

Touré on Telecoms



Robert Alcock talks to the ITU Secretary-General, Dr Hamadoun Touré



Dr Hamadoun Touré, ITU Secretary-General

Dr Hamadoun Touré has been progressively occupying strategic positions over the past 26 years in the Technical, Operational, Marketing and Management fields.

Dr Touré was first elected Director of the Telecommunications Development Bureau (BDT) of the International Telecommunication Union at the Plenipotentiary Conference in Minneapolis (October 1998). As Director of the BDT he had the opportunity to plan and implement development strategies in accordance with the decisions taken at the Valletta World Telecommunications Development Conference (WTDC-98). He made significant contributions to transforming the Regulatory environment and cultivating a new type of relationship with the Private Sector and succeeded in creating result oriented Public-Private Partnerships aimed at mobilizing more resources for the development of the information and communication sector.

Dr Touré's contribution was rewarded with his reelection as Director of BDT at the Marrakech Plenipotentiary Conference (October 2002). His reelection gave him the unique opportunity to supervise the implementation of two action plans, i.e. Valletta and Istanbul Action Plans, and to spearhead the adoption of a third Action Plan by the Doha

World Telecommunications Development Conference (WTDC-06). In his current position he has played a significant role in the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) process by way of launching numerous projects based on partnership building with International Organizations, Governments, Civil Society and the Private Sector.

Q: Dr Hamadoun Touré, what would you say is the future of ITU?

A: ITU is the leading United Nations agency dealing with information and communication technology issues, and the global focal point for governments and the private sector in developing networks and services. In an environment where ICTs are the powerhouses of the global economy and offer real solutions towards generating sustainable economic growth and prosperity, I would say ITU has an extremely important role to play in laying the foundations for the future growth and development of the ICT sector.

For nearly 150 years, ITU has coordinated the shared global use of the radio spectrum, promoted international cooperation in assigning satellite orbits, worked to improve telecommunication infrastructure in the developing world, established the worldwide standards that foster seamless interconnection of a vast range of communications systems and addressed the global challenges of our times, such as mitigating the impact of natural disasters and climate change and strengthening cybersecurity.

ITU Telecom World, a global ICT showcase and networking platform, brings together the most influential representatives of government and the ICT industry to exchange ideas, knowledge and technology for the benefit of the global community. The 40th anniversary of ITU Telecom shows the resilience of this important event in the fast-moving ICT world. A highlight of this year's event will be a Broadband Leadership Summit that will explore the future growth of networks and services for a connected world, further highlighting ITU's pivotal role as the leading intergovernmental agency for ICTs.

Q: What do you perceive are the greatest gains in the Telecoms arena since you became Secretary-General?

A: Since 2007, when I took office as Secretary-General of ITU, the ICT sector has grown in leaps and bounds, but the most phenomenal growth has been seen in mobile telephony, particularly ►

- ▶ in developing countries. Mobile subscriptions worldwide now number over 5.3 billion, and are growing steadily with dramatic increases in Africa, China and India. Convergence in technologies have led to awe inspiring developments in ICTs that are readily available to everyday users, such as streaming video, satellite navigation, music, VoIP, cameras and a host of other apps all on one mobile device.

Mobile cellular and Internet user penetration have grown impressively in all regions of the world. Just look at some of the astonishing figures:

- Mobile cellular penetration in Africa in 2010 (45.2%) was higher than mobile cellular penetration in the Americas in 2004 (42.8%). Mobile cellular penetration in the Americas had grown to 94.5 per cent by 2010.
- Mobile cellular penetration in Asia and the Pacific in 2010 (69.2%) was higher than mobile cellular penetration in Europe eight years earlier (67%). Mobile cellular penetration in Europe had grown to 117.7 per cent by 2010.
- Internet user penetration in Africa grew over twenty-fold in the decade to 2010, from 0.5 per cent to 10.8 per cent. This gave Africa higher Internet user penetration in 2010 than in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) five years earlier. In the CIS, meanwhile, Internet penetration grew from 10.2 per cent in 2005 to 34 per cent in 2010.
- Internet user penetration in Asia and the Pacific grew from 3.3 per cent in 2000 to 22.5 per cent in 2010, bringing it close to Internet user penetration in Europe nine years earlier (23%). By 2010, Internet user penetration in Europe had grown to 67 per cent.

Q: What technology can help provide a truly global system?

A: Technological ubiquity has been on the increase and mobile phones and the Internet have already permeated all aspects of human life in many parts of the world. There's a whole gamut of information and communication technologies to meet specific requirements, and ITU plays a key role in developing the standards to ensure that these are interoperable globally. We are advocating the roll out of broadband and next-generation networks as a means of connecting every corner of the world to the information and communication highways and build a knowledge-based information society. While there is no one technology that can be singled out as a truly global system, satellite communications have a global footprint and are used extensively for communication of all kinds, from television broadcasting to satellite navigation and mobile communications. At ITU, which manages orbital slots for satellites, we also promote satellite broadband communications for the rapid deployment of telecommunications in the remotest corners of the world in the aftermath of natural disasters.

Q: Which countries are setting an example in socio-economic policy through telecommunications?

A: Countries around the world have put in place regulatory policies and frameworks to ensure a level playing field for investment and growth in the telecommunications and ICT sector, and these steps have played an important role in ensuring the sustained growth

of this sector. At the same time, these policies have ensured that dividends accruing from the dynamic growth in the ICT sector are matched by a favourable sociological impact. The World Summit on the Information Society, which met in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005, emphasized the social dimension of ICTs with a clear focus on achieving the Millennium Development Goals and "building a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society". The political leadership around the world committed themselves to achieving these goals, and some countries have taken important steps to achieve them. Finland, for instance, has legislated that all its citizens would have equal opportunity to use digital services. India is committed to connecting every village by 2015. And countries in Africa have pioneered new ways of using mobile services to provide amenities such as health care and banking facilities.

Q: What do you feel is your best achievement in office?

A: Under my watch, ITU has played a stellar role as an intergovernmental agency coordinating the work of policy makers and the industry. The ICT sector has gone from strength to strength, consistently introducing new innovations and showing steady economic growth with a bullish outlook despite the recent global economic downturn. I have seen mobile subscriptions break the 4 billion mark and steadily climb beyond 5 billion. I have seen 400 per cent growth rates in the mobile sector in Africa along with phenomenal growth in China and India. I am now anticipating the advent of IMT-Advanced, the next-generation mobile standards that will no doubt bring a fresh spurt of innovation and growth. This follows the increasing convergence of ICT services and applications and I was delighted when ITU's work in developing the H.264 standard for streaming television was recognized with an Emmy Award in Hollywood.

Working with other UN agencies and our Membership, we are steadily promoting the roll out of broadband services around the world as well as next-generation networks, which will go a long way in achieving our commitment to connect the world with ICTs and act as catalysts to meet the Millennium Development Goals.

In 2010, along with UNESCO, I launched the Broadband Commission for Digital Development which prepared a report under the chairmanship of President Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Carlos Slim Helú, Chairman of Grupo Carso, and presented it to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. The aim is to make broadband affordable with universal access to information and knowledge, empowering people everywhere to harness the full potential of ICTs to meet their aspirations and objectives.

We have also addressed some of the pressing global challenges of our times, such as finding ICT solutions to combat climate change and strengthening our response in deploying emergency telecommunications in the aftermath of natural disasters. And I take great pride that the Global Cybersecurity Agenda is undertaking stringent measures to ensure a safer, more productive environment for ICT users around the world.

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