Standardization in transition

An interview with Theodor Irmer

Shortly before the opening of the first World Telecommunication Standardization Conference (WTSC-93), the *Telecommunication Journal* (TJ) asked Theodor Irmer, Director of the former CCITT and of ITU's new Telecommunication Standardization Bureau (TSB), about some of the changes now taking place in this Sector of the ITU.
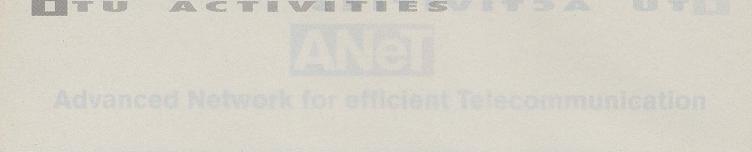
Mr T. Irmer

TJ. The World Telecommunication Standardization Conference being held in Helsinki from 1 to 12 March takes the place of what would have been the Xth Plenary Assembly of the CCITT. Is this just a change of name or will the tasks of the Conference be different to those of the Plenary Assemblies?

Irmer. The first World Telecommunication Standardization Conference, like its predecessors the Plenary Assemblies, will have to deal with standing agenda items: the reports of the Study Groups, the organization of future work, the allocation of Questions to the Study Groups, etc. However, a crucial item on the agenda of WTSC-93 is to set up the Telecommunication Standardization Advisory Group (TSAG) in response to the decision of the Additional Plenipotentiary Conference last December. The WTSC is expected to develop the precise terms of reference and working procedures of the TSAG, one of whose objectives will be to open ITU standardization activities to the newly emerging players in telecommunications. In addition to ITU's constitutional membership (Administrations), network and service providers together with manufacturers are also shaping today's world of telecommunications. If ITU is to remain a leader in global telecommunication standardization it will have to be more open to these other groups and forces. Such "opening" is especially necessary in ITU's standardization activities, an area in which these entities are becoming more and more involved.

TJ. How will the TSAG go about attaining this objective?

Irmer. First, and above all, the TSAG should be seen as an instrument to streamline and increase the efficiency of standardization. Although "advisory" by mandate, this group will nevertheless be expected to monitor and direct standardization work according to the requirements of the new Standardization Sector's membership. To meet this objective, TSAG will have representatives from both Administrations and the other interested parties I mentioned before. These, together with the Study Group Chairmen and the Director, will jointly and in a collegiate way steer the activities of the new Standardization Sector.

TJ. What other changes will result from the creation of the new Standardization Sector?

Irmer. A major task will be the consolidation of the radiocommunication standards activities into this Sector starting with the network-related standardization so far done in the CCIR. The objective of such consolidation is to put an end to the historical separation between "wire" and "radio" standardization in CCITT and CCIR which in many areas is no longer relevant. Uniting ITU's standardization activities under a single Sector should lead to greater efficiency.

TJ. How soon do you expect to complete this consolidation process?

Irmer. Consolidation of all ITU's standardization work into one sector cannot be achieved at the stroke of a pen. The decision as to what should be transferred from the CCIR to the new Standardization Sector is difficult and by no means a solely technical decision. The way Questions in CCIR and CCITT are worded is entirely different, terms and definitions are used in different interpretations, and, above all, there is the question: "Which aspects of radio standardization are in fact network-related?" In most cases they are, in one way or another, also related to radio propagation, spectrum management or some other purely radio matter which makes a clear-cut separation and transfer to the Standardization Sector difficult.

Another point of a non-technical nature, but equally important, is that CCITT and CCIR have, over many years, developed their own individual "culture"the way of thinking and doing standardization work is different in both CCIs, militating against abrupt cuts and changes. In the two CCIs there is, to some degree, a different membership with different technical and commercial interests and there is, last but not least, another important difference in the philosophy of the two CCIs: whilst in CCITT the network is the "carrier" for all services for the purpose of which all kinds of physical transmission capability may be used (without attributing a service to a particular capability), there exists, in CCIR, the allo-

cation of a given service to a given transmission capability (for example, the frequency band); hence, the service characteristics are linked to the transmission capability. This fundamental difference presents an obstacle to consolidation into the Standardization Sector. For example, in CCITT, standardization of services is concentrated in one Study Group only (irrespective of the different transmission capabilities) whilst, in CCIR, they are spread over several Study Groups dealing with the different radio transmission capabilities (such as mobile communications, satellites, microwave, etc.). All these factors require that such consolidation be effected by an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary process.

TJ. How much progress has been made, then?

Irmer. On 22 January 1993 the CCITT and CCIR Groups on Resolutions No. 18 and 106, in a meeting described as "historic", agreed on the following:
– Joint Study Group CMTT would be transferred to the Standardization Sector, maintaining its joint structure;
– two Joint Coordination Groups (JCG) on future public land mobile telecommunication systems (FPLMTS) and on ISDN/satellite matters are to be set up reporting to the Standardization Sector;
– a small group of experts was charged with proposing the allocation of Questions (or parts and elements thereof) of CCIR Study Groups 4, 8, 9, 10 and 11, so far marked as of "common interest" to both CCIR and CCITT, either to the Standardization or the Radiocommunication Sector, to be included in the work programme of the appropriate Sector.

This is the start of the evolutionary process of consolidation because the APP-92 has charged both Sectors with keeping under continuous review further transfer of work. This will be the subject of another joint meeting of the Resolution No. 18 and Resolution 106 Groups to be held in June this year.

TJ. During the Additional Plenipotentiary Conference there was some opposition

expressed to the accelerated procedure for approving CCITT Recommendations between Plenary Assemblies, or the World Telecommunication Standardization Conferences that will replace them. Both the WTSC and the first Radiocommunication Assembly, to be held later this year, have been requested to review this procedure in order to allow ITU Member countries, which consider themselves adversely affected by a Recommendation approved under the accelerated procedure, the possibility of requesting a standardization conference to reconsider the text. If this possibility is permitted, what effects do you foresee on the ITU's standardization activities?

Irmer. In replying to this question we have to distinguish two different but interrelated issues. First of all, I feel that there is a misunderstanding. Even in the past, each Administration (or other member organization of CCITT) could at any time (not only during a Plenary Assembly) challenge a Recommendation and request its revision. As CCITT Recommendations are not treaty obligations but voluntarily agreed and voluntarily implemented technical, operational or tariff-structure standards, such revisions can be done without strict procedures, quite different from the legally binding decisions of radio conferences which are international treaties. I think that the reason for the misunderstanding lies here. In any case, we will revise the text of the relevant Resolution in order to spell out clearly the possibility of revision at any time, and I hope this will clear up this misunderstanding.

Such requests for review have already been made in the past, so the mere fact that this possibility will receive additional emphasis in our texts is not likely to have any effect on our future standardization activities; it is something we are used to doing if it is considered necessary by an Administration.

Let me now come to the second issue which is why this request for the reconsideration of texts of Recommendations was put forward. The complaints expressed during APP-92 were that Administrations received (mainly in 1992) too many draft

Recommendations together, often late, so they were unable to review them properly within the time limit specified in Resolution No. 2 governing accelerated approval. Such complaints were, indeed, justified and we had already initiated appropriate steps before APP-92 to remedy this situation in the future. What happened was that towards the end of the study period in 1992, most of our Study Groups produced a large number of draft Recommendations which arrived very late in countries far away from Geneva due to delay in the postal services. I believe that this situation will not be repeated because:

– we have proposed extending the time for review,

– we shall put the texts of draft Recommendations in our new TELEDOC database where they will be available for immediate review and, in addition,

– we expect a more "balanced" production of standards over the coming years. Because Resolution No. 2 was only implemented in 1989, we still had the effect of

finishing many draft Recommendations towards the end of the study period in 1992. From now on we expect a much smoother output.

I want to stress that the shortcomings observed in the application of Resolution No. 2 have been of a transient nature, and do not in any sense indicate a serious weakness of this accelerated procedure. Leaving aside these temporary side-effects, it is really one of our greatest achievements since 1989. By this method we have managed to bring the production time for Recommendations down from four years to about 18 months, not to mention other advantages.

TJ. This is the ITU's first World Telecommunication Standardization Conference. Does that mean that in the future the ITU will issue Standards rather than Recommendations?

Irmer. From a practical viewpoint, ITU is already issuing standards. The Union has a Standardization Sector, the ITU Constitution stipulates that this Sector shall be

"standardizing telecommunications on a world-wide basis" and it would only be logical to call the product of all such endeavours a "standard".

There are in my mind two reasons why the term "Recommendation" is being used. First, it clearly indicates that its content is not legally binding, nobody can be forced to implement Recommendations (as opposed to Regulations) and it is for this reason the term "Recommendation" is still used, at least for the time being.

The other reason is more historical: for many years the term "CCITT Recommendation" has been used, people all over the world know what it stands for and are used to it. It is like a long-standing trademark–if people are accustomed to it they use it without any further thought. Intrinsically, there is no difference between "standard" and "Recommendation" and this is why, even in CCITT publications, you will find more and more the term "standard", it being more consistent with our task, which is standardization.

Management in telecommunications

ITU focuses on least developed countries

There are presently 48 LDCs, 29 of which are in Africa (south of the Sahara), 13 in Asia and the Pacific, 5 in the Arab region, and 1 in the Americas.

Telecommunications in most of these countries are as mediocre as the rest of the infrastructure, although, exceptionally, some of them have better telecommunication networks than some non-LDCs.

The ITU policy of assistance to LDCs derives generally from the purposes of the Union and in particular from Resolution 26 of the Nice 1989 Plenipotentiary Conference.

The Union has allocated from its own funds an amount of 2.2 million Swiss francs

in 1992, and 2.3 million in 1993. The LDCs are also expected to benefit from the Special Voluntary Programme for Technical Cooperation as well as from other sources.

The ITU Administrative Council, during its 47th session (June/July 1992), adopted a programme approach for the provision of ITU assistance to the LDCs. Approximately two-thirds of LDC funds will be used for the programmed activities and the remainder will be kept as a reserve for various unforeseen activities, including emergencies.

The programme concentrates on four main areas, namely management, maintenance, planning and training.

Management has been identified as one area in which the telecommunication administrations in the LDCs are very weak, covering virtually all echelons of staff. Corporate leadership is often strangulated by interference from and control by ministries and government officials. There is a widespread mismanagement of scarce resources as well as inadequate supervision of working groups at the technical, sales or operational level. Financial losses accruing from mismanagement or even from errors of omission are incalculable. Even a partial cure of the management problems in these countries would bring enormous yields in productivity.