What are the International Telecommunication Regulations — and why do they matter?

ON 3-14 DECEMBER 2012, an historic conference will be convened in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies, or ICTs.

The World Conference on International Telecommunications 2012 (WCIT-12)[1] will review the international treaty that is the basis of today's connected world: the International Telecommunication Regulations, known for short as the ITRs. They underpin how we communicate with each other by phone or computer, with voice, video or data, and across the globe.

The ITRs were agreed in 1988 at the World Administrative Telegraph and Telephone Conference in Melbourne, Australia, and came into force in 1990. They are one of the four treaties[2] forming the foundation of ITU's mission, and 178 countries are bound to the ITRs.

Treaty-level provisions are required for worldwide networks and services. The ITRs set out principles for ensuring that networks can connect with each other smoothly, and that international services will be offered in a fair and efficient manner.

They comprise ten articles dealing with such matters as cooperation among national administrations; giving priority to emergency telecommunications, and how to calculate the charges for traffic exchanged between carriers in different countries. The ITRs laid the foundation for privatization, competition and deregulation that created the conditions for growth in ICTs, including the Internet, that we see today.

ADAPTING TO THE FUTURE

But the environment has altered dramatically since 1988. Back then, the three pillars underpinning telecommunications were time, distance, and location. These have all become significantly less important in terms of global services today. Governments have re-evaluated their policies and much of the sector has been privatized and liberalized.

There is increasing use of networks and applications based on the Internet protocol, or IP, which leads to the growing importance of cybersecurity. Technological convergence has blurred the distinction between voice and data traffic, and even inexpensive mobile phones are in fact sophisticated computers. Data volumes are rising much quicker than growth in the infrastructure needed to carry them.

Meanwhile, some companies offer web-based services that are growing in popularity, but which use increasing amounts of network capacity without necessarily generating larger revenues for the companies that provide the infrastructure. The market is evolving fast, just as demand is booming worldwide. How is new infrastructure to be expanded to cope with demand (especially in developing countries), and who should pay for its expansion and its use?

>

>

There is consensus that the ITRs must be adapted to match our rapidly changing world. Differing proposals have been put forward on how best to do this, but all agree that there must be international cooperation. Governments and the private sector will play complementary but distinct roles. Governments establish sound regulatory frameworks, and the private sector provides the investment. Together this will ensure that infrastructure is built — to the benefit of consumers and the ICT sector as a whole.

The preparatory process for the World Conference on International Telecommunications is led by a working group of ITU's Council that is open to ITU's 193 Member States and the more than 550 Members of ITU's three Sectors — Radiocommunnication, Telecommunication Standardization, and Telecommunication Development. These Sector Members (private companies, scientific or industry organizations, financial and development institutions, and other organizations dealing with telecommunication matters) include some of the largest ICT firms in the world.

In addition, input has been welcomed from the more than 200 associates and academic institutions involved in ITU's activities, as well as many other entities that have participated in the series of information sessions and regional preparatory meetings held around the globe in 2012. Further information sessions are planned this year.

Proposed changes or additions to the ITRs can be summarized under the following headings:

- Human right of access to communications
- Security in the use of ICTs
- Protection of critical national resources
- International frameworks
- Charging and accounting, including taxation
- Interconnection and interoperability
- Quality of service
- Convergence.

(Details of topics to be discussed at WCIT-12 are provided in further Background Briefs.)

ITU is convening WCIT-12 at the specific request of its 193 Member States — each of which, regardless of size or wealth, has the same voice as every other. ITU is the democratic meeting place for the global telecommunication and ICT community to develop and decide, cooperatively, what it wants.

The right to communicate has been central to ITU's mission since its foundation in 1865. Many feel that the time has now come to build on the success of the existing ITR treaty and pave the way for a fully inclusive information and networked society over the next decade: one that ensures the entire world's people can gain equitable and affordable access, not only to traditional phone services, but also to the online broadband world of tomorrow.

———————

[1] For details of WCIT-12 see: www.itu.int/en/wcit-12/Pages/default.aspx

[2] The three other treaties are the ITU Constitution, ITU Convention, and the Radio Regulations.