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Remembering Donald Maitland

The Missing Link report: the Maitland legacy

Independent Commission for World Wide Telecommunications Development

Remembering Donald Maitland, who died aged 88 on 22 August 2010, is also to remember his legacy in setting telecommunication development on its inclusive worldwide path. His insight, at a time when almost half the world's inhabitants lived in countries with less than one telephone line per 100 people, kick-started the growth of information and communication technologies (ICT) as we know them today.

Donald Maitland was chosen to chair the Independent Commission for World-Wide Telecommunications Development, established in May 1983 by a resolution of the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference, held in 1982 in Nairobi, Kenya. The Commission's mandate was to identify the obstacles hindering communications infrastructure development, and to recommend ways in which the expansion of telecommunications across the world could be stimulated.

The Missing Link is the official title of the Commission's report, but it has always been known as the Maitland report. Submitting the report to then Secretary-General of ITU, Richard Butler (Australia) in January 1985, Donald Maitland said in a letter "We are grateful to you for inviting us to join the Commission… The challenge was formidable. But we found the task rewarding".

The Maitland report drew international attention to the huge imbalance in telephone access between developed and developing countries. The Commission unanimously concluded that the gross and growing imbalance in the distribution of telecommunications throughout the world was not tolerable. At that time, three-quarters of the 600 million telephones in the world were concentrated in just nine industrialized countries.

In its introduction to the report, the Commission noted that the pace of technological innovation was such that inhabitants of the industrialized world looked forward to enjoying the full benefits of the so-called "information society" by the end of the 20th century. However, the situation in the developing world was in stark contrast. "In a majority of developing countries the telecommunications system is inadequate to sustain essential services. In large tracts of territory there is no system at all. Neither in the name of common

Sir Donald Maitland planting a symbolic tree on the occasion of the Arusha meeting of the Independent Commission for World-Wide Telecommunications Development, held in October 1984. He is pictured here with Tanzanian authorities and members of the Commission

humanity nor on grounds of common interest is such a disparity acceptable," the Commission stated.

The report underlined the direct correlation between the availability of, and access to, telecommunication infrastructure and a country's economic growth. It pointed to the gaps in access and service, reflecting the disparities between rich countries and poor ones, between the wealthy and the poor within a given society, and between those who live in rural areas and those who live in urban areas.

As a way forward, the Commission set the goal that by the early part of the twenty-first century nearly all of humankind should be within easy reach of a telephone and of all the benefits this could bring. To pursue this goal, developed countries focused on expanding their already widely available networks to disadvantaged parts of their populations and on improving the performance of existing networks. Their emphasis has been on universal service — individual telephone service for every home. Developing countries have focused on universal access — striving to provide access to as many people as possible, even if this implies shared access.

In 1985, there were fewer than one million mobile phones worldwide and only a few tens of thousands of Internet users (the World Wide Web did not exist then). Fast forward to 2010, and certainly, tremendous progress has been made. ITU estimates that by the end of 2010, there will be five billion mobile phone subscriptions worldwide and almost two billion people now have access to the Internet. Nevertheless, there is still a vast amount of work to be done — three quarters of the world's inhabitants still have no access to the Internet at all. A broadband divide is looming.

The Maitland report spurred higher investment in telecommunication development, coupled with the implementation of new technologies and innovative strategies, as well as a general understanding of the socio-economic effect of communications infrastructure. This has led to a remarkable degree of telecommunication development throughout the world, and a determined effort to close the gaps in access and service.

Born in Edinburgh (Scotland) on 16 August 1922, Donald James Dundas Maitland led a life rich in achievement, mainly as a diplomat. Before chairing the Commission, Sir Donald was Permanent Under-Secretary at the UK Department of Energy (1980–1982); Deputy Permanent Under-Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (1979–1980); Ambassador and United Kingdom Permanent Representative to the European Communities, Brussels (1975–1979); Deputy Under-Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (1974–1975); United Kingdom Member of the Commonwealth Group on Trade Aid and Development, 1975; Ambassador and United Kingdom Permanent Representative to the United Nations, New York (1973–1974); Chief Press Secretary to the Prime Minister (1969–1970). Between 1947 and 1969, he held various diplomatic service appointments in the Middle East, North Africa and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

In ITU, we will always remember Donald Maitland for his contribution to connecting the world.