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| C:\Users\comas\AppData\Local\Temp\Rar$DRa0.735\jpg\ITU official logo_blue_RGB.jpg**RTDAG Working Group on WTDC Preparations**  **30 September 2020, Virtual** | | |
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**Summary**

The third meeting of the TDAG Working Group on WTDC Preparations (TDAG-WG-Prep) took place on 30 September 2020, attended by more than 90 participants.

**Introduction**

The Director of the ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau (BDT), Ms Doreen Bogdan-Martin, welcomed participants and highlighted the significance of this meeting coming just after a very busy week (21-25 September 2020) of 40 high-level digital events at the United Nations General Assembly. A number of these events underscored the importance of the World Telecommunication Development Conference in 2021 (WTDC-21). The world has woken up to the harsh reality that 3.6 billion people are not connected. And what COVID-19 has meant to the unconnected voices makes our work in this preparatory process and the conference itself more important than before, as we need to conclude the conference with a clear roadmap to connect the other half of the world, Ms Bogdan-Martin told participants.

The Chairman of the TDAG Working Group on WTDC Preparations, Mr Santiago Reyes-Borda (Canada), stressed that the world is going through a very difficult situation, one that has highlighted the critical importance of connectivity, access and use and capacity building. He highlighted the three contributions received for this meeting: a joint contribution from Lithuania and the United Kingdom, a multi-country contribution from Argentina, Brazil, Canada and the United States, and a contribution from Egypt.

In total, TDAG-WG-Prep has received eight contributions to date, including the five contributions received from the Russian Federation, Lithuania, EMEA Satellite Operators Association (ESOA) Indonesia and Zimbabwe.

The group will hold its fourth and final meeting on 20 October 2020, and has to submit its final report with recommendations to the TDAG meeting of 23 November 2020 on a way forward for WTDC preparations.

**Approval of the agenda**

The agenda in [Document14](https://www.itu.int/md/D18-TDAG27.WP-C-0014/en) was approved without change.

**Highlights from the presentation of contributions**

The Administrations of the United Kingdom and of Lithuania in their joint contribution in [Document 15](https://www.itu.int/md/D18-TDAG27.WP-C-0015/en) proposed **Building Back Better: Bridging the Digital Divide** as the overall theme for WTDC-21. Presenting this theme, the United Kingdom stated there is nothing more important than closing the digital divide for the part of humanity that is still behind. The COVID-19 pandemic has made starkly clear that digital connectivity, particularly affordable connectivity, affordable from the context of the user, is a prerequisite for economic participation. This is the time for a laser‑like focus to do whatever must be done and bring together the stakeholders from the financial institutions, development banks, development agencies and, of course, the ITU membership to take stock of what is required to finally meet the challenge of ensuring affordable connectivity for all people everywhere and to collaborate on action.

Brazil, as the CITEL focal point for TDAG-WG-Prep, presented the multi-country contribution in [Document 16](https://www.itu.int/md/D18-TDAG27.WP-C-0016/en) stressing that WTDC-21 should be an action‑oriented environment with interactive dialogues between stakeholders aimed at developing a shared understanding of existing barriers and advancing sustainable and innovative solutions for the expansion of connectivity throughout the world, particularly in developing countries. The presentation highlighted several proposals.

There is a proposal to hold up to three interregional meetings (IRMs) before the conference. The regional preparatory focus should be on defining regional priorities or initiatives, revising or drafting time-consuming resolutions, addressing study groups and study Questions-related matters and developing guidelines for the declaration.

WTDC needs to attract new and more diverse participants from the private sector and potential donors. To this end, institutions such as the World Bank, Regional Development Banks, civil society organizations, representatives from marginalized communities, UN Women, UNHCR, UNICEF and others may be involved in the preparatory process, and take on specific roles during the conference.

Consideration should be given to merging the High‑Level Segment and the side events into the thematic events as a Development Track. The thematic or development track should be separate from the administrative aspects of the conference, yet also incorporated into the work of WTDC-21. The development track should aim to conclude after two to three days to maximize senior-level participation and attendance.

The theme of WTDC-21 should focus on promoting universal, secure, affordable connectivity and connecting the unconnected, with due consideration of the role of telecommunication/ICT connectivity in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and addressing the particular needs of vulnerable sectors (indigenous populations, women, the elderly, people with disabilities, youth and so on). In the light of COVID-19, the conference could focus on related experiences, challenges and opportunities and address its impact on advancing telecommunication/ICT connectivity.

Finally, it would be important to identify a list of special guests, including a short list of top or star guests. If the focus is on action‑oriented dialogues, experts with operational or execution experience should be considered. These guests could lead specific sessions within the conference agenda, on topics such as financing of ICT development projects, operation of development agencies and banks and methodology to access their credit lines.

Egypt presented its contribution in [Document 17](https://www.itu.int/md/D18-TDAG27.WP-C-0017/en) proposing to hold two IRMs, one during the first quarter of 2021 and the other after the round of regional preparatory meetings. According to Egypt, holding too many IRMs is not necessary, considering that regional telecommunication organizations will need enough time to finalize their common proposals.

Egypt’s contribution states that the High-Level Segment can be changed to become more interactive, and involve different stakeholders. The first day of the conference could be assigned to the High-Level Segment, which could be in the form of a panel discussion that includes high-level participants attending the conference. Topics of discussion would be decided beforehand.

The proposal underlines that policy statements are considered important for Member States to be able to share their experiences and that WTDC is a good venue for that. In view of this importance, it is suggested that policy statements may be recorded and run on screens in the conference venue as well as on the WTDC online portal. In this regard more work would need to be done to make the online portal more interactive.

The secretariat presented a concept note for WTDC-21, the Youth Summit and the preparatory process in [Document DT/4.](https://www.itu.int/md/D18-TDAG27.WP-200930-TD-0004/en) This document is a compilation of the contributions received, focused specifically on the request of participants at the last two meetings of the group calling for a clear vision of how future WTDCs might look. Essentially, the concept note proposes two segments for the conference: a “Partnership Segment” and an Administrative Segment. The Administrative Segment is the statutory part of WTDC. (Note: “Partnership Segment” and “Development Track” are used interchangeably in this report.)

The “Partnership Segment” would be created through the merger of the High-Level Segment of the conference and the side events and would be open to collaboration with other ITU Bureaux and departments and with external organizations, both in the public and private sectors.

One new element not directly derived from earlier contributions from membership is the Youth Summit, which ITU plans to hold during the two days before WTDC-21. Young people are the ones who will inherit the world that technology is now shaping. It is vital that ITU hears their voices, listens to what they want from technology and that they become part of the solution to the challenges the world is facing.

**Comments, observations and questions**

**Building Back Better: Bridging the Digital Divide**, proposed by the United Kingdom and Lithuania as an overall theme for WTDC-21, received support, with one suggestion that the expression “bridging the digital divide” is old terminology and should be replaced with a more current expression such as “leaving no one behind.”

Participants welcomed the proposal to hold a Youth Summit, with Egypt acclaiming it as an excellent way to engage youth in the work of WTDC and the telecommunication/ICT environment as a whole. Support was also expressed for the idea of organizing a hackathon with the private sector as part of the Youth Summit, as suggested in the multi-country proposal from Argentina, Brazil, Canada and the United States.

Participants asked a range of questions. Of particular note, the Russian Federation asked “what is the purpose of the conference” and went on to underline that this purpose is clearly defined in the ITU Constitution, the Convention, the general rules of conferences, assemblies and meetings of the Union and in Resolution 1 of WTDC. Will there be policy statements? If the plan is to have policy statements within the “Partnership Segment”, will high‑level participants agree to make these statements outside the plenary sessions of the conference? Who will pay for the additional events? The future conference is beginning to look more like a WSIS Forum. While fully agreeing on the need to involve the private sector and other organizations and financial institutions, the Russian Federation went on to suggest that perhaps the format of the High-Level Segment could be a global development forum just before the conference or after the conference.

Saudi Arabia asked how thematic events will influence the outcomes of a contribution-driven conference. How would bringing additional outcomes from non-members into the conference work from a legal standpoint? It should be clear that a conference is a conference and side events are side events. In other words, by definition, members pay their membership fees to ITU. How will non‑members participate? The mainstreaming of side events (normally held over lunchtime) into the conference would increase costs to ITU. Who will pay these additional costs? With different accreditation schemes, how will ITU draw the distinction between members and non‑members?

While Saudi Arabia welcomes innovation, it expressed the concern that just because the door is wide open does not mean that the conference should embrace activities which fall outside its purview and which could take membership away from its main goal and objectives. Saudi Arabia announced that it would submit a contribution to the fourth and final meeting of TDAG-WG-Prep. Meanwhile, it holds the view that as a conference, WTDC should stick to the traditional format of conducting business and negotiating on resolutions. How high‑level representatives would deliver their statements needs to be addressed carefully, as the High-Level Segment is one of the most important elements of the conference.

Recalling the agreement reached at the first meeting of TDAG-WG-Prep recommending that interpretation should be provided in all the six official languages of the Union and that in the absence of a budget, the group’s meetings would be conducted in English only, some delegations reiterated the need to provide interpretation in all six languages for the next meeting, given that it will be the groups’ last and it will discuss the report to be submitted to TDAG-20/3.

Responding to the questions of the Russian Federation, the secretariat stated that the purpose of WTDC has not changed. When reviewing contributions and brainstorming internally, the secretariat has been mindful to ensure that the administrative conference is maintained in the way it is currently done – that is, as a contribution‑driven member-led and member-focused conference. Regarding the timing of events, the secretariat stated that at this point, the assumption is that the Administrative Segment of the conference would make available two to three days for the Development Track, which will include the High‑Level Segment. But this will, of course, depend on how much time is saved through a more effective preparatory process. At any rate, every effort would be made to avoid the situation of the late-night sessions faced at WTDC-17, where, as the Russian Federation pointed out, some documents were submitted to the Editorial Committee too late for it to complete the final report of the conference.

**Draft time management plan for WTDC-21**

Discussion then revolved around a preliminary draft Time Management Plan for WTDC-21 ([DT/5),](https://www.itu.int/md/D18-TDAG27.WP-200930-TD-0005/en) presented by the secretariat. The Administrative Segment of the conference is coded yellow and the thematic events are coded in blue.

The Chairman of TDAG commented that this plan is where the rubber meets the road, as people try to envision how the conference would work and how all of the important work would get done. She made the observation that the purpose of thematic events and their timing need to be made clearer in upcoming discussions and also, that having so many thematic events makes it harder to achieve the impact TDAG aspires to see through WTDC.

When should the Development Track take place? Two days before the conference, two days after the conference opening or two days before the conference closing? Egypt proposed the first day, while Jordan proposed the last two days of the conference, where a draft declaration or some other key document(s) may have been agreed upon, which would help engage with the other stakeholders more constructively. Jordan finds the first week of the conference (the middle days) a good approach, if members want to build on more contributions from other stakeholders. In this regard, the secretariat commented that the question of whether the Development Track would be contribution driven is a matter for membership to consider.

Participants requested the secretariat to map the preliminary daft Time Management Plan to that of WTDC-17 to see how they compare and what needs to be improved. In the words of the Chairman of TDAG-WG-Prep, the draft Time Management Plan will help efforts to structure the flow of the conference in a manner that is consistent with all the very good ideas and suggestions and contributions, taking into account the nature of the conference, the Constitution, the Convention and Resolution 1 of WTDC.

**Conclusion**

Participants agreed that the final report of the group should be structured in line with its terms of reference and provide specific recommendations to TDAG, to be discussed and adopted at its 23 November 2020 meeting. The Chairman and the BDT secretariat will prepare and publish on 9 October 2020 a draft final report of TDAG-WG-Prep, structured in line with the terms of reference of the group and fully reflective of all contributions, proposals and interventions made throughout the four meetings of the group.

The deadline for additional contributions is 11 October 2020. Any contributions received after 7 October 2020 will be reflected in a version two of the draft final report, which will be considered at the final meeting of TDAG-WG-Prep on 20 October 2020.

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