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MAKING ICT AND MOBILE PHONES ACCESSIBLE FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

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Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and gentlemen,

On behelaf of International Telecommunication Union, first of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the Ministry of Information and Communication, Nepal Telecommunications Authority for hosting the Workshop as part of "ITU mission on Making ICT and mobile phones accessible for persons with disabilities"

I am very pleased to note that Nepal has achieved 60% teledensity recently and has vibrant mix of technologies including GSM, CDMA, WCDMA, satellite etc are available to address the needs of different segments of the society while investment in backbone networks are gaining priority at the policy level to provide reliable ICT services to the citizens of Nepal.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, the world population is over 7 billion people and more than one billion people live with some form of disability. A disability is a condition or function judged to be significantly impaired relative to the usual standard of an individual of their group. The term is often used to refer to individual functioning, including physical impairment, sensory impairment, cognitive impairment, intellectual impairment, mental illness, and various types of chronic disease. This usage has been described by some disabled people as being associated with a medical model of disability.

ITU has undertaken an Initiative out of WTDC-06 (Resolution 56) creating awareness & skills to mainstream disability issues by creating equal opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) and supporting member states meet obligations under Article 9 of the UN Convention for Rights of Persons with disabilities and Nepal ratified the UN CRPD in 2010 already and it is time we prepare a framework that would assist implementing the commitment into practice for people of Nepal!

Few people realize that the telephone was developed as a result of Alexander Graham Bell's experiments with ways to communicate with his deaf wife. The concept of telecommunications for the deaf may sound like an oxymoron – but telecoms infrastructure is fundamental to the delivery of services to the deaf or hard-of-hearing.

Standardization makes it possible on a global scale, to connect equipment and services from different manufacturers. The most important goal of ITU-T's accessibility activities is to make sure that newly developed standards contain the necessary elements to make services and features usable for people with as broad range of capabilities as possible. Standards describe how equipment interacts and defines the quality necessary for media to be usable for all. Standards should also describe suitable methods of media delivery for people with disabilities, and are therefore essential for the provision of services accessible for all.

ITU-T pioneered international work on standardization of deaf telecommunications with V.18 (an ITU-T Recommendation on a multi-function text telephone) back in 1990 and will further open up ICT access for the deaf by progressing its work to promote an all-inclusive approach to telecommunications. The organization is also actively promoting existing standards.

The first example of a mass-produced telecommunication device for the deaf was developed by Robert Weitbrecht, a deaf physicist, in 1964. A radio ham he was familiar with the way teleprinters communicate over the air, and realized that these machines could be used by deaf people to 'talk' over the phone. He developed and patented a modem which, when coupled to a teleprinter, allowed them to do just that. Mechanical printers have been largely replaced by portable devices using LED or LCD displays. By the early eighties 180,000 were in use, and they continue to be used today.

Communication technology has greatly advanced in the last few years, which is very beneficial for us deaf people. SMS, e-mail, IRC tools like MSN Messenger enable deaf people to cope alone, without the help of a hearing person. They have been developed not to enhance the audio aspect but to better communicate using visual tools, which is important."

Total Conversation is an ITU-T defined concept that encompasses voice telephony, video telephony and text telephony. The idea is that it gives everyone the chance to communicate with one another regardless of whether they are hearing, hearing impaired or deaf. Efforts have been made to incorporate these principles into the development of many ITU-T standards (Recommendations). Text over IP (ToIP) (developed in ITU-T Study Group 16) is an example of these efforts. Its objectives are to bridge two PSTN networks via IP, allowing for simultaneous character-by-

character text communication – this would enable textphones to communicate over an IP network. The ultimate goal of ‘Total Conversation’ is to allow any device to support the transmission of video and or text signals. This could include a PC or PDA user connected to an IP network chatting with the user of a textphone.

Users of telecommunications and information technology have a varied capability of handling information and the controls for its presentation. The source of this variation lies in cultural and educational backgrounds as well as on age-related functional limitations, in disabilities, and in other natural causes. The entire community can benefit from the accessibility standardization work as people can be permanently or temporarily disabled due to physical, environmental (e.g. a phone call in a noisy environment) or cultural (e.g. spoken language diversity) conditions. Moreover, we will all grow old and lose abilities that we take for granted now, thus enlarging the part of the population that would benefit from accessible communication.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In addition to the current technical assistance on ICT for PWD , ITU has very close collaboration with Nepal in development of ICT with following recent initiatives / projects:

- Wireless Broadband Master Plan (2012)
- Regulatory Guidelines on Broadband through Universal Service (2011)
 - Report on Introduction of m-Health Services (2011)
 - Report on Assessment on Stimulating Broadband in ABBMN (2010)
 - CIRT Assessment for Nepal (2010) launched this week
 - Nationwide IPTV Services for Nepal Telecom
 - IP CDMA Planning for Nepal Telecom
 - Recommendations on QoS Enhancement & New Services for NT
 - Migration from Analogue to DTTB (ongoing)
 - Wireless BB Master Plan (ongoing)

In 2013 too, I am pleased to inform that we will have technical assistance on QoS Regulation for NTA in Nepal.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Coming back to the ICT for PWD, ensuring easy and effective communication for those with disabilities is by no means a “fringe issue.” With an estimated 1 billion of the world’s population living with a disability, this represents a significant communication challenge. Achieving the goal of equitable communication for everyone requires:

- Accessible design: Accessibility has to be built in into products and services from the very beginning
- Availability: Accessible products and services must be on hand to users
- Affordability: Access to products and services must be reasonable

Finding solutions to these challenges is not always a simple matter. On the one hand, equipment and software is now available that provides amazing breakthroughs for people with disabilities. On the other hand, there are many barriers to finding the most appropriate equipment, particularly at a price that is affordable. This is a policy and digital divide issue because the majority of disabled persons, even in OECD countries, are unemployed and in low-income brackets let alone inequalities of access in Nepal! And with current trends in population growth, medical advances and an increasingly greying population, this number will only grow which is why ITU will continue to work hard – around the world – to improve the quality of life and help build an inclusive information society.

I am very pleased to see deep interest from Ministry, Regulator as well as private sector that demonstrates the commitment and interest in furthering our efforts to facilitate access to ICT for PWD in Nepal with suitable policy, regulatory framework that will support large scale deployment of ICT devices and services for PWD by industry which are not just policy driven but also a profitable venture!

I thank the Government of Nepal, Ministry of Information and Communication and Nepal Telecom Authority for kindly hosting this workshop and also thanking my colleagues Nirmita Narsimhan, Archana Gulati to contribute effectively towards making this workshop interactive and enjoyable. Finally thanking you all for sparing time out of your busy schedule. I wish this workshop every success.

Thank you.