

Interview: Houlin Zhao, Secretary-General elect, International Telecommunication Union

On 23 October 2014 Mr Houlin Zhao was elected [19th Secretary-General](#) of the International Telecommunication Union, the specialized agency of the United Nations responsible for information and communication technology (ICT).

Mr Zhao, you'll take over the reins of ITU on 1 January, 2015. What will be your first order of business?

My first task will be to convene the new management team. We have five elected officials at ITU, including three new and two re-elected officials.

We need to establish a good working relationship between the five of us for the coming four years, and more importantly we need to establish a common vision and a common action plan to lead the Union, based on the Strategic and Financial Plans approved by PP-14.

You campaigned for the consolidation and strengthening of ITU's mandates in the technical realm. What does this mean for you in practical terms?

ITU is a specialized technical agency – this is our history, and still very much our core mandate, across all three sectors: Radiocommunication, Standardization, and Development. I believe that ITU must be positioned as the United Nations' pre-eminent technical agency for worldwide cooperation in terms of spectrum harmonization, global ICT standards that benefit the whole sector, and capacity building and knowledge sharing in every region.

Aside from our very strong technical mandate, our status as a UN-specialized agency means there is also a policy dimension to our work, with socio-economic development through ICTs a major priority. I will continue to strengthen our efforts in this area during my tenure as Secretary-General.

Looking more broadly at the evolution of the ICT industry as a whole, what are the most exciting areas for new developments, in your view?

One of the really major shifts we're now seeing is that world-class technical innovation is not always coming from industrialized nations, nor from the biggest companies. Because ICT networks allow for collaboration across the barriers of space and time, anyone with a good idea can be empowered to make that idea a reality. That means even tiny start-ups in the remotest corners of the world can come up with 'the next big thing' in ICT.

To ensure that the most is made of this opportunity, we need to use ICTs to give young people access to educational opportunities that will enable them to get tech jobs or create their own companies. It's one of the reasons we put a lot of effort into human capacity-building activities such as our Centres of Excellence and our online Internet Training Centres.

I would also like to launch a new 'hi-tech park' platform for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and young entrepreneurs. Looking at the huge number of different companies and industries within the ICT family, I do think that ITU membership has the potential to broaden still further – and I would like to encourage SMEs to join us; in particular, we need to bring young entrepreneurs from developing countries into the ITU fold.

You were elected to the post of Secretary-General unopposed. Why do you believe this was the case?

Over the past two years, ITU's membership has given us strong signals that the Union should be reinforced as a united family. That I stood unopposed in this election reflects this marvellous family spirit.

Furthermore, I see it as an endorsement that our membership is generally satisfied with the direction ITU has been taking, and with the competency of the management team, of which I have already been fortunate to be a member. I am looking forward to taking the helm, and to fulfilling the trust and responsibility that membership has placed in me.

Do you believe ICTs need to be recognized in the UN post-2015 sustainable development agenda?

Our *Connect 2020* ICT targets and programme of activities at PP-14 highlight the many ways that ICTs can make the world a better place, particularly for developing countries which can use technology to overcome chronic hurdles in education, health care, environmental sustainability, agricultural management, and many other areas.

You were a champion of the new category of Academia in ITU membership at the last Plenipotentiary in Guadalajara, Mexico, in 2010. Do you have other plans to further broaden ITU's membership base?

Yes indeed, I think broadening our membership to include universities and academic institutions was a very positive step, and we have had lots of interest from around the world, with already more than 60 new Academia members. For me, this is a great way of engaging talented young researchers and students in the vital work of ITU, and we will continue to promote this opportunity very actively under my leadership.

I'd like to see our network of Academia members grow to over 200 institutions under my first mandate as Secretary-General, creating a new, global research community that can empower young people wherever they live, around the world.

Over the next four years ITU will continue to face budget and financing constraints – what are your plans to address this?

There's no doubt that ITU will need to continue to make efforts to increase efficiency, and I will call for innovative ideas from managers and staff to make gains in productivity and cut costs wherever possible.

Also, while our mandate remains, the tasks we need to undertake to fulfil that mandate are constantly evolving. When budgets are tight, we need to prioritize on the basis of what our members – governments, the private sector and academia – most need from us.

Finally, what do you think ITU membership wants to see from the organization during your first mandate?

Huge gaps in terms of access to and the use of communications technologies still exist, with more than half the global population still offline, and many people who have still not accessed any modern communications tools whatsoever. That's a major impediment to personal empowerment – especially for those unconnected. We need to eliminate those gaps as they are a major stumbling block to socio-economic growth for nations.

The ICT community as it stands today faces some major challenges: the need to reach marginalized communities including the poor, the disabled, and physically remote settlements; the need for new infrastructure investment in areas like fixed and mobile broadband; the need to have confidence in using new ICT services; and evolving market models such as over-the-top (OTT) players. It will be ITU's important and exciting job to help the community it serves to best meet these challenges.

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