



INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION UNION

**TELECOMMUNICATION
DEVELOPMENT BUREAU**
ITU-D STUDY GROUPS

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SECOND MEETING OF STUDY GROUP 1: GENEVA, 30 AUGUST - 3 SEPTEMBER 1999
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FOR ACTION

Question 10g/2: Enhancing the capacity of the NGOs to achieve development aims, through the use of telecommunication

STUDY GROUP 2

SOURCE: ASSOCIATE RAPPORTEUR FOR QUESTION 10G/2

TITLE: DRAFT REPORT ON QUESTION 10G/2

Action required:

The meeting is invited to make comments and suggestions on the outline of this Report.

Abstract:

The following comprises background information on the relationship between NGOs and the United Nations system, in particular ITU. It gives some reasons why telecommunications are important for NGOs, and it provides the aim of the chapters relating to the potential of telecommunication technologies and the barriers to achieve this potential.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction and background

The aim of this background section is to assist the unfamiliar reader to recognise the importance of the issue under consideration, and to understand the background to the Focus Group for this Question.

The Focus Group aims to answer the following question: “*What is the actual and potential impact of current telecommunication trends on the activities of development NGOs (non-government organisations), and what policies and actions can enhance their capacity to utilise telecommunication more effectively to achieve development aims?*”

In development activities generally, NGOs have become an increasingly important actor, from local to global levels. This is acknowledged virtually throughout the UN system, with organisations such as the UN Economic and Social Council, the World Bank, and many UN agencies. Yet, while the ITU has gone to great lengths in the past decade to recognise the need to enter into partnership with private sectors firms and organisations, virtually no consideration has been given to the strategic issues relating to development oriented NGOs. Whilst such an imbalance, in the past, may be understandable, as we enter a new millennium, it is time that the ITU and other relevant international organisations and entities explored.

What are the strategic issues relating to NGOs and telecommunication? What are the opportunities for beneficial use of telecommunication and of ICTs, and what are the barriers to achieving these? What kinds of approaches and policies should global organisations involved in telecommunication, and should NGOs themselves adopt to ensure that the development efforts of NGOs are fully realised through the activities of NGOs?

These are the questions this Focus Group sets out to answer.

1.1 - Background

This Focus Group has quite an unusual genesis as compared to most others. Its first stirrings were in March 1995 at the *MacBride Roundtable* (see box 1) in Tunis, when Seán Ó Siochrú, Vice President, agreed to explore the possibility of establishing relations between the Round Table and, amongst other international organisations, the ITU. As an NGO involved in promoting debate on international media and communication issues, the Round Table believed it essential that civil society become more involved in such debate, and specifically that UN organisations with a remit in this area should be approached. UNESCO has a long history of cooperation with NGOs, as have virtually all UN agencies and bodies.

Box 1: MacBride Round Table on Communication

The MacBride Round Table on Communication is named in honour of Seán MacBride, who chaired the UNESCO’s *International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems*. Its report in 1980, entitled *Many Voices, One World* raised fundamental questions concerning the equity of the media and communications structures worldwide. The Round Table, is an NGO that meets annually (Amman, Jordan in 1998 was its tenth annual meeting) to continue this debate, raising fundamental questions around the sustainability and equity of current trends in media and communication in relation to social, cultural and development issues.

The ITU, however, was different. There existed (and exists) no formal or practical mechanism by which NGOs involved in development can gain access to ITU activities centrally, and cooperate constructively. There were linkages, for instance, at the level of BAAP Programmes, but these

tended to be entirely operational, and did not relate to policy or to key international domains of the ITU competence. As a member of the UN family, the ITU is obliged to have such mechanisms¹. All that existed in the ITU were the standard membership options, which could include first, members states, and second, the telecommunication industry sector.

However, the ITU was open to explore the question, and Secretary General Tarjanne agreed to meet with Seán Ó Siochrú in May 1995 in Geneva. In discussion also with Head of Strategy Don MacLean, they decided it was worth pursuing further. A more detailed report was subsequently researched and written by Seán Ó Siochrú, after extensive consultation with a large number of key NGOs. In October 1995, at Telecom 95, this report, entitled *The International Telecommunication Union and Non-Governmental Organisations: The Case for Mutual Cooperation*, was presented to the Secretary General.

Box 2: Main conclusions of ITU & NGO The Case for Mutual Cooperation

1. There are definite benefits to closer liaison between ITU and NGOs, accruing to to both parties and to economic, social and cultural development in general.
2. Benefits for ITU include enriched debate, wider consultation, strategic alliances, programme level synergies, and better dissemination of information.
3. For NGOs, benefits include recognition of their contribution, an opportunity to influence on policy and strategy, better networking with private and UN sectors
4. Although nothing in principle prevents ITU from working closely with NGOs, a number of practical obstacles currently prevent the ITU from satisfying its obligation as a UN agency in this regard. No effort has been made by the ITU to define or initiate a relationship.
5. High cost of participation in ITU activities, the complex issues and often arcane language used are among the main obstacles.
6. A Task Force should be set up to consider the matter and come forward with proposal for how relations can be established.

The Report called for the setting up of a Task Force with the ITU to urgently explore the issues involved and to develop a set of options to move forward. This approach did not prove possible, and an effort to put the issue onto the agenda of the ITU's Review Committee, set up to reassess membership issues, foundered.

But discussions continued with Mr Ahmed Laouyane, (former) Director of BDT, during 1996, when he attended MacBride Round Table in Seoul.

One of the obstacles that emerged early on to developing some form of relations was the absence of a single point of liaison for the ITU. A critical question regarding relations between the ITU and NGOs is how to ensure that communications between the two is open and inclusive i.e. that discussion is not limited to a small clique of self appointed organisations. At around this time also, a number of NGOs felt the need to come together on the question of media and communication more generally, and in November 1996 in London, the *Platform for Cooperation on*

¹ The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) began an extensive review and strengthening of relations between the UN and the NGO system. ECOSOC explicitly requires that all UN specialised agencies liaise with NGOs, and requested details regarding the mechanisms. The ITU reported only on their existing membership structure.

Communication and Democratisation was formed (see box 3). The Platform aims to facilitate cooperation amongst NGOs on issues relating to communication, media and development.

Box 3: Platform for Cooperation on Communication and Democratisation.

At a meeting held in London in 1995, a group of NGOs involved in media and communication agreed on a common platform to cooperate together. Represented were: AMARC, APC, Article 19, Catholic Media Council, PANOS London, People's Communication Charter, Communication for Social Change (KUB), International Women's Tribune Centre, MacBride Round Table, UNDA/OSIC, Vidéazimut, WACC, Worldview International, and Zebra.

They agreed the following platform as the basis for common action:

- a) On the contribution of communication to the democratisation of society, they agree to work for: The Right to Communicate to be recognised and guaranteed as fundamental to securing Human Rights founded on principles of genuine participation, social justice, plurality and diversity and which reflect gender, cultural and regional perspectives.
- b) On the democratisation of communication structures, institutions and processes, they emphasised: The need to defend and deepen an open public space for debate and actions that build critical understanding of the ethics of communication, democratic policy development, and equitable and effective access.

This first meeting noted that importance of the ITU in media and communication issues globally, and especially in relation to development; and the emphasis given to the Right to Communicate by the Secretary General. Based on the ITU and NGO Report, the Platform decided to prioritise the issues of relations with the ITU. Of critical importance also was a communication received by the meeting from the BDT Director, confirming "that the ITU/BDT is interested in developing working cooperation with NGOs on matters of common interest, although no formal mechanisms or procedures have been established as yet. Although these contacts are at present at an exploratory stage, it can be seen that a fruitful collaboration could evolve." (ref: ITU/BDT/026/HP/ 30.10.96)

From that point on, Mr Laouyane was also the ITU point of contact for the Platform.

At the same time, the idea was brought to an ever wider circle of NGOs, where it seemed to strike a chord.

- In May 1996, a parallel conference to the G7's ISAD (Information Society and Development) Conference in Midrand, South Africa, called for the ITU to recognise and accommodate NGOs. A number of government ministers including the South African Minister for Communications, attended this. (*Empowering Communities in the Information Society*, May 15th to 17th, 1996.)
- Conferences of international NGOs AMARC (March 1996) and Vidéazimut (July 1996) debated the issues and called for the ITU to open up to the NGO sectors; echoed by organisations such as *World Association for Christian Communication* (WACC) and the *International Women's Tribune Centre*.
- In Latin America, a meeting of the *Grupo de los Ocho*, a coalition of over a dozen region-wide NGOs endorsed it (*Caracas, November 1996*) I endorsed the call;

- Articles appeared in NGO newsletters, such as *Interadio* (AMARC), *Clips* (Vidéazimut), *Action* (WACC) and regional journals such as *Voices* (Madhyam Communications, India, Vol 1 No. 3 1997).

During 1997, in consultation with Mr Laouyane, the Platform decided to attempt to gain approval for a Study Group Question at the upcoming World Telecom Development Conference, held in March 1998. In consultation with the Platform members and several other NGOs, it was agreed that any such Question such look well beyond simply whether and how NGOs should relate to the ITU. A prior issues that needed to be addressed was how and why telecommunication is important to NGOs in the first place.

Why should NGOs consider the area of telecommunication in any depth? What were the benefits to be derived, in terms of development activities? What were the obstacles to gaining such benefits? How can these be overcome?

Without answers to these question, it would seem fruitless to pursue liaison with the ITU, since the substance and purpose of such liaison remained unclear. If, however, the answers suggest that there are benefits, and that these could be significantly enhanced with relatively little effort, then the question of a closer relationship to the ITU arises

What should ITU member states be doing at their level to ensure that the telecommunication can enhance the capacity of NGOs to deal with development issues? What could be done at ground level beyond the current ITU and NGO collaboration (for instance in the BAAP Programmes)? Which specific ITU policy issues were relevant, in the short, medium and long-terms?

However, it became clear that there was also no particular need to halt our enquiries at the ITU. Telecommunication is increasingly determined by a disparate range of international organisations and trends. If our answers did show that telecommunication is relevant to NGOs, then the Question should also consider the policy scene beyond solely that of the ITU.

How do activities in other multi-lateral organisations, such as WTO, World Bank, UNESCO and others, impinge on these issues?

Thus the issues to be considered were both broadened and deepened.

On behalf of the Platform, Seán Ó Siochrú attended the WTDC preparatory meeting in Geneva in September 1997, where a draft Question was presented (Document 1/205). There it was agreed that the Question would go forward to the WDTC for consideration, with the proviso that the Platform become a member of ITU-D. The Platform had applied to the ITU Council for a waiver of fees in May 1997, and had not by that time received a response.

Finally, the Question came to the WDTC in Malta in March 1998, where, with the support of the Canadian delegation and from within the ITU-D, it was agreed to be dealt with as a Focus Group. Between then and the first meeting of ITU-D Study Groups the following September 7th to 9th 1998, the Focus Group expanded its membership beyond the original Platform members to include several ITU Member States, additional key NGOs, and a member of Gender Task Force. In September, also, the Focus Group, attended by six of its members and by ITU staff, held its first meeting.

1.2. - For whom is this an important issue?

Why is telecommunication important to NGOs involved in development? That depends to some extent on what type of NGOs is involved, its aims, scope and activities.

Different kinds of NGOs

The categorisation of NGOs in all their diversity has been the subject of a considerable literature. However, we will side-step this, and simply try to clarify where our areas of concern lie.

First and foremost, we are interested in development-oriented NGOs i.e. NGOs whose **objectives relate to empowerment and the betterment of people's lives**, from local to global level. This excludes, for instance, regional and sectoral industry associations and alliances. A number of these are already members of the ITU, and they in general represent a sectoral interest as distinct from the general interest of social and economic development.

However, this does not greatly narrow down the field. The following is a loose matrix, that presents the domain according to the *type of activity* of the NGO; and the *intensity and importance of its use of telecommunication*.

Table 1: Matrix of NGO Aims and Telecoms Use

	Core, direct Telecoms related	Indirect, strong telecoms relationship	User of telecoms
Member Associations, providing services to support members in their development work	Members are involved in telecoms, and the association services them with telecoms related factors (AMARC, Vidéazimut).	Member may make extensive use of telecoms in achieving their aims; Association may facilitate this use.	An association where telecoms is used as, e.g., as a means to communicate with members and others
Advocacy, and information sharing, for NGOs and development (may be member or non-member)	Advocate locally, nationally, internationally on media and communication issues. (Article 19, PCC, Panos, MacBride Round Table)	General development advocacy, where media and communication sometimes are factors (AMNESTY, IWTC)	General development advocacy group, where telecoms is a means to get a message over.
Development Focus: NGOs who support and implement projects on the ground	Uses telecoms as core means to achieve aims. (Numerous Radio, video, internet projects; WETV, CMN, etc.)	Telecoms a key enabling part of activities. e.g. emergency aid logistics (VITA)	General development aid agency (Oxfam, Concern, etc.)

This is, of course, intended as indicative. NGOs could be grouped according to any number of other criteria that would differentiate their potential use of telecommunication, and quite a number of NGOs fall into several boxes. Whether an NGO is national or international in the scope of its activities, for instance, may be an important indicator of patterns of use and benefits to be derived.

However, the table offers a framework to guide us later on in describing the different benefits and issues arising. In general, the potential for benefits, and the level of strategic interest in telecoms, tends to be concentrated more amongst those NGOs to the left of the Matrix. Perhaps for the majority of NGOs to the right of the matrix, their main interest is simply in having access to adequate and cost effective telecommunication services - but that is not to say that they are well equipped (in every sense) to use such services to best effect.

1.3. - Why is telecommunication important for NGOs?

We do not wish to anticipate on the results of our Focus Group responses and deliberations. However, we can state that the movement behind the setting up of the Focus Group was motivated by the following considerations.

The background trends are now considered commonplace, and need little rehearsal:

- Telecommunication has been steadily rising in importance over the last decades, in their contribution to development issues. The ITU expended major research effort since the 1980s to persuade national governments that telecommunication must be regarded a key factor in development, with at least some success. The *Maitland Report (Report of the Independent Commission for World Wide Telecommunications Development: The Missing Link*, ITU, 1984) represented a milestone in this effort.
- At the same time, telecommunication, media and computing have been converging, greatly extending the potential impact of these intertwining sectors, and leading to all kinds of corporate rivalries and alliances.
- New technologies and services have emerged, such as the internet; and existing technologies have become much cheaper and more practical to use, such as radio and video.
- The role of the public sector has been shifting, both nationally and internationally, such that the influence of the corporate sector is greatly increased, either directly or through supportive and intermediary organisations. Privatising public companies is part of this, as well as national and global liberalisation of regulation.
- Global governance structures have been severally strained in the new circumstances, including the ITU, the WTO and others. New structures, formulas and organisations are the order of the day.
- Overall, there has been explosive growth in the reach and variety of telecommunication services, but progress has been extremely uneven with many areas gaining no benefit whatsoever. In general, the gap in terms of access to telecommunication between the poorer and the middle groups has increased.
- Community media, especially radio, have grown exponentially in many parts of the world, and often play a critical role between public and profit oriented media. Such media are generally run as or by NGOs.

However, some recent trends also suggest a new wave of importance of telecommunication.

- Increasingly, knowledge is seen as a major factor in development activities. The capacity to identify and create useful knowledge, to document it, and, critically, networking with that knowledge, storing, sending and receiving it, is increasingly regarded as critical, amongst UN and other multilateral agencies and amongst the large NGOs. The effective use of the internet is by far the most effective tool to engage in such knowledge networking.
- Working with others in partnerships, whether with the Global Knowledge Partnership, the ITU itself, or other, is increasingly the norm, often with public, private and NGO sectors combining together. Again, effective use of telecommunication is an excellent tool to facilitate this.
- In the context of the privatisation of much public media, the community media movement continues its growth. This means that regulation at national and international level will come under pressure to officially recognise the sector. Community Radio, in particular, demands access to the airwaves; community television access to scale and broadcast, even satellite; and the burgeoning community networking groups requires access to the internet at reasonable cost.

All of these factors suggest a further heightening of importance of telecommunication into the future, for development oriented NGOs.

Chapter 2 - NGOs and telecommunications: Actual and potential uses

Aim: To present a wide range of evidence that NGOs do benefit from telecommunication, and can do so much more in the right circumstances.

- An analysis of the impact and potential of telecommunication technologies on development-oriented NGOs, especially in least developed countries. This will offer some systematic or theoretical considerations of the issues, heavily illustrated by examples.
- Some best practice in the use of telecommunication.

Chapter 3 - Barriers to achieving the potential

Aim: To describe the barriers that currently prevent more effective use of telecommunication by NGOs, across a range of areas and environments.

These could be subdivided in several ways, depending on the results.

- National or Immediate: This will analyse the national level barriers e.g. poor network and service coverage, tariff levels, regulation, frequency allocation, information deficits (lack of knowledge of potential), attitudes. etc. etc. We want to pay particular attention to gender based barriers.
- International or Strategic: This could include lack of knowledge on governance structures of telecommunication internationally; frequency allocation or standards at the ITU hindering development of small local media; etc. etc.

Chapter 4 - Conclusions

Aim: To formulate draft Recommendations, and possibly guidelines or best practice models, for consideration by ITU-D Members.

Recommendations will cover the issues raised by the previous sections, and be directed towards NGOs themselves; ITU Members (governments and private sector); the ITU itself; other UN organisations; and bodies and agencies as deemed appropriate.

Annexes:

Summary of submissions received

List of publications considered

ITU and NGOs: The case for mutual cooperation:

Case studies received

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