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(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the opening of the First Session of the
Intergovernmental Council for the Information for All Programme

UNESCO, 15 April 2002

Madam Chairperson of the Executive Board,
Distinguished Members of the Intergovernmental Council for the Information
for All Programme,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to UNESCO for the opening of the first session of the Intergovernmental Council for the Information for All Programme. I am happy to see that Mrs Aziza Bennani, Chairperson of UNESCO's Executive Board, is with us today.

You have gathered here for a meeting that has the potential to become truly historical. For the first time, an intergovernmental body with representatives of Member States from all regions will take up the challenges arising from the rapid development of information and communication technologies and their applications.

It is highly significant that it is UNESCO that has established this unique Council. Indeed, UNESCO's original mandate - to promote the free exchange of ideas and knowledge - has never been more relevant than now. We are, after all, witnessing nothing less than the birth of a new civilization based on information and knowledge.

All aspects of the Organization's work are being challenged by this phenomenon: its values, its strategies, its modes of activity. And all of UNESCO's areas of competence - education, the sciences, communication and culture - are being affected. The transition towards future knowledge societies provides an exceptional opportunity to invigorate UNESCO's core mission. We must grasp this chance.

To serve this end, one of the three major strategic thrusts of our new Medium-Term Strategy (2002-2007) is that of "promoting empowerment and participation in the emerging knowledge society through equitable access, capacity-building and sharing of knowledge". Moreover, one of the five absolute priorities of our current biennium (2002-2003) is that of promoting access to information for all, especially in the public domain. Through these emphases, UNESCO is applying itself precisely where the impact of these developments is most strongly felt: in the activities and products of the human mind.

If the technologies facilitating the creation of knowledge societies are ever to take proper root and gain global acceptance, we must look beyond the technical and 'gadget' appeal of ICTs and the Internet. We must ensure that these powerful tools and networks are used effectively to combat poverty and

foster development, to create opportunities for education for all, to ensure cultural and linguistic diversity, and to empower civil society.

The knowledge societies which we are creating must be inclusive. Today, their establishment is hindered by numerous barriers, which are economic, educational and social as well as technical in character. Many of these barriers are outside UNESCO's reach and control. The most difficult obstacle - the widening gap between knowledge-wealth and knowledge-poverty – is of priority concern to UNESCO. This gap lies at the centre of the great human injustice denoted by the term “the digital divide”.

UNESCO is well aware that its actions alone will not be sufficient to overcome these barriers and gaps. For this reason, I am very supportive of the UN Secretary-General's initiative, which was endorsed by ECOSOC, to establish the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force last November. On behalf of UNESCO, I am a member of the Task Force. Our engagement with the work of the Task Force will be informed by the following strategic objectives which, indeed, shape our overall contribution to narrowing the digital divide:

First, UNESCO will work towards establishing a global agreement on common principles for the construction of knowledge societies.

Second, UNESCO will try to enhance learning opportunities through access to diversified contents and delivery systems.

Third, UNESCO will strengthen capacities for scientific research, information-sharing and cultural exchange.

And, fourth, UNESCO will promote the use of ICTs for capacity-building, empowerment, governance and social participation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The essential prerequisite for the creation of an inclusive and equitable Global Knowledge Society is access for everybody to information. This is why the new Programme, which your Council will be guiding, has been called the “Information for All Programme”.

The overall concept of this new Programme is the result of a long consultation process. It started in 1997, when the General Conference requested my predecessor to prepare a merger of the General Information Programme (PGI) and the Intergovernmental Informatics Programme (IIP).

At that time, the information revolution had resulted in an overlap of the two programmes, which had been increasingly concentrating their activities in two main areas: first, on content for the information society and, second, on actions necessary to build “infostructure” for this evolving society through training, the establishment of information policies and the promotion of networking.

With effect from 1 January 2001, the IFA Programme has replaced the General Information Programme and the Intergovernmental Informatics Programme, in fulfilment of Decision 3.6.1 taken at the 160th session of UNESCO's Executive Board.

Many of you have contributed to the elaboration of the new Programme and I wish to express my thanks for your valuable contribution. I would like to pay particular tribute to Ms Nathalie Dusoulier, Chairperson of the Intergovernmental Council of the former General Information Programme, and Mr Ludovit Molnar, Chairperson of the Intergovernmental Committee of the former Intergovernmental Informatics Programme, both of whom are with us today. I would also like to give special thanks to Ms Marianne Scott, who made essential contributions towards the merger of the two programmes.

All of those who have contributed to the creation of the new IFA Programme have been agreed upon its two-fold mandate. First, the Programme should foster debate on the political, ethical and social challenges of the emerging Global Knowledge Society. Second, it should implement concrete projects that harness the opportunities of ICTs for creating such a Global Knowledge Society.

The IFA Programme, of course, will not be working single-handedly in isolation. In order to achieve its objectives, it must cooperate effectively and liaise efficiently with a diverse and increasing number of partners.

Therefore, the Programme will actively seek and foster cooperation with other international programmes in order to harmonize positions and policies. I have referred already to our membership of the UN Information and Communication Technologies Task Force. Mention also must be made, of course, to the G-8's Digital Opportunity Task Force and the Genoa Plan of

Action. UNESCO will also pursue increased collaboration with stakeholder NGOs and the private sector.

Within the UNESCO Secretariat itself, the IFA Programme will do its utmost to ensure that close and productive partnership exists with all Sectors.

On the activity level, basic prerequisites have been formulated for concrete projects to be carried out within the framework of the Programme. These criteria require that projects must be catalytic, have a pilot character, include the 'sunset rule', contain an evaluation component, and appropriately share responsibilities at the international and national levels.

One of the main areas of activities of the IFA Programme is the development of international, regional and national information policies. A second area is that of developing human resources and capabilities for the information age. A third field is that of helping to strengthen institutions as gateways for information access. Finally, the Programme will assist in the development of information processing and management tools and systems.

As the IFA Programme was launched on 1 January 2001, the Secretariat has already begun implementation within the framework of the Programme and Budget for 2000-2001 (30 C/5). The activities undertaken have sought to promote the key role that information can play in addressing crucial social issues like poverty and social exclusion, and in empowering development actors in civil society, notably at the local and community levels.

Closely linked to the Programme are 13 projects on the contribution of ICTs to the development of education, science and culture. Their implementation started a few months ago with the onset of the new biennium (2002-2003). The projects originated from an internal competitive process for the selection of inter-sectoral projects related to the two cross-cutting themes of UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy: the eradication of poverty, especially extreme poverty, and the contribution of ICTs to education, science, culture and the construction of a knowledge society.

I was very pleased that this competitive approach attracted considerable enthusiasm and commitment from a large group of staff members, at HQ and in the field. This is a promising sign of the readiness of UNESCO to take up the demanding challenge of interdisciplinarity and intersectorality posed by the ICT revolution.

A in-depth report on all these activities is presented to you in document IFAP-2002/COUNCIL.I/4

Also on your agenda is the Draft Recommendation on the promotion and use of multilingualism and universal access to cyberspace. As some of you may recall, this Draft Recommendation was discussed at length in Commission V during the last session of the General Conference, where it became clear that we were far from reaching a full consensus. Worried about pressing ahead while views remained polarized, I proposed that we should postpone any decision until after further consultations and discussions had taken place. This was agreed by the General Conference.

I was therefore most gratified to see that the experts meeting, held here three weeks ago, made good progress in its deliberations. The outcomes of this meeting have been made available to Member States and I would like to encourage the Intergovernmental Council to undertake further discussion of this question in the days ahead.

Taking account of the experts meeting and your own discussions and conclusions, the Draft Recommendation will be presented to the Executive Board at its autumn session later this year. This will provide a further opportunity for Member States to engage with the issues involved. My hope is that, by the time it is presented to the General Conference in the autumn of 2003, the Draft Recommendation will attract such broad-based consensus that it will be endorsed unanimously.

UNESCO intends to bring the substance of this Recommendation to the attention of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) that the United Nations system, under ITU's leadership, is organizing in December 2003 in Geneva, Switzerland, and in 2005 in Tunis, Tunisia. I believe that the Recommendation will make a tremendous contribution to the World Summit in all four of its main content areas: promotion of multilingual content and systems; access to networks and services; development of public domain content; and reaffirming and promoting the fair balance between the interests of right-holders and the public interest. This is, by any account, a rich substantive agenda.

The Summit is aimed at preparing a vision of the information society that is shared by all countries and communities. UNESCO's contribution to the Summit preparation process, which mainly consists in setting the ground for the Declaration of Principles and for the Plan of Action, will be based on its mandate and on the strategy and actions that I have just outlined to you.

UNESCO's clear focus will be upon the ethical, legal, social and cultural dimensions of the information society.

UNESCO will prepare its contribution for the Summit through a series of thematic consultations and regional conferences. These will also serve as platforms for debate among the Organization's partners in this process - the professional communities, representatives of civil society, bilateral and multilateral partners, and the private sector. I am sure that these consultations and debates will help our partners in the preparation of their input to the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action of the Summit.

Since the WSIS is an event of such strategic importance for UNESCO, I have agreed to be a member of the High Level Summit Organizing Committee and shall be heading the UNESCO delegation to the Summit meeting itself. Please note that, as one of the foremost Specialized Agencies in this field, UNESCO has also made available a Senior Programme Specialist to the Executive Secretariat of the WSIS in Geneva.

The whole of the UNESCO Secretariat – both at Headquarters and in the field – has been mobilized for the preparation of and follow-up to the Summit. Interdisciplinarity and intersectoral cooperation will be the hallmarks of this effort.

Another important item on your meeting's agenda is that of preserving digital heritage, an issue which is urgent but also defiant of overnight solutions. The risk of losing essential materials in which valuable resources have been invested is very real. Therefore, it is crucial that we assume responsibility for digital heritage and take steps to prevent such loss.

In this regard, the General Conference adopted Resolution 34 at its 31st session. In doing so, it drew attention to the ever-growing digital heritage in the world and to the need for an international campaign to safeguard endangered digital memory. The General Conference also invited me to prepare, for the forthcoming session of the Executive Board, a discussion paper containing elements of a draft charter. This document will be made available to you and I would like hereby to invite you to make comments and propose amendments. Your suggestions will be taken into account when preparing the Preliminary Draft Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage, which will be circulated to Member States as part of a broad consultation process.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The energetic involvement of UNESCO in the international debates and initiatives relating to the knowledge society is a chance both to breathe fresh life into many aspects of the Organization's mandate and to contribute to creating a global knowledge society with a human face.

The role of the Intergovernmental Council for the Information for All Programme has a vital function in this regard. Your main tasks will be to guide the planning and implementation of the Programme, to review and assess the Programme's achievements, to define the key areas needing increased international cooperation, and to promote the participation of Member States in the Programme. In these ways, the Intergovernmental Council will strengthen UNESCO's unique role in shaping the international response to the emerging information society.

No new Programme can be successful without adequate financial support. The IFA Programme will need complementary funding if it is to achieve the objectives that have been set. Much needs to be done to raise additional extra-budgetary funds and we are eager to hear your suggestions and advice on how funding can be mobilized and how new quality projects can be prepared and funded.

It remains for me to wish you a very successful meeting.

Thank you.