



UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Distr.
LIMITED
E/ESCWA/C.1/13/6
18 April 1986
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

Technical Committee
Fourth session
19-22 April 1986
Baghdad

Item 8 of the provisional agenda

COMMUNICATIONS SECTION

APR 22 1986

LIBRARY & DOCUMENT SECTION

FOLLOW-UP ON THE MISSING LINK REPORT

Report by the Representative of the
International Telecommunications Union (ITU)

Report by the Representative of the
International Telecommunications Union (ITU)

It is an honour for me to participate, on behalf of the ITU, in this 13th session of ESCWA. Mr. R.E. Butler, the Secretary-General of the ITU would have very much wished to be here on this occasion. He regrets that other equally important commitments have kept him away, and has asked me to convey his best wishes for a successful 13th session.

The ITU has enjoyed the privilege of close understanding with ESCWA for over a decade. During this period, through our joint efforts, and with the cooperation of the UNDP, the Arab Telecommunications Union and many other agencies, it has been possible to make considerable progress in the development of telecommunications within and among the countries of this region. The ITU looks forward to continuing and further strengthening collaborative endeavours with ESCWA.

The role of telecommunication in the world of today is now well recognized. Telecommunications are a key factor for all socio-economic activity and a prime source for cultural enrichment. They bring together the peoples of the world and are a major contributor to the quality of life and to the pursuit and preservation of peace on earth. In fact, telecommunications are the neural system of human society and an important instrument for its development.

One of the purposes of the ITU as enshrined in the International Telecommunication Convention (Nairobi), 1982, is "to maintain and extend international cooperation between all Members of the Union for the improvement and rational use of telecommunications of all kinds, as well as to promote and to offer technical assistance to developing countries in the field of telecommunications".

It may be recalled that against the background of the increasing importance of telecommunications to development and the urgent need particularly for their accelerated growth in developing countries, the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference, Nairobi, 1982, decided to establish an Independent Commission for Worldwide Telecommunication Development to examine in depth all aspects of such development and among other things "...to recommend a range of methods including novel ones, for stimulating telecommunication development in the developing world...".

H.E. Dr. Faisal Zaidan of Saudi Arabia and Mr. Abdul Rahman K. Al-Chunaim were two of the seventeen eminent persons from the different regions of the world and representing a variety of disciplines and experience who constituted the Independent Commission. The unanimous report of the Independent Commission entitled "The Missing Link" which was presented in January 1985 and very widely disseminated, has been the subject of discussion in several fora around the world. (Copies of the Executive Summary of the report have been circulated for this meeting). The report identified telecommunications as an essential complement to other sectors and hence an integral part of development; it highlighted the serious and unacceptable imbalance in the distribution of telecommunications worldwide and emphasised the need for giving a higher priority for investment in telecommunications in developing countries than hitherto.

The Independent Commission, from the very beginning, recognized the political character of the task assigned to it and addressed its recommendations for decision at the highest political level. The Commission also set an over-riding objective - "by the early part of the next century, virtually the whole of mankind should be brought within easy reach of a telephone and, in due course, the other services telecommunications can provide". It may be noted in this context that although the Independent Commission focused particular attention on a basic public telephone service, it also recognized the important role of broadcasting and private telecommunication facilities, e.g. for transport and other utilities. The Commission was of the view that given the political will and determination, there was no reason why the set objective could not be attained.

Some of the other principal conclusions of the Independent Commission were:

- there is a clear link between investment in telecommunications and economic growth. No. development programme of any country will be balanced, properly integrated or effective unless it accords telecommunications an appropriate role;
- neither in the name of common humanity nor on the grounds of common interest, the existing wide disparity in the extent and quality of services between the industrialised and the developing countries and within developing countries between urban and remote areas was acceptable;
- it cannot be right that in the latter part of the 20th century a minority of the human race should enjoy the benefits of the new technology, whilst the majority live in comparative isolation;
- there is considerable mutuality of interests between the industrialized and the developing countries in the development of telecommunications, which should fuel their joint efforts in achieving this objective.

The recommendations of the Independent Commission encompass a wide range. They are addressed to governments of industrialized and developing countries alike, international and regional institutions involved in, or concerned with telecommunications, relevant private and public sector entities, agencies responsible for development aid and funding etc. The key recommendations:

- there is an urgent need for recognition of the role and contribution of telecommunications and for according an appropriate higher priority for investment in this sector;
- provision should be made for adequate telecommunication facilities in all projects for economic or social development and the assistance programmes for such projects;
- the development in telecommunications should be planned and implemented on a longer-term basis to obtain the best benefits from technology and investments;
- increased attention should be given to the development of human resources and the related training programmes;
- organization and management aspects of telecommunications need critical review and strengthening with a view to ensuring optimum returns from investments and efficient services;
- advantage should be taken of modern technological developments, keeping in view their appropriateness in individual situations and also the need for technology absorption and self-reliant management;
- attention should be paid to the growth of the necessary telecommunication services in the remote and rural areas in the knowledge that profitability alone may not be an appropriate criterion for such investment;
- programmes should be embarked upon for Research and Development and manufacture of telecommunication equipment on regional, subregional or country bases as appropriate, with a view to achieving adequate self-reliance;
- common specifications should be evolved and combined procurement on regional or sub-regional bases effected to derive economies of scale and logistic support for operations and maintenance;
- as an immediate step to improving the present arrangements for assisting developing countries, a Centre for Telecommunication Development should be established by the ITU;
- international cooperative endeavours should be further strengthened by the concerted action of all parties concerned for increased transfer of resources from industrialized countries to developing countries; the role of the ITU as the principal agency for telecommunication matters should be strengthened and made more effective;
- specific proposals recommended in the long term for finding sufficient financial resources for investment should be further examined so as to enable the next ITU plenipotentiary conference to take appropriate decisions.

The report of the Independent Commission was considered at length by the World Telecommunication Development Conference held in Arusha in May 1985 at the invitation of the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania. Delegations from 93 Member countries of the ITU, including the ESCWA region, many headed at the level of Minister and several international and regional organizations participated. The Conference unanimously adopted the now well-known Arusha Declaration on World Telecommunication Development (copies have been circulated for this meeting). The Arusha Declaration endorsed the general thrust of the conclusions and recommendations embodied in the report and the over-riding objective set out therein. The Declaration laid special emphasis on the need for according a sufficiently high priority for the telecommunications sector in national development plans and on the adoption of a number of related measures for achieving a satisfactory level of growth of telecommunications in the developing world. The mutuality of interests between the developed and developing countries which should motivate joint action was underscored by the Conference which also urged governments and other entities concerned in developed countries to match the higher priority which developing countries have been urged to accord, and to assist the latter in every way to make possible the rapid growth of telecommunications. The Conference requested the UNDP, the World Bank, regional and sub-regional development banks and all other interested agencies, regional economic commissions and sub-regional economic committees: "to bring the report of the Independent Commission to the attention of the respective policy-making bodies with a view to according priority and enhanced allocation to the needs of the telecommunication sector".

The Missing Link report and the Arusha Declaration are of special relevance to the West Asia region in the context of the Plan of action for the Transport and Communications Decade for Asia and the Pacific 1985-1994, which is being jointly implemented by ESCAP and the ESCWA.

ESCWA plays a key role in stimulating the economic development of the West Asia region and the variety of infrastructures including telecommunications needed for this. Insofar as the region is concerned, it would benefit ESCWA to assume a major role in following up the recommendations relevant to its own sphere of responsibility, namely:

- to accord a high priority for telecommunications in the plans for national and regional development and in the allocation of the necessary resources;
- to encourage the formulation of common specifications for telecommunication equipment at the regional or sub-regional levels as appropriate to enable economic and efficient procurement;
- to establish regional or sub-regional Research and Development centres to study and solve problems relevant to the local situation and progressively to develop equipment and systems which can more effectively respond to local needs; such centres could also be instrumental in effecting technology transfer and absorption as also in the training of high-technology personnel;

- to set up local manufacture of telecommunication equipment as appropriate, on a collective basis at regional and sub-regional levels.

Acceptance and implementation of these recommendations are inescapable steps for self-reliant and balanced growth of telecommunications in the region. They require common cooperative endeavours and mutual agreement among the countries in the region on several fronts, which touch on economic, trade and other associated relations. Obviously, they call for support and decisions at political levels. ESCWA would be the appropriate aegis for the pursuit of these goals.

The West Asian region is one of contrasts and diversity, in terms of geography, levels of economic development, material and human resources, etc. These present a challenge and an opportunity. At the same time, they also offer immense possibilities and potential for intra-regional cooperative endeavours.

Evidence of this has manifested itself in many ways in the significant progress registered in the field of telecommunications in this region, through country efforts and the concerted endeavours of ESCWA, the UNDP, the ATU, the ITU and other agencies. Indeed, there have been some notable achievements, e.g. the establishment of many centres for training and R&D, programmes for network development, the introduction of new technology such as satellite communication and digital techniques, etc., at national, sub-regional and regional levels, particularly within the framework of the MEDARABTEL project. The ARABISATION project for the translation of 28.000 telecommunication terms and the feasibility studies undertaken by the ESCWA and the ATU for the launching of a regional telecommunication industry are the other important steps for successful technology transfer and progressive achievement of an adequate measure of self-reliance.

These provide a pool of experience and give cause for satisfaction and optimism. Nevertheless, viewed in the context of the minimum needs of many countries of the region and against the over-riding objective set out by the Independent Commission for fulfilment by the early part of the next century, it is clear that still greater efforts are necessary. The Transport and Communication Decade for Asia and the Pacific would seem to be an ideal springboard for this purpose.

The conclusions and recommendations of the Independent Commission for Worldwide Telecommunication Development and their endorsement in the Arusha Declaration have raised great expectations that telecommunications will at last receive the recognition and priority it deserves and pave the way for purposeful action by all concerned at national, sub-regional, regional and international levels to achieve the balanced and accelerated growth of telecommunication facilities and services across the world. Telecommunications can then fulfil its catalytic role in socio-economic development, which is a common goal shared by ESCWA and the ITU.

To this end, the session of ESCWA may wish to endorse the relevant recommendations of the Independent Commission and provide inspiration and guidance, as appropriate, for further, specific follow-up action. The ITU, as always, is ready to make available the expertise and resources available to it and closely collaborate in ESCWA's endeavours for the attainment of the over-riding objective set by the Independent Commission.