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**Accessible ICTs for persons with disabilities**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to this session on making accessible ICTs for persons with disabilities.

I am proud to say that, for the past two decades, the ITU, in partnership with its members and other United Nations organizations, has led efforts to ensure that Information Society infrastructure is universally deployed and promoted as a foundation for human, economic and social development.

Standardization, regulatory and development policies promoted by the ITU and the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and implemented by its Member States, combined with market forces, have led to an unprecedented expansion and adoption of ICTs, including in the developing world.

Now the world counts some 5 billion mobile cellular subscriptions, 1.2 billion fixed telephone lines, and 1.8 billion Internet users. In addition, virtually all areas are covered by broadcasting services.

Despite these successes, there remain over 650 million persons living with disabilities who are at risk of being excluded from the essential services, social interaction and information sources delivered through ICTs.

Tasks which seem simple to execute for the majority of users such as interacting with a web site, a telephone, an electronic kiosk or simply watching the news or following emergency public announcements can be overwhelmingly difficult or impossible to accomplish for persons living with disabilities.

The WSIS Plan of Action emphasizes that everyone, including older people, persons with disabilities, children, especially marginalized children, and other disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, are fully included in the Information Society.

Yet, with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), a new universal legal and policy framework for ICT accessibility has emerged. ITU Member States are encouraged to ratify this important treaty and communications policy makers and national regulatory authorities -- will be expected to implement it.

Among many new mandates, Member States who ratified the CRPD now need to ensure that their national information infrastructure including telephony, emergency services, the Internet and broadcasting are all accessible.

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 UN Convention.

As the world’s pre-eminent global ICT standards organization, ITU is embracing the challenges of accessibility through standardization efforts and has long championed the principles of inclusion and Universal Design.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Ensuring easy and effective communication for those with disabilities is by no means a ‘fringe issue’. 10% of the world’s population is disabled, many living in developing countries, plus a growing elderly population especially in developed countries. This represents a huge and growing market. ITU has already done a lot of work in this area through the implementation of a number of projects that include such work for the blind in Ethiopia. Toolkits have also been produced by the ITU and are available to the Membership. Such tools are critical in supporting countries in their effort in making ICT universally and easily accessible.

Governments and Industry are expected to understand that persons with disabilities have the right to be included in the new technological achievements and advances of our time. This is e important for all countries irrespective of their level of development.

I would like to take this occasion to highlight how, as an organization, ITU practices what it preaches. ITU continues to strive to make itself more accessible to persons with disabilities. For example, we provide assistance to delegates with disabilities to our meetings through such mechanisms such as captioning and sign language, wheel chair access etc. In the field, the development sector implements a host of projects in favour of persons with disabilities.  
  
Finding solutions to these challenges is not always a simple matter. On the one hand, equipment and software are now available that provide amazing breakthroughs for people with disabilities. On the other hand, there are many barriers to finding the most appropriate equipment, particularly at affordable prices.   
  
This is why ITU will continue to work hard – around the world – as an advocate to improve the quality of life for persons with disabilities and help build an inclusive information society for all.

I wish you a very successful and productive session.