

Hopes for the New Secretary-General on the ITU's 150th Anniversary



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This year, we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the ITU. Starting with the telegraph and moving through the telephone, television, and satellite communications, it is not an exaggeration to say that the ITU has brought about today's dramatic advances in information and telecommunications. Considering the facts it is the oldest international organization and the role it has played over the past 150 years, we should truly celebrate the anniversary.

There is another reason to commemorate this year. It is the target year by which the world leaders committed themselves to build an information society at the ITU organized World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). In view of today's proliferation of ICT, we could say that this target has been met magnificently. So it is truly an occasion to celebrate. However, it is quite regrettable that the most ITU people have forgotten this. I think it goes back to when the ITU was first established that such an auspicious occasion tends to be forgotten.

150 years ago, when international telegrams were spreading rapidly through Europe, there existed numerous technical and cost-sharing schemes, because they were operated by individual agreements made by pairs of countries. It was extremely complex and inefficient. Napoleon III called representatives from 20 European countries to Paris, and after several months of deliberation, a unified agreement was reached (International Telegraph Convention) and the International Telegraph Union was established. This was the first international organization established in history and was the origin of the ITU. In fact, the very objective of the foundation, I think, was a source of difficulties within the ITU today.

The ITU was established to provide a venue for operators to coordinate everyday telegraphy operations to run smoothly. As such, it was (1) an organization for practitioners, and (2) decisions were made by consensus, since any agreements would only be meaningful if all related operators could put them into practice. These two basic principles control the ITU to date.

However, the liberalization of telecommunications involves very high level political policy making processes and the ITU, as a gathering of business people, lacks the ability to handle them. The very basic principle of telecommunications industry was handled by the WTO rather than the ITU. It was a fatal flaw for the ITU.

Further, the conflicting issues surrounding telecommunications after liberalization mostly concern policies and regulations more than technology, and the ITU, as an organization of business people and engineers, lacks both the desire and the capability to handle those issues. In a word, the WTO decided to liberalize telecommunications market and the World Bank and its

consultants enforced it. The ITU was left behind.

Further, the ITU, which emphasizes consensus, does not suit to the liberalized telecommunications market. To begin with, consensus decision making is basically incompatible with the principle of free competition where those who make innovations get benefits and the strongest wins. Consensus decision making practice also requires much time. It is too slow for today's advancement of technology.

Decision making rule in the ITU Convention is by majority-rule, but most people participating in ITU activities—whether in a state of paralysis or dogmatically committed to consensus—do not even realize that consensus decision making practice is a major cause of difficulties. If consensus is held sacred, monsters come out insisting on their views on something. Their selfish behavior cannot be discarded and there can be no progress. This has become a common occurrence at the ITU.

As a result, except for the field of radio frequency allocations for which there is no other venue for finding resolutions, people dislike the ITU as a venue to harmonize differing interests. As such, hundreds of private groups—so called Forums—have been established and are replacing ITU activities. Even in the field of radio frequencies, issues such as coordinating satellite orbital positions are being carried out more quickly, directly by parties concerned, and not through the ITU. The ITU is being bypassed.

Regarding development support for developing countries, a relatively new mandate for the ITU, there are also problems. At the ITU Additional Plenipotentiary Conference in 1992, closing the digital divide was taken as a large responsibility, and the Development Sector was created independently from the Secretary-General. Placing such emphasis on development was very good, but ITU participants wanted the Development Sector as their own organization, and completely ignored the practical reality that it would not function unless the Secretary-General used all of its political power to gather funds.

In all U.N. agencies, development activities are carried out by the heads of such agencies with their political leadership exercising their full capabilities.

As a result, ITU's development activities have weakened, all its projects disappeared, and other international agencies and NGOs have been replacing ITU for ICT-related development activities. The ITU Development Sector has become nothing but a place for representatives from developing countries to receive travel expenses from the ITU and attend fruitless meetings.

As the position of the ITU has declined in these ways, the Council, which must be the highest oversight body of the ITU,

has come to consist mainly of just clerks. Rather than a place for solving major managerial problems, it has become a place of trivial, low-level debates and job-seeking exercises.

In order for the ITU to effectively deal with issues like competition policy or Internet governance, its presence has to be elevated, and it must become an organization capable of discussing telecommunications policies. First, as the Director-General of International Affairs of the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications of Japan and later, as the Secretary-General of ITU, I focused my efforts on two things.

The first was to create a “Telecommunication Policy Forum”. As the representative from Japan and with the cooperation of a French delegate who supported the effort, we made a proposal at the Additional Plenipotentiary Conference in 1992. Then, after two years of promotion and preparation, we successfully established the Policy Forum at the Kyoto Plenipotentiary Conference in 1994. Mr. Naomasa Murakoshi and his staff worked hard. The Forum embarked for the first time on solving problems through a secretariat driven method completely different from one taken by conventional ITU activities, by addressing issues with a narrower focus and coordinating various views based on papers prepared by the Secretariat.

The Forum was held four times, and the greatest success was reaching an agreement on the implementation of IP telephony. Incumbent carriers could not have accepted it. IP telephony provides telephone services for almost free disregarding distance, so this agreement has contributed greatly to humanity. It was the result of countless workshops held and the draft agreements written by the Secretariat. However, veteran representatives active in the ITU held antipathy for the Secretariat driven decision-making process, and without adequately understanding the importance of policy issues in a time of competitive markets, the Policy Forum was later abolished.

My second challenge was to organize WSIS. In the history of the U.N., this was the first-ever attempt by a specialized agency that does not have financial resources and experienced staff members to hold a summit attended by heads of state. There were many obstacles, but we held dozens of preparatory meetings under the direction of the Secretariat, and were successfully able to hold the summit twice, in Geneva and Tunis. Reflecting on the events now, it was a totally miraculous success. Art Levin, Tim Kelly and the rest of the ITU staff members put their heart and soul into guiding the events to this success.

As a result, the ITU not only sprang into the forefront of U.N. agencies, but the Secretary-General was in a position that

he could speak to heads of state. The ITU was also tasked with coordinating execution of the summit resolutions. This spanned a wide range of fields centered on development activities. The summit transformed the ITU from a mere technology-oriented specialized agency into an important political one in the U.N. system. In the election for my successor as the Secretary-General, several candidates came forward who were active communications ministers or directors of independent regulatory commission. This was unheard of in the history of the ITU, and also shows how the status of the ITU had changed.

Unfortunately, however, after the Summit there were not enough follow-ups by the ITU and ITU is now being replaced by organizations like UNESCO and the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development, who are performing tasks that ITU should be doing. And, 2015, the agreed-upon target year for building an information society, has all but been forgotten by ITU people.

At this point, it is not useful to look at why the Policy Forum, which had been established so that the ITU could respond to the demands of the times, and the leadership to organize WSIS, which gathered the interest and resolve of world leaders, were not exploited after that. It is important to consider what to do now in the constantly changing world of information and telecommunications, and to find new resolve.

Now that with the information society being implemented at every corner of the globe, the greatest issue in the ICT field is no longer eliminating the digital divide, but rather security. The mission entrusted to the new Secretary-General is for the ITU to take leadership with respect to security issues, and to fulfill this expected role.

Some years ago, when I lead the ITU, Mr. Zhao as the Director of the Standardization Bureau worked with ambition and energy to promote activities of the Standardization Sector through liaising with universities and other standardization organizations and interacting with industries. I hope to see his initial resolve return, and to see him show leadership to rejuvenate the ITU which has been deteriorating with age. The Secretary-General has authority not written in the ITU Constitution and Convention. If he just has the will, I believe it is still possible to resuscitate the ITU, to once again be an organization central to ICT. And rather than being for the sake of the ITU, as Mr. Zhao always said, “As long as the ITU exists, industries and users with ITU playing a central role will be more efficient, not doubling or tripling efforts.” I certainly would like Japan to contribute to his effort.