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UNESCO AND THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

OUTLINE

Source: 33 C/Resolution 52.

Background: The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), organized in accordance with resolution 56/183 of the General Assembly of the United Nations in Geneva (Switzerland), in December 2003, and in Tunis (Tunisia) in November 2005, was an international landmark event setting targets, developing new approaches towards harnessing the potential of information and communication for development and mobilizing multistakeholder approaches and new networks.

Purpose: In accordance with 33 C/Resolution 52, the Director-General reports on the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and UNESCO's action and activities in that area to the General Conference at its 34th session.

Background and outcomes

1. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)¹ was an international landmark event setting targets, developing new approaches towards harnessing the potential of information and communication for development and mobilizing multistakeholder approaches and new networks “to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society” (WSIS Declaration of Principles). WSIS was held in two phases. The first phase culminated in the first Summit meeting in Geneva from 10 to 12 December 2003, and the second phase culminated in the second Summit meeting in Tunis hosted by the Government of Tunisia, from 16 to 18 November 2005.

2. Although the WSIS process involved primarily governments at the highest level, it also included the participation of all relevant United Nations bodies and other international organizations, non-governmental organizations, private sector, civil society, and media, with the intention of being a truly multistakeholder process.

3. For each phase, the Summit event marked the culmination of many months of preparations in the form of consultations and negotiations among Member States, United Nations experts, the private sector and non-governmental representatives reviewing vast amounts of information and sharing a broad spectrum of experiences on issues related to the Information Society.

4. The following four documents were adopted in Geneva and in Tunis including principles, action areas and instructions on implementation mechanisms:

- Geneva Declaration of Principles (December 2003);
- Geneva Plan of Action (December 2003);
- Tunis Commitment (November 2005);
- Tunis Agenda for the Information Society (November 2005).

UNESCO’s role in the WSIS process

5. UNESCO’s engagement with WSIS¹ has been creative, consistent and constructive. Its distinctive contribution has been the elaboration of the concept of building knowledge societies, qualified by four key principles, namely: freedom of expression; universal access to information and knowledge; respect for cultural and linguistic diversity; and quality education for all.

6. 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 information and communication revolution for human development. By contrast, the concept of “knowledge societies” stresses plurality and inclusiveness and puts the emphasis on what technology can do to improve people’s lives rather than on technology itself. It maintains that the application of new technologies offer remarkable possibilities for advancing human development.

7. Through the consistency of its core message “building knowledge societies”, and on insisting on its four principles, UNESCO helped to open up the Summit’s agenda and make it more relevant to the concerns of all Member States. The World Report *Towards Knowledge Societies* published in November 2005 helped to contextualize the so-called “digital divide” within the wider “knowledge divide”.

¹ <http://www.wsis.org>.

Results for UNESCO

8. For UNESCO, the Summit resulted in a considerable increase of the Organization's visibility and importance as a significant actor in the area of communication and information for development. Its role in adding value to the debates during and after WSIS was well recognized as demonstrated by the number of new partners, especially from the private sector and other agencies that the Organization was able to mobilize throughout the ongoing WSIS process and by the mobilization of its Member States to support both the Organization's message and operational role, as evidenced by the adoption of 33 C/Resolution 52.

9. The increased importance on the Organization in the process is illustrated by the fact that it was assigned one of the leading roles in the implementation process including:

- implementation of concrete activities contained in the Geneva Plan of Action within the framework of its own programmes so as to operationalize its concept of knowledge societies;
- facilitation of the coherent implementation of the six action lines in its areas of competence; and
- cooperation, together with ITU and UNDP, in the overall multistakeholder coordination of the facilitators of all 11 action lines.

10. These responsibilities include advocacy with the various stakeholders in the post-WSIS process to mainstream in their agendas the issue of building knowledge societies and fostering information and communication for development. The aim is to translate the spirit of Geneva and Tunis into concrete actions.

Facilitating implementation

11. In May 2006, UNESCO was designated as the facilitator for the multistakeholder implementation of the following six WSIS action lines included in the Geneva Plan of Action:

- access to information and knowledge (C3);
- e-learning (C7);
- e-science (C7);
- media (C9);
- cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content (C8);
- ethical dimensions of the Information Society (C10).

12. UNESCO organized first consultation meetings in May and October 2006 in Geneva, Beijing and Paris. These meetings aimed at: establishing terms of reference for the implementation of the action lines and determining working methods for stakeholders. The meetings, each attended by 80 to 100 participants from governments, intergovernmental organizations, civil society and the private sector, resulted in agreement on the terms of reference of coordination mechanisms and on clustering the paragraphs of the action lines into subthemes in order to facilitate implementation. Participants also agreed to use as widely as possible online tools in the facilitation process.

13. Following the first consultations and for planning the establishment of an online collaboration platform for the multistakeholder teams, UNESCO conducted an online survey on the needs and facilities of potential participants. Out of the nearly 18,000 people who were invited to participate in

the survey, 1,450 replied. The result of the survey indicated that most of the participants have access to rapid Internet connections and good computer and web skills. Participants indicated to be very motivated to work via online collaboration platforms and to see great potential in this tool to facilitate the WSIS action line implementation.

14. In May 2007, a second round of consultation meetings was organized in Geneva. The main part of the meetings was devoted to reports on concrete activities undertaken by the different stakeholder groups in order to establish partnerships. Participants endorsed the decision taken at the first meetings of establishing thematic subgroups within action lines and of assigning to various organizations the responsibility of moderating the activities under these subgroups. Next steps will be the finalization and launch of the online platform.

Challenges of the implementation process

15. The establishment of an efficient and effective implementation process in which UNESCO requires vision, political will, institutional and individual capacities, and resources. It necessitates a truly interdisciplinary and transsectorial approach, “out-of-the-box” thinking and the readiness to create mechanisms and approaches using new community applications and processes that in some cases still need to be invented.

16. Novel approaches are also required to ensure coherence of UNESCO’s own action and its effective and efficient contribution to the various complex follow-up and implementation mechanisms, such as the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD), the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), the Global Alliance for ICT for Development (GAID) and the United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) that UNESCO will lead from July 2007 on.

17. For the United Nations agencies, a major issue will be to link the implementation of the WSIS Action Plan to the United Nations reforms in the spirit of the report of the High-Level Panel on System-wide Coherence. Effort will be required to achieve a more coordinated and coherent United Nations system response to the WSIS outcomes while striving to ensure national ownership and leadership.

Internal coordination arrangements

18. All sectors of UNESCO are concerned by these developments. The aims of WSIS require UNESCO to operationalize the concept of knowledge societies throughout its action in education, sciences, culture and communication. Intersectoral mechanisms need to be strengthened to provide adequate and coherent responses to this challenge.

19. Therefore, the Director-General has set up a “Task Force on Knowledge Societies” whose main mandate is to ensure coherence of UNESCO’s own action to operationalize the concept of building knowledge societies. This includes:

- coordinating the activities of the various sectors involved in the facilitation of the implementation of the six action lines in its areas of competence;
- providing the strategic and consistent focus of UNESCO’s efforts and its added value in relation to new mechanisms emerging with the development of the information society;
- advising the Director-General on key issues of relevance to UNESCO emerging from the rapid development of ICTs and their societal, cultural and ethical implications and proposing adequate institutional response.