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The Technical Assistance Problem at the Plenipotentiary Conference

During the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference, held in Geneva from October to December 1959, the General Secretariat of the ITU had occasion to submit a report on Technical Assistance in the sphere of telecommunications.

Since the questions dealt with in that report are of topical interest, we are reproducing below the text of the statement made at the Plenipotentiary Conference for the information of readers of the Journal.

(Ed.)

(Translation)

The subject of technical assistance, particularly in telecommunications, is of the highest interest but at the same time of the greatest complexity, and as the Conference is about to tackle its fundamental aspects, I think it advisable to define it as clearly as possible, that is, to recall its principles and to outline its scope. With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I shall first try to explain what technical assistance is.

What is Technical Assistance ?

The expression "technical assistance to under-developed countries" adopted in international circles about ten years ago, is not the most felicitous of terms, as it does not reflect exactly the aim of the great undertaking which has developed under the auspices of the United Nations, and which might be more accurately termed "international co-operation for economic development." This undertaking is, of course, primarily intended to give technical assistance to countries which are as yet inadequately equipped in certain fields, but in reality its purpose is much wider, for it aims at improving economic and social conditions in all countries of the world, including

those which are at present sometimes considered as being sufficiently developed.

We shall, however, continue to use the term "technical assistance" but, as well as using the words "countries which are as yet inadequately equipped" or "under-equipped countries" in preference to "under-developed countries," we must bear in mind the following points :

- 1) technical assistance is not conceived as an act of charity but as a combined effort to co-operate in the general interest ;
- 2) if, in some respects, the technical assistance machinery allows a distinction to be made between countries which give and those which receive, it should be remembered that most countries are in a position both to give and to receive ;
- 3) the aim of technical assistance is to spread and to standardize every kind of technique (including, often primarily, administrative techniques), so as "to help some countries to help themselves," to use a seemingly paradoxical but, in the circumstances, very apt expression ; technical assistance

is not, then, in any way manna from heaven, or, more prosaically, a source of capital for the less-favoured countries; on the contrary, the inadequately equipped countries must make great efforts, and even sacrifices, if they are to benefit from it.

Technical Assistance for telecommunications

After this general outline, I shall attempt to survey technical assistance in the field of telecommunications. I shall mention only those general ideas and principles which deserve the Conference's attention. The details of the very complicated machinery of the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance and of the new United Nations Special Fund are described in documents at the disposal of every delegate, and I would strongly advise delegations which wish to have complete information on certain procedures or projects to profit by their presence in Geneva to make contact with the Secretariat.

The idea of technical assistance in the field of telecommunications is not a new one. It was born with the ITU and has grown up with it. At the very first international telegraph conferences, the countries undertook to keep each other informed of any progress they made in telegraph techniques. Later on, in addition to the need to standardize the general characteristics of telecommunication equipment, mutual assistance became necessary to speed up, in the general interest, the development of national networks and means of communication. It was at this time that the International Consultative Committees were formed, and the establishment of the European telegraph and telephone network was probably one of the best examples of the co-operation which is now called "technical assistance".

Technical assistance for telecommunications does not only fall within the scope of the Expanded Programme and the United Nations Special Fund, then. It is part of the normal activity of the ITU and the main problem before this Conference is to ensure that the Union is well-adapted to all the needs which are felt today, taking into account the development of techniques and modern concepts of international co-operation.

The first problem is, therefore, to find out what are the needs of the countries which are inadequately equipped for telecommunications.

Technical assistance requirements

Many of those here—and especially the delegates from the inadequately equipped countries—are better qualified than I to describe technical assistance requirements in the field of telecommunications. Since, however, no document has yet been published on this subject, perhaps I may be allowed to summarize here the conclusions to which the experience of the Secretariat points in relation to the participation of the Union in the Expanded Programme of

Technical Assistance. I think it is necessary, to get a picture of technical assistance requirements, to refer to the general situation of telecommunications development.

The development of telecommunications raises four groups of problems:

- 1) those relating to the definition of the telecommunication facilities needed by each country, taking into account its geography, economy, social conditions, etc.;
- 2) planning problems, that is, those relating to the establishment of plans for networks and installations to be built;
- 3) problems raised by the training of the staff necessary to maintain and operate the proposed installations;
- 4) financing the plans.

I feel that we should set aside those problems which some countries may consider to be of major importance, but which do, in fact, form only one aspect of the general problems which I have just listed. I am thinking in particular of the establishment of research centres—which may be associated with planning—and the creation of telecommunication industries—which may be considered as the financing of plans.

The general problems raised by the development of telecommunications, which may be summarized as "the study of the facilities for the required telecommunications, planning, staff training and financing," do not, of course, arise in the same form in every country. Some countries are thus faced only with problems of finance.

Having described the situation, I think it may be advisable now to recall the means of mutual international assistance which are available today to help in finding a solution.

Existing means of mutual aid

I shall simply gloss out the bilateral assistance schemes which are widespread in the field of telecommunications, but on which the Secretariat has practically no information, and I shall refer only to those means of international mutual aid which exist under the auspices of the United Nations and the ITU.

Such means include:

- the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance;
- the United Nations Special Fund;
- international finance undertakings;
- the ITU's own means.

I shall make a few comments on these four possibilities with reference to the technical assistance requirements which I mentioned earlier.

The Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance supplies aid in the form of expert missions, the

granting of fellowships, and the provision of training equipment. It is well-suited to countries wishing

- to make general surveys of their needs in one or more branches of telecommunications ;
- to prepare plans for networks or installations ;
- to arrange the vocational training of their staff.

The activities of the ITU in this field are summarized in the Report of the Administrative Council, and I shall not comment on them here.

The United Nations Special Fund was set up to encourage the preparation of financial investment in fields offering assured prospects of economic development, which is certainly the case for telecommunications. It operates at the "pre-investment" stage, that is, in carrying out the studies necessary for the preparation of investment plans. As in the case of the Expanded Programme, it operates by means of expert missions, the granting of fellowships and the provision of training equipment.

The international finance undertakings include the International Bank for Economic Development and a body which has recently become associated with it : the International Finance Company which handles private capital. It is also planned to create an International Development Company to make loans with special facilities for repayment.

Questions of finance must, of course, be left entirely to the discretion of the countries concerned, acting in full sovereignty, and the ITU cannot intervene in this connection any more than the authorities of the Expanded Programme or of the Special Fund can,

but countries wishing to apply for external loans should remember that their plans will receive a warmer welcome if they have been worked out with the help of international experts, for example, within the framework of the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance or of the United Nations Special Fund.

The means of mutual assistance peculiar to the ITU are related to the normal activities of the various organizations. They are principally concerned with planning and vocational training.

In accordance with the instructions of the Administrative Council, a service has been set up within the General Secretariat for the exchange of *technical manuals* and *films* on the basis of *catalogues* published for all Administrations. In addition, every opportunity is taken to recommend exchanges of specialists in the spirit of Resolution 363 of the Administrative Council, which deals with scientific and technical co-operation in the field of telecommunications.

Some of the activities of the IFRB are certainly of a technical assistance nature.

Finally, the role of the International Consultative Committees in the exchange of technical knowledge and in the planning fields is well known. The Administrative Council has, moreover, stated that countries wishing to obtain technical assistance in the field of telecommunications should seek it in the first place in the Consultative Committees.

(The "conclusions" follow, but are not reproduced here)