Welcome Address: Joint ITU and G3ict Forum 2008 on The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Challenges and Opportunities for ICT Standards, Geneva 21 April

Mr Malcolm JOHNSON
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Ladies and gentlemen

It's an honour and a pleasure for me to be able to open this meeting today.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is one of the fastest human rights treaties ever adopted.

It is an acknowledgement of this achievement that we have convened this workshop, together with G3ict, to examine how best to take into account the needs of people with disabilities in standards for ICTs. This important constituency of people represents ten per cent of the global population. I can confirm that ITU is committed through its work to extending the benefits of the information society to ALL.

Indeed, the theme of this year's World Telecommunication and Information Society Day is: *Connecting Persons with Disabilities: ICT Opportunities for All*. The purpose of this initiative is to help raise awareness of the possibilities that ICTs can bring to all societies and all economies. On 17 May ITU's Secretary General will award three Laureates who are champions of accessibility.

I believe that standards have an enormously important role to play in making ICTs more accessible. Equally, I believe that ITU-T can lead the way in terms of international standards to achieve this goal. Indeed ITU-T was the first international standards body to address accessibility issues - back in 1991. By 1994 the international text telephone standard, ITU-T Recommendation V.18, was published. V.18 was a major landmark tying together text telephone protocols allowing different - previously incompatible - textphones in different countries to communicate.

Since then, ITU-T's accessibility experts have helped to incorporate accessibility needs into standards for multimedia, network interoperability, multimedia service descriptions and multimedia conferencing, and most importantly created the concept of Total Conversation with real time text.

An example of recent work focuses on taking accessibility needs into account in the development of all standards, from the very beginning. The recently published ' Accessibility Checklist', which will be presented in detail in session two, gives guidance to the makers of standards on how to incorporate the needs of people who have restricted access to ICTs. The Accessibility Checklist is an excellent tool helping to ensure that accessibility needs are included at an early stage of standardization, rather than industry having to retrofit products and services at a later date. Retrofitting can be costly to the

industry. It makes sense to design - for all - from the beginning. In this way we end up with better products and services. Building on this concept is the development of an extension of the ISO 9000 family that would be applicable for building accessible products.

This year we have established a new group to coordinate standardization activities on accessibility and human factors issues. The joint coordination activity on accessibility and human factors (JCA-AHF) is open to experts working in the field to improve access to the information society by people with varied capability of handling information and the controls for its presentation. I would encourage you to take part. The first initiative of this group is the organization of a tutorial on accessibility that will be held tomorrow morning in this room. It is designed to train ITU staff on how to improve the accessibility of ITU facilities such as websites and conferences, you are welcome to attend.

In addition, the Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disabilities, was set up following an ITU proposal, under the Internet Governance Forum. We are proud to have G3ict as a partner and founding member for this initiative. Further, the Development Sector of ITU will be signing today, just before the lunch break, a cooperation agreement with G3ict for the development of an Accessibility Toolkit that will be an invaluable tool for training ICT users in the regions – we will hear more about this excellent initiative from Mr Grin.

One of our current and most important and intensive standardization activities focuses on next generation networks (NGN). Accessibility features were included at the first stage of the standards work when we defined the requirements for NGN. However it is important that these features are implemented into the technical aspects of NGN. So, as standardization work progresses ITU is working to ensure that this continues to happen. The next important step is after the standards are established. At this stage it is for industry to use and implement them including the accessibility features so that everyone benefits. All ITU standards can now be downloaded without charge to help meet this objective.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank all champions that are active in accessibility work in ITU-T and G3ict. It's important work, and there are few experts in the field. There has been a great deal of effort put into preparing this workshop, for which I am very grateful. You have some excellent speakers and a very interesting programme, and I wish you an enjoyable and informative workshop.

Thank you for your attention.