

Quito Update

Art Levin, Head of the Standardisation Policy Division at ITU-T discusses the Third Symposium on ICTs and Climate Change held in Quito, Ecuador on 8-10 July 2009



Mr. Levin is presently Head of the Standardisation Policy Division in TSB as of 11 August 2008.

Mr. Levin was the lead ITU staff member in the organisation of the two phases of the World Summit on the Information Society and has served as a senior policy adviser and legal counselor with the Union. He organised and was Executive Secretary of the ITU Plenipotentiary Conferences in 2002 and 2006 and previously served in the Legal Office. He was formerly the Legal Adviser of the OECD, is an adjunct faculty member at prominent American law schools, and has published numerous books and articles on telecommunications

Q: What's the ITU's role in combating climate change?

A: Over the last three years, the ITU has decided to become much more involved in the area of climate change. One of the key issues has been to examine the relationship between ICT and climate change. Three years ago, not much was known, other than a lot of anecdotes. Then in 2008, we started to have symposia on ICT and climate change. The first two in 2008 were in Kyoto and London, which concentrated on the issues and concerns of developed countries. Our membership, which

comprises 191 states, really liked these symposia and they issued Resolution 73, asking for further symposia and also looking at the needs of developing countries. The first two symposia also led to the creation of the ITU's Focus Group on ICT and climate change which has already produced an agreed methodology on how you measure the impact of ICT on the climate. We are very excited to have had this invitation from Ecuador for our third symposium in the series. It was also a symposium of firsts. It was the first to be held in a developing country and the first to be held in the Americas, which has a unique take on climate change issues.

Q: What happened at Quito?

A: We had a very full programme of speakers from all sectors including government, the private sector and civil society. We also issued a call for papers and students were also invited to present the papers. What was exciting about it was that we covered a lot of issues that we had not dealt with in previous symposia, for example deforestation is estimated to create about 17-20 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions. This is a huge issue in Latin America which has significant rain forest. It is also a region very much touched by extreme weather events such as hurricanes in the Caribbean. We had a whole session on that. Another big issue for developing countries is cost. The argument from Latin American countries is that they contribute only an estimated four percent of greenhouse gas emissions. They argue that developing countries who are creating the pollution should pay for the solution. For the first time, we had a separate session in our workshop on how you finance the battle.

Something we take for granted in developed countries, when you talk about how you use ICT to combat climate change, is access. When you go to Latin America, they don't have the same access and they still have a long way to go to connect the continent, to increase their broadband capacity. That issue warranted its own session as well. That addressed what we could do on a national and regional basis to speed up

access to ICTs and to make the best use of them to combat climate change.

We also discussed some of the issues we had discussed previously such as adaptation, helping countries that are already suffering the effects of climate change and mitigation, reducing emissions in the ICT sector and how could you use ICT to make reductions in other sectors which is really their most powerful role in this whole problematic.

We had two and a half days of really good presentations and we had excellent speakers mostly from that region with close to 400 participants and 20 of our member states attending with about 600 people following on line each day.

Q: What were the findings from the conference?

A: By the end of the conference, we tabled a set of conclusions. We had not done this at the previous two symposia. I think it is a very good statement about the concerns in Latin America and what needs to be done.

It was a conclusion not a resolution, which for us is a big distinction. Latin America sometimes feels less well heard in the climate change debate and when listening to the presentations, a lot of people were saying very similar things about what their concerns were. We consulted with the chairman and we felt that it would send a good message from the symposium if we were to have a set of conclusions that we could agree to.

Q: What were they?

A: They recognised the special characteristics of Latin America. It is always important to developing countries that efforts to combat climate change should not halt or impede economic or social growth. We recognised that the ICT sector must limit its own carbon footprint and that we need global standards including an agreed methodology to measure the impact of ICTs on climate change. There was a section about e-waste too. Everybody recognises that e-waste is a growing problem and steps need to be taken. In a lot of places, people are

▶ going from analogue to digital and that means that a lot of television is being thrown out. We also talked about the role of ICT as an enabling technology to reduce emissions in other sectors such as smart buildings, smart grids and dematerialisation. This is one of the powerful arguments that we have developed over the last two years, based on some very serious scholarship and a study that was done for the Global E-Sustainability Initiative, a consortium of private companies and the ITU. The studies show that ICT can reduce emissions across the board in all sectors by about by 15 percent and steps have been taken to make it a concrete reality. We also recognised the need for action on the part of developed countries to assist developing countries. We were so pleased with the statement that we sent it to the entire ITU membership.

Q: In future events, how are you going to continue that regional focus?

A: If you look at Quito, there are general concerns that apply to every region and we have some sections that very much highlight the areas of concern in that region, particularly deforestation. We don't have a fixed format for future symposia. We only have one fixed date. We are still discussing where we will host these events. It is up to each symposium if it wants to have a set of conclusions but it is quite likely that any conclusions are going to address general as well as regional concerns.

Q: Such as?

A: One of the things we didn't discuss at all in Quito is the whole issue of deserts and solar power because certainly in Northern Africa, that is a huge issue right now. Another big issue in sub-Saharan Africa is drought and the effect of climate change on agriculture. For London and Kyoto, the programmes were almost identical whereas for Latin America the programme was about 50 percent different: different issue, different topics etc. We will do the same in each region, we will have some of the same kinds of general issues and then identify key issues for each region, but we have already covered Asia and Europe and

now we have done it in America, I am hoping to have an event in Africa but neither is confirmed yet.

Q: How would you move from conclusions to resolutions?

A: Some meetings in the ITU have a higher rank than others. Those are formal meetings that are listed in our constitution and convention and they adopt resolutions. A resolution is not binding however, there are certain obligations. When we had our Standards Assembly in South Africa in October 2008, that was one of the major meetings of the ITU and it is enshrined in our constitution and had formal powers. In South Africa, a strong resolution was adopted on climate change which is Resolution 73. When we have a more informal type of meeting like a Symposium, it doesn't have the authority to adopt a resolution, that is why we adopt terms like conclusion. It is still an important statement. In 2010 we

will have two major events and I would be highly surprised that there wasn't a climate change resolution there.

Q: Are you seeing the outputs from ITU events being taken up in government policy?

A: The ITU doesn't claim credit for everything that happens. When you look at different countries, we have seen a lot more interest in the subject of climate change and the role of ICTs. This was an unknown topic three years ago. At the present there are 37 countries that have binding commitments to reduce emissions. We don't know how many countries are going to make that commitment in ongoing UN negotiations, but these countries recognise the important role that ICTs can play in fulfilling their commitment. That was stated in Resolution 73.

For more information visit:

www.itu.int

