

ACCESS TO ICTs - FOR THE SPECIAL CHILD

World Telecommunications Day is celebrated on the 17th May every year to commemorate the setting-up of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the signing of the first International Telegraph Convention in 1865.

The theme for this year's World Telecommunications Day "Connecting the Young: the opportunities of ICTs" reaffirms International Telecommunications Union's commitment towards helping the world to communicate, specially the young.

We agree with the ITU that young people are the best promoters of ICTs and are key contributors to building an inclusive society. As expressed by the Secretary General of ITU Dr. Hamadoun Touré, "In an increasingly networked world, the young are not only the beneficiaries but often the driving force behind latest innovations and practices and for many the dependence on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has come to determine their choice of lifestyle".

The ITU, recognizing the importance of ICTs for the youth, held its first Youth Forum for Asia Pacific Region, in conjunction with Telecom Asia Exhibition and Forum in Hong Kong in year 2002. The main objective being to create a platform for talented young students in the region to participate in the Union's events and discussions encouraging them to meet the future challenges concerning ICTs. Two young people are sent from Sri Lanka each year to participate in these events. The selection is made in accordance with an established selection procedure. We had the opportunity to witness some of the sessions which were mainly focused on training and technology, regulation and policy, financing and investment, society and culture. Events of this nature would certainly motivate emerging young talent. The World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) has recognized that today's young people are tomorrow's leaders and Member States were given this opportunity to take advantage of the offer for participation in the Youth Forum.

In Sri Lanka, the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission commenced a project to enable the young who are with various types of disabilities to access ICTs. In the early stages we concentrated on providing basic telecommunication facilities for people with disabilities. Later considering the fact that young people with disabilities are information deprived to a great extent we found a way to provide assistance for them to have access to ICTs. The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission became a direct link between service providers and people with disabilities for provision of services and equipment to fulfil the communication needs of these people. We are focusing mainly on young people with disabilities to enable them to be members of an inclusive society in the near future.

As the early excitement gave way to new fears people in the developed world wondered as to how people in developing countries and least developed countries could make use of this new found technology which seemed to be incredible. Many developing countries faced challenges bravely and initiated action to create well informed societies. It is clear that connectivity is the central enabling agent and all stakeholders should be involved in facing challenges when building an information society in Sri Lanka. It is also important to understand that the digital divide could be a factor to create several other divides at a fast pace.

It was amazing to find the excitement among young people with disabilities who were craving to learn on how to use a computer. Accepting the fact that only a true and an effective collaboration of all concerned could help to fulfil the hopes of these children the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission commenced the project *eNABLE* – to provide the young with access to ICTs.

For young people with hearing impairments there are technological solutions which could certainly help them to communicate with others. Assistive technologies were provided to a school for hearing impaired children in Matale. A Solaris Group Hearing System is ready to be installed at the Centre for education for children with hearing impairments in Dalugama, Kelaniya. Normally children with hearing impairments are rarely correctly diagnosed and given proper treatment. Even if correctly diagnosed they are not given a systematic education. This system contains a

wireless FM microphone and personal receivers with built-in hearing-aids giving complete control over the user's entire hearing experience.

The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission in partnership with service providers helped to provide the system to enable hearing impaired children to learn to speak without using the sign language. Sister Greta who is the driving force behind this successful institution is being assisted by Ven. Velamitiyawe Kusalahamma Thero and Rev. Father Aloysius Peris.



Teaching a child with hearing & speech impairments to speak.

A fully equipped computer laboratory with ADSL facilities to access the Internet has been provided for the School for hearing impaired children at Ratmalana. These children seemed to be quite competent in accessing ICTs.



School for hearing impaired Children – Ratmalana

In the North Central Province we have provided a fully equipped computer laboratory with computers printers, facsimile facilities and a photocopier to enable women and young people with disabilities to learn and earn.

For the Ratmalana, school for children with visual impairments a computer with Braille facilities and HAL System (speaking software) has been provided with other necessary equipment. Same facilities will be provided to Vocational Training Centres for young people with disabilities in Seeduwa and Tangalle. A fully equipped computer laboratory is provided for Wattegama Vocational Training Centre for young people who have various forms of disabilities. Presently we are studying the possibility of Internet access to a school for hearing impaired children in Matale, where computers are available to be installed.



School for hearing impaired children – Matale. Children using assistive technologies to communicate with others.

All computers and accessories are new and of good quality. Certain centres have been refurbished by service providers for the users' convenience and comfort.

In Angunukolapelessa, it became a dream come true for these children who are now able to access ICTs in comfort in a well equipped laboratory due to services and equipment provided jointly by the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission and a service provider.

In enabling the young with access to ICTs our aim is to promote empowerment, employment and to link them with others at global levels as well as national levels where equal opportunities would be available for them to live in an inclusive society.

Access to telecommunications is an issue that had been discussed at various forums. A special Study Question was developed on this topic at the World Telecommunications Development Conference (WTDC) held in Doha in March 2006. At the Rapporteurs' Group Meeting held in Geneva in April 2007 it was highlighted by the ITU the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly the landmark Convention on the "Rights of Persons with disabilities" which has specific reference to communication services and equipment for people with disabilities. We hope that this would proclaim loud and clear that nothing is impossible for the "special child" provided they get the right kind of support.

A true commitment by all concerned have contributed greatly for the success of this project. The eNABLE Project is now recognized by the ITU for similar development initiatives in other parts of the world.

We, in the regulatory environment would fervently hope that the young would be able to develop new skills by having equitable access to ICTs as well as economic, social and cultural resources. Creating an enabling environment is not easy but certainly the joint efforts of many will help our young people to have a greater economic and social interaction with the rest of the world with the help of ICTs.

It is important to recognize at the same time that these developments in technologies must be used for noble values in life. It is only then that all young people, irrespective of whether they are with disabilities or not could make this world a better and a brighter place for all.

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