes also video remote interpretation (VRI) service called SIEL, and 20,000 services are provided per year.

Mr **Mejía Roget** emphasizeda very important point: “To implement TRS, empowerment of the Deaf Community is essential. It should be ensured that they participate in all phases of decision making processes and political advocacy.”

Mr **Nanao Kachi**, Director, Social and Consumer Policy, Consumer Affairs and Strategic Policy, Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), Canada, presented Video Relay Service (VRS) in Canada. Brief summary is as follows:

VRS Regulatory Policy in Canada (2014) defines VRS is a **basic telecom service**, and allows VRS users to make calls over the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) using a telecom facility. Large Canadian telecommunications service providers (TSPs) must fund a national contribution fund (NCF) of which purpose is to support continuing access to **basic telecom services** in high cost areas.

TRS are regulated by CRTC, and VRS was officially launched in September 2016 (Text-based relay service was mandated since 1985 and IP relay service was since 2009) after some years’ study and consultation process. One central administrator (Canadian Administrator of VRS – CAV), an independent, not-for-profit corporation administrates VRS. The CAV was created in consultation with relevant organiztions including organizations representing PwDs and interpreters’ organizations.

During the study, two models were considered: a decentralized model and a centralized one. The centralized model was selected as it is efficient, it avoids unnecessary redundancies, for more consistent quality of service, and it addresses limited pool of qualified sign language interpreters.

VRS users use traditional telephone numbers and access to emergency services. The service is now operational for 24 hours per day, 7 days a week. More information is available on the presentation slides.

# Conclusion

Examples in implementing and operating TRS in Japan, Canada, Colombia, and Egypt were presented at the session. It was understood that each country/region has different issues and challenges, and big efforts have been/being made to overcome each barrier. In each case, the empowerment of deaf community plays a big role.

It was generally agreed that further standardization work in the area of TRS would be expected to promote the services worldwide, especially for developing countries. During the discussion, it was pointed that TRS based on web-based technologies, such as WebRTC, would facilitate the initiation and the operation of TRS because of its low-cost characteristic, especially beneficial for emerging economies that don’t have enough budget. In this sense, the pilot project conducted by The Nippon Foundation would be a good example for those economies considering to initiate TRS. It was also highlighted the need of standardization on quality of Communication Assistant (CA) to globally ensure a sufficient reliability and quality of service of TRS. These may be the possible areas for new work items in ITU-T.

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1. This issue was successfully discussed recently, and now SLI is addressed by the Ministry for telecommunications (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)