UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

on the occasion of the Round Table on Science, the Information Society and the Millennium Development Goals
during the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

Geneva, 11 December 2003
Your Excellency Mr Iliescu, President of Romania,
Your Excellency Prof. Atta-Ur-Rahman, Minister for Science and Technology of Pakistan,
Your Excellency Lidia Brito, Minister of Higher Education of Mozambique,
Ms Jane Lubchencko, President of ICSU,
Mr Iwata, President of CODATA,
Mr Hassan, Executive Director of TWAS,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to this Round Table on such an important issue as Science, the Information Society and the Millennium Development Goals, being held in the context of the World Summit on the Information Society.

Guided as we all are within the United Nations system by the Millennium Declaration, we need to ensure that this Summit’s Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action contain concrete measures that will contribute to achieving these goals. Frankly, very few, if any, of the MDGs will be achieved without the contribution of science and technology, which are at the heart of the information and communication revolution that has been the driving force of globalization.

One of UNESCO’s core missions is to promote the free exchange of ideas and scientific knowledge. Another is to maintain, increase and diffuse scientific knowledge. These missions have never been more relevant than today. ICTs are opening up new horizons for human development through the exchange of scientific knowledge, the expansion of education and training, and the promotion of creativity and intercultural dialogue. In this light, UNESCO has a clear message to convey to this World Summit, in line with the three main strategic thrusts of its Programme.

The first of these is the development of universal principles and norms, based on shared values, in order to meet emerging challenges in education, science, culture and communication and to protect and strengthen the “common good”. The second thrust is the promotion of pluralism, through the recognition and enhancement of diversity together with the observance of human rights. And the third is the promotion of empowerment and participation in the information society through equitable access, capacity-building and the sharing of scientific knowledge.

Let me now touch on four dimensions of the question of access to scientific knowledge which are relevant to your deliberations.

The first dimension concerns access to current scientific information. For thousands of students, researchers and academics in developing countries, this has become a daily struggle. For this reason, UNESCO has pursued several lines of activity aimed at facilitating access. For example, we are helping libraries and
archives to acquire, store and disseminate scientific knowledge and we have supported the development of free software packages and other initiatives. We recognize that such efforts are only a small part of the answer and that the question of scale is crucial. Therefore, we have sought, through our role as an honest broker, to build partnerships and to encourage others to make the necessary investments.

The second dimension is that of improving science education and training. We all recognize the potential of ICTs for making teaching/learning processes more effective, as various forms of open and distance learning have already shown. For its part, UNESCO has been promoting the creation of multimedia courseware, virtual laboratories (such as the Aral Sea, the Dead Sea and the Lake Chad projects) and virtual universities, such as the Avicenna Virtual Campus involving institutions from 14 Mediterranean countries.

Yet science education does not take place only in universities and institutions of higher education. It is at a younger age that vocational callings are born and, whether in the classroom setting or through other less formal means, this is where an early start must be made if we are to halt the decline in the numbers of students, even in developed countries, who are interested in pursuing a scientific career.

The third dimension pertains to what is commonly known as the digital divide. The uneven diffusion of ICTs between the industrialized and developing countries raises concerns about how the accessibility and affordability of these new technologies can be improved. More than 80% of people in the world have never even heard a dial tone, let alone surfed the Web. And the gap between the information have and have-nots is widening.

According to the 2001 UN Human Development Report, industrialized countries, with only 15% of the world’s population, are home to 88% of all Internet users. Less than 1% of people in South Asia are online, even though it is home to one-fifth of the world’s population. The situation is even worse in Africa. There are only one million Internet users on the entire continent whereas in the UK alone there are 10.5 million. In other words, capacity-building is vital; it is a basic pre-requisite for many parts of the developing world if they are to even to contemplate becoming knowledge societies.

Fourthly, I wish to mention here the complex policy issues in relation to scientific information, such as the public domain, open source access, and intellectual property rights. The scientific community is addressing these questions with a due sense of urgency, taking into account the breathtaking changes that are taking place.

These are some of the key issues that I hope you will address during the coming two hours and beyond. I am interested in how you perceive the role of science in
building knowledge societies in relation to the MDGs. In particular, I am keen to hear your views on how this Summit can make a difference and, indeed, how science can make a difference.

Thank you.