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COMMUNIQUÉ

MINISTERIAL ROUND TABLE ON “TOWARDS KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES” (UNESCO HEADQUARTERS, 9 AND 10 OCTOBER 2003)

1. We, the ministers participating at the Round Table organized by UNESCO at this crucial time in the preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), arrived at the following common position:
2. Our Governments are committed to the improvement of the quality of life of our citizens and economic strength of our societies and to the achievement of an equitable and peaceful global community. The building of knowledge societies is an essential means to achieving these objectives and opens the way to humanization of the process of globalization.
3. Knowledge societies are about capabilities to identify, produce, process, transform, disseminate and use information to build and apply knowledge for human development. They require an empowering social vision which encompasses plurality, inclusion, solidarity and participation.
4. Universal access to information and knowledge cannot be obtained without the building of the relevant technological infrastructure. Information and communication technology (ICT) is a major tool for building knowledge societies, and these societies also entail many issues other than technology and connectivity.
5. Knowledge societies must be based on universally recognized human rights, respect for privacy and human dignity, and solidarity of and among peoples. They must reflect high ethical and professional standards.
6. Building knowledge societies implies a commitment to the principles of democracy, transparency, accountability and good governance. This process must engage, and recognize the interdependency of, governments, the private sector and civil society. Lack of access to knowledge engenders marginalized and disadvantaged populations and hinders the participation of these populations in decision-making and the development process.

7. We are very concerned about growing inequalities in infrastructure development and in the access to and use of technologies. Our goal is to transform the digital divide into digital opportunity through digital solidarity.

8. Building knowledge societies is essential to achieving sustainability and future prosperity. Governments should thus reassess their development priorities in order to make the necessary investments in building knowledge societies.

9. We urge the international community to help the developing countries to build their capacity so that they can achieve self-reliance as soon as possible. To achieve this objective, we need to pay particular attention to the identification of possible mechanisms for the funding of this effort, including the setting up of a digital solidarity fund to augment national resources.

10. The following principles and parameters are essential for the development of equitable knowledge societies:

- Freedom of expression;
- Universal access to information and knowledge;
- Respect for human dignity and cultural and linguistic diversity;
- Quality education for all;
- Investment in science and technology;
- Understanding and inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems.

Freedom of expression

11. The free flow of information is the fundamental premise of knowledge societies. In a knowledge society, each individual will have more freedom and greater possibilities for self-realization, while respecting beliefs and ethics. Knowledge societies encourage openness and dialogue and appreciate wisdom, communication and cooperation. They must be based on the principle of freedom of expression as guaranteed in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers”.

12. Freedom of the press must be upheld and promoted to ensure that all media, traditional as well as new, can fulfil their role in the building of knowledge societies. Media professionals in particular, as key agents in materializing and ensuring freedom of expression, should be afforded an environment which is conducive to the exercise of their profession.

Universal access to information and knowledge

13. No society can claim to be a genuine knowledge society if access to knowledge and information is denied to a segment of the population. We therefore affirm the need for universal access to information and knowledge. By access we imply: infrastructure and connectivity; content; affordability; information literacy; know-how for use and development; education; and, the free flow of opinions and ideas.

14. Much of the world's population does not have access to any ICT, whether radio, telephone or the Internet. As traditional media are still an important brick in the building of knowledge societies, countries must accord a high priority both to the development of traditional media and to the putting in place of modern ICT infrastructure which is accessible to all.

15. It is essential to ensure affordable access to a wide range of content. This includes provision of data, publications, artistic works, radio and television programmes, and computer programs including open source software, support for access gateways such as libraries, and formulation of national policies to promote publicly accessible information, particularly in the public domain.

16. We also affirm the need to develop measures to create cyber-security, which do not infringe on the free flow of ideas, opinions and information.

Respect for human dignity and cultural and linguistic diversity

17. Cultural diversity is the common heritage of humankind. Understanding and respect for other cultures is a prerequisite for building inclusive and participatory knowledge societies. Plurality and diversity are central to our understanding of knowledge and society. Knowledge societies must enable citizens to access and create information and knowledge in their own languages and within their own cultural frameworks. We are committed to facilitating the participation of all cultural and linguistic groups in the building of knowledge societies.

18. Nurturing, preserving and diffusing tangible as well as intangible cultural heritage, both nationally and internationally, is an integral element in the shaping of knowledge societies. To these ends, appropriate cultural policies and public-private partnerships should promote the production of local creative content and its wide accessibility in electronic form. In particular, ICT should be used by creators and cultural institutions and industries to preserve and promote minor languages and cultures.

19. In the light of the opportunities and challenges of knowledge societies, culture and artistic expression and exchange should be promoted. Libraries, archives and museums, and the professions which permit them to function, are at the heart of knowledge societies, and should be strongly supported and promoted within national policies.

20. We underline the necessity for determined action to fight against forgery and piracy of cultural goods as an essential element of efforts to encourage healthy and diverse cultural creation.

21. In building knowledge societies, we must maintain and promote an equitable balance between the rights of creators, owners and users of intellectual property, and the public interest.

Quality education for all

22. Access to education is a fundamental right, as well as a tool for combating illiteracy, marginalization, poverty and exclusion. ICT provides vast opportunities to effectively and affordably provide quality education for all.

23. It is only through quality education that the profound changes which we seek in our societies can be brought about. The opportunity to acquire an information culture, which encourages critical evaluation of information, should be an essential part of education at all levels.

24. We need to rethink and redesign our education systems and processes to meet the challenge of the knowledge societies – to find new ways of looking at information and knowledge according to which we have a right to acquire and a duty to share.

25. Considering the rapid advances in ICT and its application in development, regular upgrading of knowledge and skills of information and ICT professionals is imperative.

26. Teachers are the pivotal force for achieving these goals and should be involved from the beginning in educational reform. We recognize that sustained effort will be required.

Science and technology in knowledge societies

27. There is a well established relationship between a country's scientific capability and its prosperity. Science and technology are the wellspring for creation of knowledge. Therefore, the public sector, as well as the private sector, in all countries should invest in building science and technology capacities, including research and development (R&D), science education, and electronic networks for science and research. Affordable access to scientific and technological content, such as publications and databases, is a critical development priority. There is also a need to identify and preserve traditional knowledge, to apply ICT to make it available to all, and to establish appropriate links with modern science.

Indigenous knowledge systems

28. Indigenous knowledge systems constitute an important component of emerging knowledge societies. Every effort should be made to identify, understand, digitize and mainstream indigenous systems to enable them to be universally accessible and to contribute to the development of knowledge societies.

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29. We appeal to heads of state and government to participate personally in the WSIS, and commit ourselves to:

- Pursue earnestly the broad objectives of this Communiqué at the WSIS; and
- keep in mind the broad objectives of this Communiqué while formulating national policies.

30. We call on the Director-General of UNESCO to:

- bring this Communiqué to the attention of the WSIS and ensure the relevant follow-up;
- facilitate further initiatives for a better understanding of the impact of knowledge societies on efforts to build a peaceful and prosperous global community; and
- explore appropriate mechanisms for technical and financial assistance to the developing countries in the building of knowledge societies.