ITU EXPLAINERS
DEVELOPMENT

What is development?

Though the issue is complex, and the term contested, development is, at its essence, the economic and social advancement of a population. There have been international and bilateral efforts to support development in less developed countries for many decades, but in recent years their orientation has changed. For many years, their focus was on 'economic development' – or, in other words, the economic growth and increased gross domestic product of countries. Since the 1980s and 1990s, however, the emphasis has shifted towards 'human development', which – in the words of the UN Human Development Programme – focuses on "improving the lives people lead rather than assuming that economic growth will lead, automatically, to greater wellbeing for all". In this approach, development efforts are directed towards improving a wider range of economic and social metrics within countries – including education, healthcare, employment, infrastructure, levels of discrimination and inequality, and governance.

At the international level, development is largely addressed through the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the successor to the previous Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015). Adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015, the Agenda contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals across a broad range of social, economic and environmental areas and issues (see table below), with specific targets to be achieved by the international community by 2030.

1. No poverty	2. Zero hunger	3. Good health and wellbeing
4. Quality education	5. Gender equality	6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Affordable and clean energy	8. Decent work and economic growth	9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure
10. Reduced inequalities	11. Sustainable cities and communities	12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Climate action	14. Life below water	15. Life on land
16. Peace, justice and strong institutions	17. Partnerships for the goals	

Why is development being discussed at the ITU?

It is widely recognised within the development community that increased access to the internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) has the potential to support a number of aspects of development. GPD's submission to the ITU Council Working Group on International Internet-related Public Policy Issues' consultation on "developmental aspects of the internet" in January 2017 set out details and examples of how increased access to the internet and other ICTs could support the achievement of a number of the Sustainable Development Goals, such as those related to economic growth, education, health, employment, gender equality and peaceful and inclusive societies and institutions. For example, digital technologies and open educational resources enable people to access education, including remotely – a particular advantage for those with poor or unaffordable local provision. And with ICTs and the internet, patients have access to more health information, and healthcare providers are better able to communicate and share data, both among themselves and with patients.

As well as supporting development, internet access is now also considered an indicator of development in and of itself. Target 9.c (in Goal 9) of the Sustainable Development Goals is to "[s]ignificantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020".

In recognition of the links between ICTs and development, the ITU established a Development Sector (ITU-D) in 1992. The ITU-D has a mandate:

• To promote the availability of infrastructure and foster an enabling environment for telecommunication/ICT infrastructure development and its use in a safe and secure manner;
• To provide assistance to developing countries; and
• To expand the benefits of the information society to the membership in cooperation with public and private stakeholders, and to promote the integration of the use of telecommunications/ICTs into the broader economy and society as drivers of development, innovation, well-being, growth and productivity globally.

In 2005, at the conclusion of the World Summit on the Information Society, the ITU was also appointed as a co-facilitator for one of the Action Lines, "the role of public governance authorities and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs

for development", giving it a specific mandate to support development efforts.

In practice, the ITU-D fulfils this mandate chiefly through building human and institutional capacity via training, information and resource-sharing, and publishing guidance on policy and regulatory frameworks and issues.

Why should human rights defenders care?

There are two main reasons that human rights defenders should care about development-related work at the ITU. The first is that, as we've explained, the ITU's development agenda is closely linked to a range of human rights (particularly economic and social rights) – and so, the better it fulfils its remit in increasing access to ICTs, the better the potential outcomes for human rights. We should be pushing ITU-D to focus its resources on supporting developing states in establishing and maintaining telecommunication and ICT infrastructure and regulatory frameworks which advance development, activities which fall squarely within its mandate, and where it has resources and expertise. In doing so, the ITU and the states which it supports should ensure respect for human rights and resist practices which threaten online freedoms.

The second reason for engagement by human rights defenders is the issue of mission creep. Some issues discussed in ITU-D and in other ITU forums under the guise of development in fact have little, if anything, to do with development – and may even present risks to human rights. To give two examples:

• At the World Telecommunication Development Conference (WTDC) in 2017, one of the ITU-D Study Groups (Study Group 3/1) was tasked to look at the issue of Over the Top (OTT) services in the period 2017-2020. The growth in OTT services affects all countries, not just developing countries, and the issue is already being studied in another ITU sector (Study Group 3 in ITU-T). It is questionable how further work on OTT services by the ITU-D would help development efforts – and, indeed, inappropriate regulation of OTT services could lead to adverse impacts upon the rights to freedom of expression and privacy, as we explain in our OTT Explainer.
• Also at the WTDC in 2017, some member states proposed amendments to a Resolution on combating and dealing with counterfeit devices to include an explicit reference to Digital Object Architecture (DOA) as a tool that can be used to tackle such counterfeit devices. DOA – as we explain

in our [Explainer](#) on the subject – has the potential, if widely adopted as a means of information management, to facilitate much greater control, surveillance and tracking of online data by governments, creating a clear risk to the right to privacy. As with OTT services, there is nothing about DOA as a means of information management that has a substantive link to development.

Human rights defenders should therefore pay attention to discussions taking place in ITU-D, as potential adverse impacts on human rights can materialise in a range of processes and on unlikely issues.

Where is the discussion taking place?

Given its specific role and mandate, discussions around development primarily take place in ITU-D. Within ITU-D, the most significant policy discussions take place at the WTDC which takes place every three to four years. The most recent took place in Buenos Aires in October 2017 (see our write-up of the event [here](#)), and the next will take place around 2021.

Within ITU-D, there are two Study Groups which develop reports, guidelines, and recommendations based on input received from the membership. Study Group 1 focuses on an "enabling environment for the development of telecommunications/ICTs" and Study Group 2 on "ICT services and applications for the promotion of sustainable development".

Discussion on development issues will also take place at the Plenipotentiary Conference in late 2018.