

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is an honour to be a part of this eminent panel and noble summit. I am grateful to the conference organizers for inviting me and for facilitating my participation.

I would like to share with you the very first steps taken by the Universal Service Obligation Fund of the Department of Telecommunications, Government of India, in the direction of ensuring accessibility of ICTs to Persons with Disabilities in rural India.

We are all familiar with the concepts of Universal Access and Universal Service, in pursuance of which, nations across the world have put in place mechanisms to ensure the availability, affordability and accessibility of telecommunications services to their populations irrespective of whether they reside in rural or urban areas and their paying capacities. The systems and structures of Universal Service Funds and Administrations may differ, but the objectives are consistent across the globe. They arise from an acceptance of the rights of every citizen to have an equal opportunity to participate in the digital world which has now become the sine qua non for equality of socio-economic and political opportunities

Access to ICTs for the disabled is often included as a part of the legal definition and scope of Universal Service. This has been done in Australia, various states of the United States of America, and nations in Europe, Africa and Asia.

In India, Universal Service Obligation is legally defined as the obligation to provide access to telecommunications services to people in rural and remote

areas at reasonable and affordable prices. In pursuance of this mandate, the Indian USOF has implemented a number of schemes to ensure public access to telecommunications and to promote greater household penetration. These include schemes for shared mobile infrastructure and services, broadband, and shared and open access optical fibre networks.

While there is no specific mention of persons with disabilities in the primary and secondary legislation which regulate and govern the scope of activities of the Universal Service Obligation Fund, there has been no doubt in our minds that this mandate requires us to ensure that **all** sections of the target population who on account of their location, income, gender or various disabilities face unique challenges in accessing ICTs, must be provided with access on equal terms.

Accordingly, we initiated our programme for ICTs for the disabled in October 2010. While taking the preliminary steps towards our programme, we were acutely conscious of the fact that India has one of the **largest** disabled populations in the world. According to the World Bank the figure would lie between 40 to 80 million. Of these about 50% are illiterate and only 34% employed. Significantly, 75% reside in rural India which is the focus of the Universal Service Fund's activities.

Particularly in rural India, and I quote 'poverty and disability often form a vicious circle. Poverty, many a times becomes a cause of disability, due to malnutrition, disease and lack of access to medical help.' Unquote.

A rural family's efforts towards treatment, rehabilitation, education, assistive aids etc can act as a drain on the family's limited resources. The disabled member often remains a non-earning member of the family due to lack of opportunities. The disabled in rural India face many barriers to inclusion. To begin with, they may find it difficult to communicate (as in case of a speech or hearing impaired individual) and to lead lives of self-reliance and dignity. If at all they and their families are aware of assistive devices and technologies and if at all these are available, the cost may be prohibitive. In the absence of the same, they are often deprived of the ability to communicate effectively, to access information and education. Their disability brings in its wake isolation and marginalization.

There is another segment of the population which has similar needs. According to our Eleventh Five Year Plan document, the number of elderly persons in the Indian population is expected to increase from 71 million in 2001 to 173 million in 2026. A majority, (80%) of this elderly population lives in rural India. This makes service delivery to them a challenge. After contributing actively to the nation's development, elderly people often get isolated within the four walls of their homes, completely dependent on family members for basic day-to-day activities. Even simple arthritis could restrict an elderly person from going to the market place, bank, cinema house and so on.

The Constitution of India guarantees equality, freedom, justice and dignity of all individuals and implicitly mandates an inclusive society for all including the persons with disabilities. Suitable policies and programmes have been laid down and initiated by various Ministries and Departments of the Government of India

to address the needs of the disabled, with the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment being the nodal ministry.

The fact that India is one of the 106 nations that has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also legitimately compels us to address the distinct barriers to access, faced by the disabled. In recognition of the significance of ICTs, the UNCRPD has stressed the obligation of the state to ensure access to ICTs to the disabled.

It is apparent that by helping them to effectively communicate and access various services (such as health, education and Government services), information and employment opportunities etc, ICTs can play an important role in facilitating the socio-economic and political inclusion and mainstreaming of persons with disabilities. However to play this role ICTs must be available, affordable and truly accessible in the sense that they can be used as effectively by the disabled as by any other person. We realize that in addressing the needs of individual and public access to ICTs for the disabled in rural India, we will also benefit the significant proportion of rural Indians who are aged or illiterate and need assistive technologies (ATs) to enable them to access ICTs.

Given this appreciation, our objectives and role became very clear as we set about to initiate our Programme. However, given our inexperience in this area and the challenges we anticipated and in order to test our approach, it was decided to launch a number of pilot projects first.

These pilot projects will facilitate the provision of ICTs with Assistive Technologies, by way of telecommunications infrastructure including mobile phones, computers and other IT hardware, assistive software and content (including real time information and data banks of books and other relevant material in regional languages). The projects would also cover the aspect of training of both facilitators and persons with disabilities in the use of ATs. The projects are envisaged to cover people with various forms of disability including inter alia sensory (including vision and hearing), cognitive and motor disability.

We understand that for our projects to be successful, we would need to follow a multi-stakeholder approach. Most of all to we would need to involve the disabled community and their representatives in scheme design. In this initiative, USOF has also enlisted the assistance of various stakeholders including inter alia telecom service providers, telecom equipment manufacturers, applications and content providers, Non Government Organizations, and other Ministries and Departments.

In consultation with the stakeholders we have identified three project categories.

These are:

Firstly

- A. Setting up of ICT centres equipped with appropriate ATs for PwDs in rural educational/rehabilitation/vocational training institutions.

Secondly

- B. Provision of special mobile handsets with/without access to bundled content for PwDs in rural areas.

Thirdly

- C. Public access to ICT facilities with ATs in villages/in rural institutions dealing with PwDs.

Through this initiative it is primarily hoped to enrich the lives of the PwDs who are provided with ICT enabled access to information, skills and employment opportunities. It is expected that this will result in enhancement of self-reliance of target beneficiaries and in their integration with and mainstreaming into society. It is also envisaged that the success of these pilots will effectively demonstrate the utility and benefits of AT enabled ICTs both on the demand side i.e. to the disabled, their families and to rural institutions/organizations for PwDs, and on the supply side to service providers, equipment manufacturers and content providers etc.

This scheme is expected to provide an impetus to the development of ATs and relevant content in accessible formats in regional languages.

Finally, it is hoped that the success of these projects will lead to scaling up of such initiatives to the national level not only under USOF schemes but also under commercial and Corporate Social Responsibility agendas of service providers, equipment manufacturers and application services and content providers.

In our efforts, we have been ably guided and supported by various ITU experts and before I close my address I would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by them.

Thank you.