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Shaping the future

The Plenipotentiary Conference in Nice brought back the ITU's supreme policy body to the country which, 124 years ago, provided the motivation and the venue for the creation of the *Union télégraphique*—which in 1934 became the International Telecommunication Union.

In an era of comparatively rapid change, Napoleon III and his aides had the vision and the wisdom to recognize the benefits of consolidating the three interrelated international telecommunication regimes of the day into a single Union and thus provide the beginnings of a world-wide perspective on the operation and development of telecommunications.

Many decades later, the French soil has brought us together—also in a period of remarkable change—to consider what structures, what processes and what resources will be made available to the ITU for the operation and development of global telecommunications in the 1990s and beyond.

Telecommunications is the revolution of our times, and how profoundly does it influence our work, leisure, health, and wealth! It is closely linked with international trade and commerce involving a rapidly growing array of participants and services. What electric power and railways contributed to the Industrial Age, telecommunications are now contributing to the Information Age which is almost here.

Telecommunications offer unprecedented opportunities for mankind in spreading knowledge, observing events in real time throughout the world, and creating the conditions to strengthen hopes of peace and prosperity.

At the same time, we are confronted with a great challenge to bring the benefits of technology and the attendant capabilities to the majority of the world's population. Without telecommunications there can be no development; and without development there are no resources to invest, in telecommunications or in any other sector. Without development there is economic stagnation. It is imperative that definitive steps be taken to ensure that this vicious cycle is broken, and broken soon.

With the increasing ability of modern technology to provide lower cost telecommunication services, the opportunity exists—if the will can be found—to provide basic telecommunications to those billions of people who do not have access to this service.

During the past seven years since the last Plenipotentiary Conference, we have witnessed more change in telecommunications and associated communication technology and infrastructures than in the previous 70. This profound change in the dynamics of this industry compresses the time scales in which we operate, and impinges on the way the Union is organized and functions, not to mention the need for adequate resources to keep up with the dynamics of the situation. The Union cannot race into the 21st century, still tethered to the 19th.

The Plenipotentiary Conference is the occasion to rise to the challenge of our times, to reaffirm and further strengthen the Union's mandate and its primacy in the global arena, reviewing its structure to match the demands placed upon it and provide it with the necessary resources to respond to the needs of the times.

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