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Address by
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on the occasion of the opening of the WSIS Contributory Conference
on “ICT and Creativity”

Vienna, Austria, 2 June 2005

Mr Federal Chancellor,
Ministers,
Ambassadors,
Colleagues from the UN system,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased and honoured to address this opening ceremony of the Conference on “ICT and Creativity”. This thematic meeting promises to make an important contribution to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process.

I wish to applaud the Federal Chancellor for his commendable initiative in organizing this event, whose rich agenda captures the multifaceted character of this complex question, and also for choosing this historic place as the venue of this conference. In my remarks, I shall reflect on how the theme of “ICT and Creativity” intersects with several core concerns of UNESCO in its approach to the WSIS process.

UNESCO has been emphasizing the concept of “knowledge societies” along with four key principles, namely, freedom of expression; quality education for all; universal access to knowledge and information; and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity. The Declaration and Plan of Action that emerged from the Geneva Phase of the World Summit gave due recognition to these emphases.

For UNESCO, the idea of a single, uniform global information society is at odds with the multiple forms of social and human development which ICT and its many applications are making possible. The concept of “knowledge societies” that are pluralistic, inclusive and participatory, and grounded upon the four principles just cited, offers an attractive prospect of human diversity rather than narrow uniformity. UNESCO believes that the building of knowledge societies is essential for improving the quality of life, building social cohesion based on respect for diversity, and enhancing the economic strength of societies. Indeed, building knowledge societies paves the way to a genuinely participatory globalization process.

How, then, does the challenge of building knowledge societies intersect with the theme of “ICT and Creativity”, especially in regard to bridging the digital divide and closing the contents gap? I shall address this question by reference to two key aspects of the conference’s theme - quality e-content and innovative applications. Let me look at each of these in turn.

The quality of e-content is an issue for several reasons: the ability of anyone to place information somewhere in cyberspace; the sheer profusion of information of varying kinds that is available; the unacceptability of official gatekeepers to apply

quality control mechanisms; and the directness and immediacy of individual access to the Internet. This means that wild fabrications, groundless hearsay and well-authenticated facts exist in the same domain. How is one to tell the difference? What tools are needed in order to evaluate the credibility of different sources of information and opinion? How does one judge the quality of what is on offer?

Several options are available. For example, users may take into account the established reputation of the information source, such as a news service. Another option is the peer review approach towards content, as when known professionals in a certain field provide a critical guide to information on a particular website. Alternatively, the use of professional editors may provide a buffer between “citizen reporters” and the reading public. In some cases, the credibility of websites may receive attestations from users, giving rise to a kind of ratings guide. Credibility, furthermore, may be enhanced by the disclosure and ‘traceability’ of authorship.

We believe that such options, linked to the promotion of lifelong learning in a digital context, are the best way forward rather than an imposed quality control mechanism. Indeed, the very nature of cyberspace and how it has already developed render such a mechanism unpalatable to the vast majority of users for whom individual choice and open access are the great freedoms offered by the Internet.

For UNESCO, the key requirement is for Internet users to be demanding and discerning. This involves learning how to evaluate the status of different kinds of information and how to apply a critical intelligence to e-content. This in turn clearly has implications for education systems and for learning institutions of all types and at all levels, starting with pre-primary education. Capacity-building in this area of “information literacy”, within a framework of lifelong learning, is a main priority of UNESCO’s Information for All Programme.

Increasingly, the quality of education itself will be measured, at least in part, by how it equips and orients learners to navigate cyberspace with critical awareness and responsible judgement. Educational processes themselves will be increasingly transformed by the learning opportunities provided by the Internet, but “education for cyberspace” should not be narrowly construed as training to develop skills of access and use. More than ever, given the risks that exist, an education in values is called for, one that enables learners to make informed and discerning choices as individual citizens.

We are only at the beginning of the process of conceptualizing what the ICT revolution may mean for the future of education. For UNESCO, this is a moment that should not be wasted. It is imperative that a shaping orientation is given that is embedded in core human values. We believe that the global nature of the Internet calls for an education in universal values, as enshrined in the United Nations Charter

and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Freedom of expression, respect for human dignity and equality, respect for the rights of others, and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity are among the essential principles and values that educational processes everywhere should impart. This, please note, is not a recipe for bland uniformity; on the contrary, by empowering the individual and communities, such values become a framework or platform for specific applications in particular contexts.

Respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, for example, translates into concrete requirements when applied to cyberspace and especially in relation to quality e-content. In this perspective, what counts as ‘quality’ should embrace such considerations as local relevance, intercultural awareness and linguistic representation. Thus, far from being a minor or peripheral issue, the active presence of lesser used languages on the Internet is central to the nexus between ICT, cyberspace, and national and community development. When we say “local content”, this in practice should signify local languages and local knowledge, and all are vitally implicated in how quality e-content is understood.

That understanding certainly cannot be confined to the provision and consumption of high-definition, well-resourced expressions of the cultures of developed countries in a ‘world language’. E-content that is exclusionary, unrepresentative and non-participatory does not meet the test of quality, nor does e-content that denies the creative involvement of local or minority cultural communities.

These issues came to the fore in a thematic WSIS meeting organized by UNESCO, in cooperation with the African Academy of Languages, on “Multilingualism for Cultural Diversity and Participation for All in Cyberspace”, held on 6-7 May 2005 in Bamako, Mali. I am very happy that the Academy’s President, Professor Adama Samassékou, is with us here today. At this international conference, it was recognized that the destruction of hundreds of local languages should not be the price we pay for bridging the digital divide. On the contrary, the representation of lesser used languages in cyberspace should be a means for ensuring their survival; in other words, ICT and the digital environment should be vehicles for the sustainability of cultural and linguistic diversity. It was also recognized that this has educational implications, particularly for the adoption of mother language in schools and literacy classes and for capacity-building linked to community development.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me now turn to the second main theme, namely, innovative applications. This theme is of particular interest given that emphasis has now fallen on how best to implement the Plan of Action adopted at Geneva. In UNESCO’s case, this involves

identifying how to operationalize the four basic principles in order to enhance the possibilities of creating genuine knowledge societies. In addition to a number of programmatic actions, our approach to the follow-up of the Geneva phase has focused on the promotion of partnership and networking. The question of innovative applications and developing a culture of innovation has figured prominently in our work, both before and after the Geneva phase.

ICT and the Internet bring radically new prospects to creative practices. They help to generate new opportunities for intercultural exchange and networking, innovative means to make old and new knowledge available, new vehicles for promoting and expressing creativity, and fresh avenues for accessing cultural content and services produced worldwide. In the past, the alliance between technology and creative practices was instrumental in creating such new fields as photography and film. Today, we are witnessing new alliances and inter-connections between ICT and a variety of fields. This is bringing a real stimulus to creativity.

One example is the field of education. Here, new modalities of ICT and learning are emerging that, through their flexibility or their potential for large-scale and speedy action, offer fresh ways to extend and diversify educational opportunities. Examples that UNESCO is promoting include community learning centres and community multimedia centres (CMCs), the latter illustrating the advantages of linking ICT with more traditional media such as local radio. Other examples of the application of ICT in learning and capacity-building include its use in HIV/AIDS-related projects, agricultural extension schemes and open learning and distance education programmes (UNESCO has published guidelines on distance learning in teacher education, for example). Last month, meanwhile, UNESCO and FAO launched a training CD-Rom and an on-line community on digitization for librarians and laymen, with a particular orientation towards users in developing countries.

The creative explosion in the fields of art and design, especially visual communication, often serves to illustrate the new nexus between ICT and creativity, which have already yielded results of remarkable variety and significant cultural and economic value. These products include innovative architectural and product designs, computer animated films, computer music, computer games, web-based texts and interactive art installations.

The processes by which these products have been generated have spanned both the commercial and not-for-profit worlds and the formal and informal economic sectors. However, the opportunities for developing innovative applications linked to content creation skills are unevenly distributed, especially if one compares the “North” and the “South”. This is why UNESCO is focusing its attention on capacity-building, networking and partnerships.

One example is its DigiArts project, a project aimed at empowering young people to use new media in order to share ideas, reflect on crucial subjects of our time, and create new forms of expressions using digital tools, thereby communicating on a peer-to-peer basis and acquiring knowledge in the field of ICTs and creativity. The capacity-building activities of the DigiArts project are complemented by regional networks, linking the young people's communities with others through their artistic, scientific and technological practices.

Another example of UNESCO's work in this area is the Audiovisual E-Platform, which offers a multicultural on-line catalogue of productions (such as new documentaries, short films and television magazines) that links film-makers, broadcasters and distributors. At present, 260 productions from 71 developing countries are available, offering a range of culturally diverse materials. It is a highly secured platform designed specifically for professionals.

An example of UNESCO's promotion of public service broadcasting is UNESCO's partnership with the Public Service Broadcasting Trust of India focused on the Open Frame forum, which gives opportunities for television directors and film-makers from developing countries to display their latest work.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the shift from the idea of a global information society to the notion of diverse knowledge societies, the role of applications is central. With the added ingredient of creativity, one moves toward the re-imagining of society itself. Through the digitization of personal experience, views and information, ICT and the digital revolution are bringing opportunities for the democratization of creativity, often in minor ways but sometimes, especially in the aggregate, in significant forms. It is important, however, that the very openness and profusion of the Internet do not lead to an undermining of the rightful claims of expertise. A balance is needed and this, I believe, can only be achieved through education and the spread of information literacy.

I wish your conference every success. Its theme is central to the task of bridging the digital divide and closing the content gap on the Internet so that truly open, pluralistic and diverse knowledge societies may be constructed.

Thank you.