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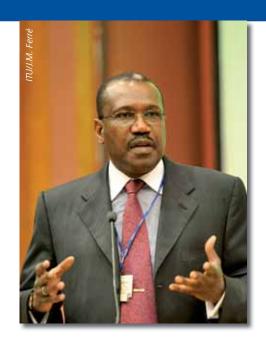
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Together we can do so much

Empowering people with disabilities

Dr Hamadoun I. Touré ITU Secretary-General



The celebration of World Telecommunication and Information Society Day took place this year on 15 May in Cairo, Egypt, at the end of our highly successful ITU TELECOM AFRICA 2008. As a highlight of the ceremony, I was delighted to present this year's ITU World Telecommunication and Information Society Award to three distinguished winners. Under the theme Connecting Persons with Disabilities: ICT opportunities for all, this year's laureates were honoured for their work in helping to bring new technologies to disabled communities worldwide (see pages 5–13).

It was a great honour for me to present the Award to Egypt's First Lady Suzanne Mubarak, for her efforts in mainstreaming policies to empower disabled children and young people. She was also recognized for her backing of the Cairo Declaration on Supporting Access to ICT Services for Persons with Disabilities, which was jointly developed by ITU and the World Health Organization in 2007.

Also receiving the Award was Andrea Saks, a lifelong pioneer of technologies to help the deaf. Her work with ITU, the United States government and the Internet Governance Forum has paved the way to a more inclusive approach to the development of information and communication technologies (ICT). The third Award went to the DAISY Consortium, a worldwide organization of talking-book libraries and ICT companies which is active in promoting international standards that enable equal access to information for people with reading disabilities.

During the event, I was especially moved by the demonstration of assistive technology by a special guest from Italy, Diamante Albergati. His personal story demonstrates the power of ICT to transform lives. Paralysed from the neck down after an accident, Mr Albergati showed how, using a computer and webcam to track head movements, he has regained his ability to interact with the wider world (see page 14). This is a shining example of the importance of technological solutions in helping people with disabilities — and yet, these solutions are not widely available.

Today, an estimated 650 million people live with disabilities worldwide — of whom three-quarters are in developing countries. Few disabled children in such countries get the chance to attend school, and adults find it hard to earn a living. Although the situation is better in the developed world, a digital divide persists. All too often, people with disabilities find themselves marginalized and unable to afford the technologies that could change their lives.

We must all play our part in ensuring that ICT are made accessible and affordable to people with disabilities, to help them make their valuable contribution to society. In doing so, we should be inspired by the laureates who received this year's ITU Award. We should also remember the words of Helen Keller, a blind and deaf American who became a celebrated advocate for the disabled: "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."