

WSIS and UNESCO

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In many ways, the two meetings of the World Summit on the Information Society are landmark events in the global dialogue. For the first time ever, issues such as equitable access for all persons to information and knowledge, digital divide and fair sharing of the benefits of information and communication are being discussed by all nations of the world during a process that started in 2002 and will go far beyond the second Summit meeting in Tunis, in November 2005.

The adoption of the Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action at the first Summit meeting in Geneva and its commitment to taking concrete action to narrow the digital divide and use information and communication to attain international development goals are major achievements. They are also global acknowledgement of the critical role of information and knowledge in all aspects of human development.

Over the past decade, ICT has triggered a revolution, affecting education, culture, society and many other spheres of our lives, and this revolution is only just beginning. We continue to find that access to information and knowledge facilitated by ICT is increasingly determining patterns of learning, cultural expression and social participation, as well as providing opportunities for development, more effective poverty reduction and the preservation of peace. Indeed, knowledge is playing, and will continue to play, a pivotal role as a principal force of social transformation.

In light of these technological advances and their pervasive societal and ethical implications and impacts, UNESCO's mandate to "promote the free flow of ideas by word and image" and to "maintain, increase and spread knowledge", takes on new dimensions. It exerts an even greater moral responsibility on the Organization to contribute proactively to addressing potential challenges, maximizing benefits and supporting equitable access to the

opportunities provided by the free flow of information and communication through the use of appropriate technologies.

For these reasons, UNESCO seeks to extend the debate. While technology and infrastructure are very important, UNESCO's understanding of the changes of societies goes beyond technological transformations.

Since the beginning of the WSIS process, UNESCO has continuously promoted the concept of "Knowledge Societies". Including dimensions of social, cultural, economic, political and institutional transformation, it is centred around a holistic, multidimensional and development-oriented vision, and captures the complexity and dynamic of the changes that are taking place.

Inclusiveness must be central to knowledge societies. All persons, without distinction, must have access to its benefits and must be empowered to create, receive, share and utilize information and knowledge freely – whether this be for reasons of economic improvement, social recreation, cultural expression and enjoyment, or civic participation. Within this concept, ICT is a tool dedicated to human development, not an end in itself.

The growth of knowledge societies depends on the production of new knowledge, its transmission through education and training, and its dissemination through ICT. Scientific research and discovery, and associated technological applications, are the driving forces behind the creation of knowledge societies.

UNESCO's concept of knowledge societies is founded on four principles: freedom of expression; universal access to information and knowledge; respect for human dignity and cultural and linguistic diversity; and quality education for all.

Freedom of expression is the first cornerstone of knowledge societies where individual freedom must be respected and honoured. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the "freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers". In knowledge societies, all citizens should not only have the potential but also the right to express their ideas and opinions freely. Openness, dialogue and respect for wisdom in societies can only be ensured if freedom of expression for all citizens is guaranteed.

Universal access to information and knowledge is another fundamental building block of knowledge societies. The concept of universal access is underpinned by the presence of several essential supporting components, namely: availability of communication infrastructure and connectivity; availability of content relevant to the user; affordable

services within reasonable distances; and users with the necessary information literacy skills to use these services and to add value by developing, exchanging and creating new services.

Public accessibility to a wide range of content needed by citizens for their lives and work, including data, publications, artistic works, radio and TV programmes, and informatics applications should be ensured.

The rights of creators, severely affected by rampant e-piracy, should be reaffirmed. However, limitations and exceptions to copyright have traditionally allowed, under specific conditions strictly defined in international conventions, preferential access to copyrighted works for precise purposes such as news reporting, teaching, library activities or use by the disabled. These provisions should be clearly applied in the digital environment.

Support and attention should also be given to open source software and information provided under “open access” terms, as well as to efforts promoting low-cost, high-quality scientific, medical, and other commercially published electronic works to developing countries.

Respect for cultural/linguistic diversity is the third essential building block of knowledge societies. In addition to art and literature, culture encompasses lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, languages, traditions and beliefs. Cultural diversity is the common heritage of humankind and the understanding of and respect for other cultures is a prerequisite for building knowledge societies.

A central feature is the need for policies as well as actions that support plurality and diversity, so that citizens can access and create information and knowledge in their own languages and within their own cultural frameworks. The creation of environments conducive to the development of local content in digital format and the preservation of digital heritage will benefit present and future generations.

The fourth building block of knowledge societies is quality education for all. Knowledge societies are necessarily societies with strong learning imperatives. Knowledge societies are societies in which new paradigms of learning are emerging and exceptional investments, both intellectual and financial, in new learning will be needed.

Learning as a process of progressive change from ignorance to knowledge, from inability to competence, and from indifference to understanding has never before been so crucial. As this learning process becomes increasingly complex and non-linear going far beyond the acquisition of basic literacy skills, age-old methods of learning are becoming insufficient and conventional methods limiting the learning process to the four walls of a classroom and a

one-time learning experience are passé. ICT makes it possible to create learning communities across age, class and status, language, skill, gender and spatial boundaries.

The need for provision of lifelong learning and for education that is accessible, affordable and of high quality is rapidly increasing. ICT helps changing modes of learning as it provides open and flexible solutions and can be highly cost-effective. This does not mean that we do not need to build schools. But we need to combine traditional and new methods.

UNESCO, through instruments such as the *Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace* and the *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, has established foundation principles for building knowledge societies that have been echoed in the Summit Declarations. There are many actions being undertaken with Member States to support the implementation of these commitments within the framework of their national policies and legislations.

The role of WSIS cannot be overstated in placing the issues of access to knowledge and its role in responding to development challenges, as well as the digital divide, centre-stage on the international agenda and in the public's consciousness. The Summit in Geneva provided an important platform for promoting UNESCO's concept of knowledge societies.

Over half of the areas identified in the WSIS Action Plan fall within UNESCO's mandate and fields of competence, particularly those related to access to information and knowledge, capacity-building, e-learning, e-science, cultural and linguistic diversity, media as well as ethical dimensions.

Presently, UNESCO's focus is on operationalizing its concept of knowledge societies and it concentrates on implementing many of the recommendations of the Geneva Action Plan. UNESCO's actions include up-stream policy initiatives including the preparation of studies, recommendations, guidelines, implementation of grass roots projects and training initiatives, provision of information management tools as well as knowledge management and monitoring services.

The Geneva phase of the World Summit on the Information Society was a critical milestone in international cooperative efforts to promote knowledge societies and to understand their prerequisites. UNESCO is working unstintingly to maintain this momentum and to advance the WSIS process. The phase leading up to the second Summit in Tunis will provide an opportunity to assess progress made since Geneva on implementation plans and actions, to explore new initiatives and solutions and to mobilize future partners.

UNESCO is committed to fostering the creation of equitable and just societies, supporting human rights and human development in all spheres and working for achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The necessary political, social, economic and attitudinal changes to realize these goals will not occur overnight. This will require persistent long-term actions that combine a range of multidisciplinary skills and perspectives. UNESCO is committed to work with its partners to help implement these actions.