



A Commonwealth ICT Perspective

**Tim Unwin, Secretary-General,
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InterComms talks to Professor Tim Unwin of the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation

Q: ICTs for people with disability is a priority area of the CTO, can you please explain the role the CTO is playing in the Commonwealth to ensure this important issue is given the importance it deserves? And what should Commonwealth countries do to ensure people with disabilities are not excluded when it comes to the use of ICTs?

A: This can be answered in two main ways, first with respect to policy issues, and second through our more practical capacity development and implementation activities. In 2012, the CTO convened the first ever ICT and disabilities summit in the Commonwealth, and reached agreement on eight main ways through which the rhetoric surrounding the use of ICTs by people with disabilities can be turned into reality:

1. The adoption of e-inclusion on the CHOGM agenda;
2. Policies and practices so that people with disabilities should have equal access to ICTs and accessible information, without having to pay a premium for it;
3. An e-inclusion champion in every Commonwealth country;
4. An e-inclusion policy in every Commonwealth country;
5. The sharing of examples of existing good practice in the Commonwealth and beyond;
6. Government and business use of ICT procurement to encourage inclusive design;
7. The Accessible Technology Charter; and
8. Effective training programmes on e-inclusion for governments, the private sector and civil society.

These were endorsed by Commonwealth ICT Ministers meeting in London in 2014, who also added the recommendation that “Universal service and access funds can be used effectively to support all underserved people,

including those with disabilities”. Sadly, although we submitted the proposal that this theme should be included in the CHOGM declaration, those responsible for drafting the communiqué did not see fit to include it.

Nevertheless, we are moving forward in very practical ways, including for example, a major workshop in Antigua and Barbuda in February 2015 to bring together people with disabilities, policymakers and practitioners in the Caribbean to develop practical actions to enable these ideas to be implemented. We intend to roll similar workshops out in other parts of the Commonwealth in the future.

I should also stress that in everything we do the CTO works together collaboratively in partnerships, so that we reduce the amount of duplication and overlap in this important area, and we greatly value the good working relationship that we have with the ITU and G3ICT in particular.

Q: Given the CTO’s work in the developing world, how are new technologies helping to deliver services and bridge the digital divide there? Is the divide getting bigger in developing countries?

A: It rather depends on how you look at it. I actually don’t like the term “bridging the digital divide” at all, because it is not really an appropriate metaphor! ICTs are an accelerator, and so those who have access to them and the knowledge of how to benefit from them, are able to gain considerable benefits. Those who don’t have access are therefore left increasingly further behind. However, there has definitely been a vast expansion in the usage of ICTs in poorer countries of the world, and so to an extent it is true to say that many of these countries are indeed benefiting. Indeed, some can truly be said to be at the cutting edge, with Kenya’s experiences in the use of mobile banking (Safaricom’s M-PESA) frequently being cited as a real example of African

- ▶ cutting-edge technology and innovation. The challenge, of course, is to ensure that the poorest and most marginalised communities and individuals do also indeed benefit, and that is an important part of the mission of the CTO.

Q: The CTO has recently been involved in a lot of work on protecting the young and vulnerable online. In your view, what should regulators and governments do to protect the young and vulnerable?

A: Again, this is a really tough question. I don't think that child/youth online protection is merely a matter for governments and regulators. We all have responsibility for ensuring safe and sensible use of the Internet. This is not just an issue about obvious things such as sexting, child online pornography, or cyber bullying, but is actually much more pervasive in terms of the material that young, and not so young, people are willing to put online about themselves. Many global corporations have benefitted hugely by giving people something apparently for "free" when actually what they gain from so doing is much more valuable than the cost of the service offered; that is where their shareholders take profit! In essence, we need to encourage everyone to be much more aware of what they are "giving away" about themselves when they post things on the Internet, or indeed use Cloud solutions. For me, the role of governments is therefore primarily to provide resources so that users are more aware of the challenges associated with the use of the Internet. There are certainly those in government who are afraid of the potential damage that social media can do to society and therefore seek to restrict such usage. For me, this is ultimately unrealistic. It is rather like trying to put the genie back into the lamp! Governments need to work closely with such companies, so that they both better understand each other, and can work together to resolve potential challenges. I do, though, think that in most instances existing legislation can usually be used to resolve difficult legal situations, except in circumstances where there are cross-state or jurisdictional issues involved, and there is not necessarily a need to develop a separate raft of cyber-legislation. So, the short answer to your question is that governments and regulators need to do much more to ensure that users are much better educated about the risks, as well as the benefits, of their use of the Internet and digital technologies.

Q: With the telcos (or CSPs as they like to be called) transforming their business into digital offerings, how do you envisage this change and where are the most likely problems?

A: To answer this, one needs to look at the medium-term structural processes ongoing in the telecommunications sector, differentiating the roles played by the infrastructure providers (be they cable or satellite companies), the operators (again fixed line or mobile), and those who provide the mechanisms for people to gain content (ranging from app developers, to publishers, and those selling media). Many analysts argue that "voice is dead" and "the future is data".

Those operators whose business model is focused primarily on voice, and are unable or unwilling to restructure their pricing policies are clearly going to be hit by such a shift. However, some traditional voice traffic will remain for a long while yet, especially in countries that do not currently have fully developed 3G or LTE systems. In the longer term, those operators who work collaboratively with over-the-top (OTT) service providers are more likely to be able to survive, despite the threat provided, than those who seek to compete.

Q: With many companies looking but not leaping on issues such as content and media delivery, where do they need to invest and where do they need to stay clear, and how are you looking to educate in this area?

A: This depends very much on the kind of companies that you are interested in. In many countries much of the available bandwidth is as yet insufficiently used, and so those companies that have invested in the pipe are desperate to encourage greater usage so as to recoup some of their investment. This is one of the reasons why there is such attention paid to the provision of educational and health-related content online. If governments can be persuaded to deliver much educational content over the Internet, for example, then those who provide connectivity are likely to be able to generate considerably more revenue than would otherwise be the case. Moreover, there is substantial discussion about the importance of local content development, be it for education, rural development, entrepreneurship or health, and were this to become extensive then this could be the source of considerable income generation for local companies. The dominant trend nevertheless seems to be for major international content providers, and those providing content through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), to seek to dominate local markets, in part on the grounds that if a course is developed at a prestigious institution in the USA then it is likely to be better than content developed locally in a poor country.

Q: Big data and data centres are an ongoing topic. Using vast amounts of data for trend analysis and to provide correct services to the end user, are CSPs swapping the data for personal customer service?

A: To me, this is not the biggest challenge with arguments about big data. Whilst there are those who assert that big data can be used to solve some of the world's biggest problems, from understanding the spread of diseases to managing climate change, I am less sanguine. The reality is that companies are eager to get their hands on as much data as possible so as to find new ways of generating profit. There are indeed many ways to do this, and there is real potential for innovative new entrants into the market place to exploit exciting new data mining opportunities. That having been said, the established giants, be they companies that began as major search engine providers or social media corporations, are investing so heavily in this field that most new entrants will find it difficult to compete. ▶



- ▶ I also have some doubts about the proliferation of data centres. No poor countries are going to be able to compete with the data farms of the major corporations and Cloud providers, and the trend for so many countries to build regional data centres, albeit for sound security reasons, is likely to lead to considerable over-capacity and redundancy.

Q: The CTO is regularly talking about its strategic programmes and future path. Could you explain what they are and why you are looking at this strategy?

A: Our current strategic plan, with its six priority areas (Mobile Broadband, Regulatory Environments, Cybersecurity, Youth and ICTs, ICTs for People with Disabilities; and ICTs for Skills Development and Entrepreneurship) runs until 2016, and so it is right and proper that we should be considering what new priority areas we should focus on. These original six were generated from a comprehensive stakeholder review alongside the thoughts of members of the CTO Council and Secretariat, and it is right and proper that we should now be reviewing this, identifying which are still seen as appropriate, and which new areas we might focus on instead. It is too early to say what these might be, but I imagine that many of the areas will remain the same since we have built an enviable reputation in delivering effective value for money services in them to our members.

Q: With your global events up coming, what will you be discussing and why should our readers attend?

A: Our major international events seek to do three main things for our members and delegates: provide

opportunities for them to gain up-to-date information about key issues affecting the sector; network with their peers to identify good practices that they can apply in their own contexts; and meet with colleagues from different types of organisations interested in building multi-stakeholder partnerships to deliver effective solutions. Our next major event, the Commonwealth Broadband Forum to be held in Nairobi on 17th - 20th November will thus provide an important forum for exploring aspects of mobile broadband strategy development and practical implementation from across the Commonwealth. Likewise our HR for ICT event in India on 3rd - 5th December will provide opportunities for ICT companies to explore ways through which they can improve their HR strategies and practices. Early next year, we will be convening our annual African Digital Broadcasting Switchover Forum to support governments and companies involved in the crucial switchover from analogue to digital broadcasting in 2015, and we will be holding another Cybersecurity Forum in Cameroon.

As well as these large events, we also run several smaller workshops and events in our key priority areas to provide more specific updates and training for participants in the latest ideas and practices in ICT for development on topics ranging from Critical Information Infrastructure Provision to the Use of ICTs by People with Disabilities.

For more information about the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation please visit: www.cto.int or email info@cto.int



Recent Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation Forum 2014 in Dhaka Bangladesh which addressed some key issues on Youth and ICTs and Broadband Technology