ITU-T Helps Bridge the Asia-Pacific Standards Gap

Art Levin, Head of the Standardisation Policy Division, reports on the ITU Regional Workshop on Bridging the Standardization Gap (BSG) for Asia Pacific Region in July

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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 counsellor 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 was achieved at Fiji?
A: The meeting was part of our general programme on Bridging the Standardisation Gap where we have had workshops in various parts of the world. We had been in Fiji two before and we were asked to come back to help address the needs of the twelve Pacific island states, countries with very specific needs. To help do this, we had a workshop where we explained a little more about what we do in the ITU, discussing some of the hot key topics in standardisation including climate change. On this occasion we had a broader agenda, looking at some spectrum issue with colleagues from the Radio Communication Bureau. We had forty-six participants from a broad range of countries in that area and the event was also co-sponsored by the Korea Telecommunications Commission, the TIA and also with the Pacific Island Telecommunications Association. We are also trying to increase participation by developing countries and last year was the first time that we had more delegates from developing countries than developed countries.

Q: How did you evolve the event from what it was two years ago in Fiji?
A: We did something new on the third day and had a really hands on interactive simulation of a Study Group meeting. Participants could really see what it is like and gain the skills to be involved in a real meeting. The ITU has become very aware that it is important to attract new participants, for example in November we established a new membership category for academia. We have also become concerned that once you walk through our doors it can be a little confusing at ITU meetings. In the simulation we explain what is going on and follow up with questions and answers in a mentoring programme. We give

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► them a taste of the rules the procedures to show how to find the documentation and present their views on something and make a contribution, either orally or in writing. Once you have been through the ropes a couple of times it seems easy but the first time out can be daunting. In the simulation we had a mock issue where participants take different sides, develop a position, submit written contributions and defend their position normally. Then we do an exercise where they have to see what it is like to start building a consensus and negotiate. For some people, this is really quite new.

Q: What are the specific needs in standardization for these very small countries?

A: The thing I find with many of these countries is that they are particularly looking at how the technologies and standards can be best suited to local conditions. Another thing that comes across in developing countries and certainly in this part of the world is that they need communications period. They are also not easy to connect, being small countries with small populations but at the same time being geographically enormous countries with thousands of islands scattered across the ocean. They all mention the difficulties they face in getting all their citizens connected. Standardisation not just about building a mobile phone, we are also doing a lot of work in standards for climate change, measuring the impact of ICTs on this which is a very critical issue out in the that part of the world. These are countries that are literally disappearing under the ocean and so our work on standards in that area is extremely important to them. Spectrum management is something that they have all asked for. At the national level, they all need to decide better on how they use spectrum. Fiji for example was not happy with their national spectrum plan and recently completely redid it, bringing in additional expertise to do that. One of the days I was there for example Fiji announced all the new frequencies for radio stations.

Q: What have you identified in terms of best practice to address these issues?

A: At these workshops, I like to see an outcome on how the ITU can best help the countries in the region. We decided early on that we wanted the workshop to come up with action points on the key needs in that part of the world. Then we asked them where they needed the most help which was on

conformity assessment, spectrum management best practice and developing national spectrum allocation tables. Population wise they are small countries so they also want to consider the best ways that they can co-operate and collaborate amongst themselves such as having one delegate to speak on their behalf. We are also looking at scalability and adaptable solutions. When you do a standard it may work for a country of 100m people but how does it work in a country of 30,000 people. They also want us to help develop national regional ICT standardisation strategies with roadmaps and capacity building always being mentioned in a number of areas. Also, it is not always clear who we should be communicating with so each country is considering establishing a focal point to co-ordinate standardization activities at the national level. One of the keys I find, particularly in developing countries and particularly for those with smaller populations is that they just don't have a strategy and changing that is usually the first step. We did a big report two years ago on bridging the standardisation gap and obviously you need the people who can prepare a strategy but you can always get outside expertise to help do this so we think having national strategy is probably the most important step.

Q: How will the next workshop be different based on what was concluded here?

A: As a global organisation, we are trying to help every region that needs helps. Our next climate event is in Algeria next month. This is the first real event we have done in North Africa and the Middle East. If you want to interface with the ITU in a workshop the presentations and information are pretty standard. What we also want to look at are some of the critical needs for the region and certainly in the area of climate change these can be quite different. If you go to Algeria, the issues of solar power and desertification there are not the same issues as for the Pacific island states. We try to adapt to each region. In the area of climate change some are affected already. In some other parts of the world they are not seeing the most direct impact yet but they will.

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