Council Working Group - WCIT-12

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Opening Remarks

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Distinguished colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

- It is a great pleasure to be with you here this morning and let me offer a very warm welcome to all participants.

- I would like to start by saying how flattered I was by the attention that was given to the informal, impromptu remarks I made at 2pm on the 23rd of April, during this working group's last meeting. I suppose that mentioning the word 'Internet' wakes everybody up, and gets them to pay attention.

- Those remarks were recorded on the webcast of the meeting, so I am surprised that I seem to have been misquoted in some reports. I have reviewed the report of your last meeting, however, and my remarks have been correctly summarized there. Let us therefore consider the matter closed and move forward with our busy schedule here over the next three days.

- Please also rest assured that these present remarks will be duly published on ITU's web site; and I would also request that they be annexed verbatim to the report of this meeting.

Distinguished colleagues,

- I would like to take this opportunity to set the record straight on a number of important issues which have found their way into various realms of the public domain over the past few months, and which have not – on the whole – been helpful in terms of clarifying the plain facts and the potential benefits we can hope to achieve through the WCIT-12 event.

- Firstly, there has been fairly widespread comment stating that WCIT may set barriers to the free flow of information.

- In article 33 of the ITU's Constitution, however, Member States recognize the right of the public to correspond by means of the international service of public correspondence.

- And the ITRs cannot contradict that provision.

- It is true nonetheless that all countries impose some restrictions on various forms of speech, including telecommunications – for example to protect copyright owners and to prevent defamation.

- Some countries go further and restrict the use of telecommunications for areas such as pornography, gambling, hate speech, negation of genocide, and even certain types of political speech.

- Such restrictions are permitted by article 34 of the ITU's Constitution, which provides that Member States reserve the right to cut off, in accordance with their national law, any private telecommunications which may appear dangerous to the security of the State, or contrary to its laws, to public order or to decency.

- And the ITRs cannot contradict that provision, either.

- So I do not see how WCIT could set barriers to the free flow of information.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- There have also been a number of accounts stating that there is some sort of barrier, conflict or even war between telecommunications and the Internet.

- In the converged world of the 21st century, this is plainly ridiculous. Who can stand up today and tell me the difference, in terms of traffic passing across networks, between voice, video, and data?

- The real issue is how best to cooperate – to ensure:

  - The free flow of information;

  - The continued development of broadband;

  - Continuing investment in networks, services and applications;

  - And perhaps most importantly – in this very fast-moving world – continuing innovation.

- I cannot imagine anyone who would disagree that the benefits of ICTs should be brought to all citizens of the world.

- But to do that, we will have to work together.

- So the question before WCIT is therefore how best can the ITRs be adapted to facilitate the achievement of that goal.

Distinguished colleagues,

- There seems to be considerable support for including high-level, technology-neutral, principles in the ITRs.

- And of course those principles should have a positive impact on the Internet – because they should favour its further growth.

- As we all know, not only were the 1988 ITRs instrumental in enabling the global deployment of the Internet, but many other ITU activities have been, and will continue to be, essential components of Internet growth.

- Let me mention just a handful:

  - Standards for end-user access equipment such as modems, including xDSL and cable modems;

  - Compression standards;

  - Security standards, including standards to combat spam

  - Standards for backbone networks, including fibre optics;

  - And, of course, the radio frequencies used to implement WiFi – which you are no doubt using as I speak.

- International policy and economic issues related to telecommunications have always been discussed and agreed by ITU, to the benefit of all the world's users – and there is no reason to think that WCIT will be an exception.

- Indeed, the conference comes at a time when the ICT sector is having a major impact on global social and economic development, so this represents a great opportunity to amend the treaty in a way that will further extend the benefits of ICTs to all the world's people.

- As the industry has pointed out, data volumes are increasing much faster than the infrastructure needed to carry it, and there is currently a risk of an infrastructure investment shortfall.

- The revised ITRs should therefore help to encourage broadband roll-out and investment. They should emphasize the importance of liberalization and privatization, and should recognize the role of the private sector and market-based solutions.

- At the same time as data volumes are increasing, unit prices are declining, so total revenues for telecommunications operators are potentially at risk. As a result, some have said that there is a need to address the current disconnect between sources of revenue and sources of costs, and to decide upon the most appropriate way to do so.

- The current international regulatory framework is simply not equipped to deal with these challenges – challenges which will affect the development of a fully-inclusive information society over the next decade; a society that ensures all the world's citizens have equitable, affordable and secure access to voice, video and data.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- There are also some people who think that WCIT should not address costs.

- But we all know that the cost of Internet connectivity is too high in most developing countries. And we all know that many consumers think international mobile roaming prices are too high. These are facts.

- We all want to see greater Internet usage in developing countries. And I presume that we all want consumers to feel that they are getting good value for money when they roam.

- So it would seem fully appropriate to discuss these matters in Dubai – so that we can find ways to bring down the cost of Internet connectivity in developing countries, while ensuring sufficient revenues for operators to deploy broadband infrastructure. And so that we can find ways to ensure that both customers and operators feel that roaming prices are fair and reasonable.

- So let us not just discuss it; let us find agreements that enable more people to use more telecommunications and agreements that enable more operators to roll out more infrastructure.

Distinguished colleagues,

- It has come as a surprise – and I have to say as a great disappointment – to see that some of those who have had access to proposals presented to this working group have gone on to publicly mis-state or distort them in public forums, sometimes to the point of caricature.

- These distortions and mis-statements could be found plausible by credulous members of the public, and could even be used to influence national parliaments, given that the documents themselves are not officially available – in spite of recent developments, including the leaking of Document TD 64.

- As many of you surely know, a group of civil society organizations has written to me to request public access to the proposals under discussion.

- I would therefore be grateful if you could consider this matter carefully, as I intend to make a recommendation to the forthcoming session of Council regarding open access to these documents, and in particular future versions of TD 64.

- I would also be grateful if you would consider the opportunity of conducting an open consultation regarding the ITRs. I also intend to make a recommendation to Council in this regard as well.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- I am proud of the ITU's tradition of open discussion amongst its membership, and I am proud that the ITU works bottom-up, thanks to inputs from its 193 Member States and 552 Sector Members.

- I am pleased to see that our membership has submitted over 120 input documents to this working group. All of our Member States and Sector Members have access to these documents – and in keeping with ITU's working methods all members have had an opportunity to comment on them, in particular at the regional preparatory meetings.

- In accordance with national laws and practices, some countries will no doubt be conducting public consultations on WCIT, and some of those consultations will be based on the report of this working group. Indeed I note that the Netherlands has already informed this working group of such a national consultation, and I commend them for that. So let me encourage more of this kind of action as we move forward, both in the interests of transparency and of accountability.

- With all this activity, we can expect significant additional inputs to the conference, and I am confident that these will help us to understand how to iron out any differences in views, so as to achieve consensus in Dubai, in the true tradition of the ITU.

Distinguished colleagues,

- Most of us were not involved in the preparations for the 1988 conference in Melbourne. But the historical record shows that many of the fears, concerns, and criticisms surrounding WCIT-12, also appeared in 1988.

- As we know, those fears and concerns were unwarranted: the 1988 Melbourne conference created the framework that enabled the spectacular growth of telecommunications – including the Internet – over the past 24 years.

- 1988 set the stage for the ***information society***. And 2012 will set the stage for the ***knowledge society***!

- Many constructive proposals for revising the ITRs have already been presented to this group. If some of you do not agree with some of the proposals, then I would urge you to submit alternatives, and to engage in constructive discussions with all parties.

- We all know that, in the true tradition of the ITU, we will not vote on any issues – just like in January, at the World Radiocommunication Conference, where in four weeks we did not vote once, but came to consensus on every issue.

- WCIT is an opportunity to create a stable international regulatory framework providing the right conditions to allow markets to flourish globally – and the issues on the table are vital to the creation of a fully-inclusive information society.

- We all want the same thing: further development of telecommunications.

- So let's all work together to make that happen, and help create the framework for tomorrow's converged networks: mobile and fixed; voice and data; and of course the Internet.

- By working together, we will make this world a better place.

- A world where everyone has equitable, affordable and secure access to the Internet – wherever they live and whatever their circumstances.

- A world where the social and economic benefits of ICTs have reached all the peoples of the planet.

- And a world where social and economic justice prevails.

Thank you.

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