

DG/2005/112
Original: English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

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on the occasion of the information meeting for Permanent Delegations
on the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

UNESCO, 8 July 2005

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you today to this information meeting on the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). On the occasion of the Executive Board Information Meeting in January 2004, I briefed you about the outcomes of the first phase of the World Summit in Geneva. My main purpose today is to brief you on the preparation of the second phase of the Summit, which will take place in Tunis from 16 to 18 November 2005, and about UNESCO's engagement with this process.

Today's meeting is most timely. It provides a vantage point from which we can put into perspective the different events coming up on the international agenda. I am thinking, in particular, of the Millennium + 5 Summit in New York in September, when world leaders will review progress since the Millennium Declaration of 2000. The summit will also consider UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's report entitled "In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All" and his proposal of an agenda for global action and a realignment of the UN system.

Information and communication are central to the agenda of global development. The Secretary-General's report quite rightly highlights the role that ICT can play to help achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The process generated by the World Summit on the Information Society, over the two phases in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005, has served to catalyze the international development agenda. Let me now outline how UNESCO has addressed the WSIS process since Geneva.

You will recall that 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 Summit gave due recognition to these principles.

UNESCO's position has been that, as both a description of present trends and as a characterization of a desirable future, the notion of a single global information society does not capture the full potential of the ICT revolution. By contrast, the concept of "knowledge societies" stresses plurality and diversity instead of a global uniformity. It maintains that the new technologies, if harnessed creatively and wisely, offer remarkable possibilities for individual and collective choice about how, through our own actions, we can shape our lives. In other words, there is no one way that determines how different societies, with their own cultures, national histories and distinctive institutions, will interact with ICT. I am convinced that, by encouraging

this kind of thinking, UNESCO has helped to open up the agenda of the World Summit and make it more relevant to the concerns of Member States.

Following the first phase of the Summit, UNESCO took prompt action by emphasizing the shift from global debate on the principles towards implementation of the Action Lines in the WSIS Plan of Action. We have continued to explore the significance of transferring attention from “information” to “knowledge” but, since Geneva, UNESCO’s substantive contribution to the WSIS process has increasingly focused on the implementation of concrete actions within the framework of the 32 C/5, actions that are intended to operationalize the principles of knowledge societies. The Draft Programme and Budget for 2006-2007 (the 33 C/5) have been designed to continue implementing the outcomes of the Geneva Summit while also anticipating the likely outcomes of the Summit in Tunis.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In addition to its programmatic actions which are already putting relevant aspects of the WSIS Plan of Action into practice, UNESCO has organized four thematic meetings this year. The four themes were chosen because of their importance in light of the Geneva debates. All of the meetings endorsed UNESCO’s key principles for knowledge societies and stressed UNESCO’s role as a facilitator of WSIS implementation mechanisms. They allowed UNESCO to foster its multi-stakeholder approach to WSIS implementation activities and to formulate proposals for concrete actions in the areas of UNESCO’s competence.

Let me now briefly examine each thematic meeting in turn, highlighting their main contributions to the WSIS process.

In February, UNESCO organized a two-day International Conference in Paris on “Freedom of Expression in Cyberspace”. This experts’ meeting was attended by about 200 participants, including journalists, publishers, other media professionals, academics, NGO and civil society activists, and a large number of official representatives of Member States of UNESCO. The meeting examined the challenges and opportunities that freedom of expression, a fundamental human right, encounters in the global digital network.

While adopting no official declaration, the meeting agreed that Internet media should have the same freedoms as print and broadcast media. The conference concluded that it is dangerous to establish regulations for the flow of information in cyberspace - the Internet should be based upon full human rights and it is the responsibility of all states to respect and defend these rights when it comes to their application in cyberspace. The participants wished that this message be included in any new declaration from the countries participating in the WSIS process. The

Conference also encouraged the development of guidelines that could ensure the legal underpinning of commercial Internet enterprises, especially Internet service providers. In addition, the participants recommended the examination of how international legal provisions might be established to minimize ‘spam’ without infringing upon freedom of expression.

The second thematic meeting was an international conference on “Multilingualism for Cultural Diversity and Participation for All in Cyberspace” that was held from 6 to 7 May in Bamako, Mali. This event was organized by UNESCO in cooperation with the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) and with financial support from the Agence intergouvernementale de la Francophonie (AIF). The holding of this global meeting of experts in Africa was especially beneficial, not least by affording many opportunities for networking.

The conference illustrated one of UNESCO’s greatest strengths, namely, its convening capacity. In this particular case, many different constituencies of stakeholders involved in multilingualism were brought together for the first time. The Bamako meeting, in fact, proved to be extremely valuable for recognizing the importance of “problem-solving networks” of practitioners who can bring their different knowledge, experience and know-how to bear on complex issues.

An important outcome of the Bamako meeting was the clear recognition that the debate over multilingualism in cyberspace must change. This debate can no longer be dominated by a few ‘global’ languages but must seriously engage with the presence of lesser used languages. In a nutshell, when we speak of local content, we are really talking about local languages and local knowledge, and about how they are vitally implicated in processes of sustainable development and community empowerment.

There is a real risk that, in efforts to bridge the digital divide, hundreds of local languages may be sacrificed. In fact, the presence of lesser used languages in cyberspace should be part of the process through which they survive and flourish. As was recognized in Bamako, this also has implications for education, especially regarding the use of mother language in schools and literacy programmes. The use of ICT and the learning of mother languages should go hand-in-hand so that local languages may be kept alive. This means that, while national frameworks of policy and programme are clearly important, the local level is crucial: the building of pluralistic and inclusive knowledge societies is basically a grassroots process. If used creatively, the ‘global’ resource of ICT can be very productive at the local level.

The third thematic meeting – on “ICT for Capacity-Building: Critical Success Factors” – took place at UNESCO Headquarters from 11 to 13 May and attracted the participation of Mr Karklins and President Adamkus of the Republic of Lithuania. Organized by UNESCO in cooperation with the Club of Rome, this meeting focused

on how to make the best use of current resources, energies and commitments so that we can speed up our response to the problems that developing countries face in regard to ICT and capacity-building. Particular attention was paid to the needs of marginalized groups such as rural populations, the urban poor, refugees, the visually impaired and those affected by the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

This meeting clearly recognized that new paradigms of ICT and learning are taking shape that offer a variety of opportunities for large-scale and speedy action, including community learning centres, HIV/AIDS-related projects, agricultural extension programmes and national educational reform initiatives. ICT is transforming how learning and capacity-building are undertaken in many parts of the world.

A unique feature of this meeting was the live discussion platform which enabled us to get ‘real time’ interaction with 12 locations in Latin America, the Arab States, Africa and Asia. This provided further evidence of how ICT can provide added value.

The fourth event was the International Conference held on 17-19 May in St Petersburg, Russian Federation, on “UNESCO between Two Phases of the World Summit on the Information Society”. A UNESCO thematic meeting on “Cultural Diversity in Knowledge Societies” was integrated within the framework of this conference. This afforded an opportunity to explore the interesting idea of how ICT may contribute to the sustainability of cultural diversity. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the organizers of the conference in St Petersburg, which was very useful for highlighting UNESCO’s important role in the WSIS process.

Please note that copies of the reports and conclusions of the four thematic meetings, which will be presented to the participants in the third meeting of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom-3) in Geneva in September, are available here in the meeting room.

The outcomes of the four thematic meetings are building blocks within UNESCO’s engagement with the WSIS process and will be taken forward to the Tunis Phase of the World Summit.

Although it was not organized by UNESCO, I would also like to make reference to the WSIS Contributory Conference on “ICT and Creativity” in Vienna on 2-3 June. In my remarks at the opening ceremony, I focused on two key aspects of the conference’s theme: the quality of e-content and innovative applications. The “Vienna Conclusions” arising from this conference, which was organized by the Austrian Government, will also go forward to the PrepCom-3 meeting in Geneva in September.

In addition to the four thematic meetings, another significant contribution by UNESCO will be the publication of the World Report on “Building Knowledge Societies” that is planned to take place in the coming months. The World Report will contextualize the so-called digital divide within the wider “knowledge divide” that is particularly manifest in the North-South division of the world. As the premier tool of development in the future, it is vital that knowledge does not reinforce existing disparities but, instead, becomes a vehicle of sharing, a tool of collaboration and an instrument of solidarity.

The World Report will considerably support UNESCO’s contribution to the WSIS process and will strengthen the intellectual, strategic and ethical “watch” capacities of the international community. Its analyses and recommendations, especially as they pertain to the building of knowledge societies that are truly “for all”, look set to further enrich this important debate.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have now four months until the start of the second WSIS phase in Tunis; a significant part of the preparation process will occur during the forthcoming PrepCom-3 meeting. This meeting will prepare the outcomes of the Tunis Summit, which will most probably be called the “Tunis Commitment” and the “Tunis Agenda for Action”.

Currently, Mr Janis Karklins, the President of the Preparatory Committee, is organizing frequent consultations to prepare for PrepCom-3. I fully agree with Mr Karklins, with whom I have met several times in recent months, that the main goal of this second phase of the Summit must be to re-confirm the principles identified in Geneva and to concentrate on concrete actions to harness the potential of ICT for development.

I am pleased to observe that UNESCO has gained higher visibility and is seen more and more as a key agency, together with ITU, for fostering the WSIS process. Furthermore, UNESCO’s vision of knowledge societies is being increasingly recognized.

At the World Summit itself in Tunis in November, UNESCO will have a strong presence and high visibility. It will be an active participant and contributor, not least through our efforts to organize three events that will build on UNESCO’s concept of “knowledge societies”.

First and foremost, we will host a High-Level Round Table on “Knowledge for Development” on 17 November in Tunis. Drawing on the thematic consultations of recent months and the World Report, the Round Table will be an opportunity for

world leaders and eminent thinkers to share their vision of future societies and to consider new paradigms of education and learning necessary for creating pluralistic, inclusive and participatory knowledge societies. The question ‘what knowledge for what development?’ goes to the heart of the issue. It may be anticipated that the role of ICT in knowledge creation, knowledge sharing and knowledge preservation will receive particular attention.

In addition, on 18 November, the Education Sector is organizing a Round Table on “The Role of UNESCO in the Construction of Knowledge Societies through the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme”. It will review national, regional and world experiences in implementing UNESCO Chairs and networks in ICT and will consider how this important UNESCO mechanism can help to bridge existing information and knowledge gaps in line with the Summit’s objectives and plan of action. Participants will be drawn from UNESCO Chairholders from different regions and representatives of international and regional organizations, NGOs and the private sector.

On 16 November, UNESCO will organize a workshop on ICT in the service of people with disabilities. A joint venture between the Communication Sector and the Education Sector, the workshop will look at policies that promote accessibility in the digital world, especially in developing countries, and at how access to cyberspace for people with disabilities can be built into the Summit’s plan of action.

Furthermore, there will be ancillary events involving UNESCO that are hosted by other agencies and partners.

As was the case at the Summit meeting in Geneva, UNESCO will again offer a stand as a clearing-house on UNESCO’s action and a meeting point open to all so as to foster debate and dialogue among the Summit participants.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some issues to be addressed by the World Summit, such as Internet governance and financial mechanisms, are of high importance. While these issues are not at the core of our work, we are following the debates on these matters with interest. I am pleased that in the Working Group on Internet Governance, whose report will be published shortly, there is strong support for an open, transparent and inclusive approach. It is particularly important to recognize that “Internet governance” does not signify “Internet government”. The Internet constituencies are far wider than this and their full participation is integral to the Internet’s development. For its part, UNESCO has consistently advocated the principles of openness, the free flow of information and freedom of expression.

With regard to financial mechanisms, UNESCO has taken note of the report of the Task Force on Financial Mechanisms that was submitted in January to the WSIS Executive Secretariat. The report examines the many different funding mechanisms for ICT for development, noting that there is sometimes a mismatch between needs and available funding. I endorse its recommendation that greater cross-sectoral and cross-institutional coordination on financing programmes should be undertaken, both on the part of donors and recipients. Improvement and innovation in existing financing mechanisms are certainly necessary.

In this context, I would like to refer to the Global Digital Solidarity Fund that supports projects aimed at reducing digital disparities. The Fund's mode of operation is based on traditional North-South cooperation, in addition to an increased cooperation effort between the emerging South and the least developed countries, an approach which is often better suited to local realities.

The dire need for project support in this area is illustrated by our recent experience with the Information for All Programme. At the end of last year, we issued a call for project proposals that might be funded by the Special Fund of the Programme, and we received more than 500 projects. We estimate that at least US\$ 20 million would be needed to fund all of these projects.

I regret that the amount actually available in the IFAP Special Fund for financing these projects is slightly over US\$ 700,000, which will only allow funding allocations to be made for 24 projects. Clearly, the needs of Member States in the area of communication and information far exceed our capacity to assist. What is also evident, however, is the great interest in IFAP, which clearly responds to countries' self-perceived needs in regard to using information and knowledge for development.

Let me now turn to what comes after the Tunis phase of the Summit. As many of you will know, there is as yet no consensus regarding the implementation mechanisms of the Action Plan. This is an issue that is being extensively debated in the lead-up to Tunis and must be decided, if possible, before the Tunis Summit.

UNESCO, of course, based on its mandate, intends to play a major role in the implementation process, honouring its growing presence in the international debate on ICT for development and building on its strong multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Half of the 150 actions in the WSIS Action Plan fall under the responsibility of UNESCO. We feel we have to take responsibility for coordinating the multi-stakeholder implementing teams dealing with six of the eleven Action Lines that form the WSIS Action Plan, namely, access to information and knowledge; capacity-building; e-learning and e-science; cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content; media; and the ethical dimensions of the Information Society.

It is clear that each of the eleven Action Lines will involve a multiplicity of stakeholders in the implementation process. Among the UN agencies, it is important that there is a unified and coherent approach. At the international level, therefore, there is a need for overall inter-agency coordination of the activities of the multi-stakeholder implementing teams addressing the eleven Action Lines. ITU Secretary-General Utsumi has proposed that our two agencies should take on this responsibility together and I have accepted this proposal. However, it is important to remember that the greatest responsibility for implementation lies at the national level.

I agree with PrepCom President Karklins and Member States that overall international coordination should be a light-touch function, intended primarily for the purposes of information gathering and exchange, avoidance of duplication, as well as consolidated reporting. We need to avoid creating new systems that would impose a heavy administrative burden.

It is well understood that there is no single ownership of the Information Society, neither within the UN system, nor within the other parts of the global community. Regardless of the form of coordination mechanism, the implementation process must be genuinely multi-stakeholder, transparent and un-bureaucratic.

Closely linked to this debate are the present discussions on how best to fill the gap in the international high-level multi-stakeholder policy debate on ICT for development after the expiration of the mandate of the UN ICT Task Force at the end of this year. UNESCO is supporting the creation of a Global Alliance for ICT and Development, as a decentralized network and multi-stakeholder cross-sectoral platform of existing forums and institutions for policy dialogue on ICT for development. However, a final decision on objectives, functioning, composition, and modalities must take account of the decisions of WSIS in Tunis. Furthermore, the possible links between the Global Alliance and WSIS implementation and follow-up mechanisms need to be included in the discussions at PrepCom-3.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Summit will be on the agenda of the 33rd session of the General Conference, where I will seek the formal approval of Member States for my proposals regarding UNESCO's strategy in the post-WSIS phase. I know I can count on the support of your governments for the ideals that UNESCO represents in building knowledge societies.

Thank you.