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World Telecommunication and Information Society Day

17 May 2008

"Connecting Persons with Disabilities: ICT Opportunities for All"

Message from Dr Hamadoun Touré
Secretary-General
International Telecommunication Union

The key to the information society is universal access. Everyone must have equal opportunity to participate in the digital age. And no one should be denied the potential benefits of new information and communication technologies (ICT), not least because they are hampered by their disabilities. As ICT bring a range of innovations in the workplace, at home and in every facet of our lives, these benefits must also be harnessed for the benefit of persons with disabilities.

This year, ITU has adopted the theme: *"Connecting Persons with Disabilities: ICT Opportunities for All"* to mark World Telecommunication and Information Society Day. The World Summit on the Information Society urged Member States to address the special requirements of persons with disabilities along with other marginalized and vulnerable groups in their national e-strategies. A further call was made to encourage design and production of ICT equipment and services adhering to the Universal Design Principle and the use of assistive technologies for research and development to facilitate accessibility to ICT for all, including persons with disabilities.

The last World Telecommunication Development Conference (WTDC-06) held in Doha, Qatar in 2006, created a new Special Initiative on "Access to telecommunication services for persons with disabilities". The Doha Plan of Action endorsed the Tunis Commitment of building ICT capacity for all, including persons with disabilities, through the promotion of universal, ubiquitous, equitable and affordable access to ICT. It encouraged the adoption of universal design and assistive technologies to ensure that the benefits are evenly distributed within societies as well as to bridge the digital divide by creating digital opportunities to harness the full potential for development offered by state-of-the-art ICT.

During this year's WTISD, ITU calls upon all stakeholders (policy makers and regulators as well as operators and industry) to raise awareness on the need to adopt policies and strategies that would meet the ICT needs of persons with disabilities by ensuring that both equipment and services are accessible. This would not only ensure an inclusive information society, but would also enable Member States to meet their obligations under Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2006.

Our focus this year on meeting the ICT needs of persons with disabilities is aimed at empowering every citizen with information and knowledge, improving the lines of communication to the remotest and most vulnerable groups, and building an inclusive information society geared towards the advancement of a better, more peaceful and productive world. It is clearly our duty today to provide the opportunities of ICT to all, especially to those of us with disabilities.

As we celebrate World Telecommunication and Information Society Day, we invite all stakeholders — manufacturers, service providers, international organizations, public and non-governmental organizations as well as policy makers — to join us in our endeavour to connect everyone, especially the 650 million or so people around the world who live with disabilities, to the remarkable digital opportunities offered by ICT.

Hamadoun Touré
Secretary-General