



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Towards knowledge societies?

2005
60
1945

Bureau of Public Information
memobpi

Towards knowledge societies?

“Knowledge societies” represent one of the new century’s greatest challenges. UNESCO is working to make these new societies a source of human and sustainable development for all.

The term “**knowledge societies**” was first used at the end of the 1960s; according to theoreticians, the wealth of a nation depends more on its ability to produce, exchange and transform knowledge than on its natural resources or industrial production.

- The expansion of knowledge societies – as long it doesn’t lead to the creation of guaranteed income for the profit of countries in the North - therefore constitutes a new development opportunity for countries in the South.

Will the 21st century see a real expansion of knowledge-sharing societies? Several obstacles bar the way. The digital divide is now often coupled with a knowledge divide. The latter separates countries with a good education system, research facilities and development potential from the others, which are hard hit by the brain drain.



The UNESCO World Report “Towards Knowledge Societies” presents a panoramic forecast for current upheavals. The Report puts forward several key ideas such as:

- Knowledge societies cannot be reduced to the information society: unlike information, knowledge cannot be considered mere merchandise.
- Diminishing the digital divide is crucial, but not sufficient, because it is most often coupled with a much older and deeper knowledge divide.
- Knowledge plays an increasingly important role in economic growth, in both North and South. It is also one of the keys to human and sustainable development.

- There isn’t a single model for a knowledge society. Knowledge societies must be pluralistic and take into account the diversity of knowledge cultures. It is up to each society to promote the local and indigenous forms of knowledge it possesses.

- Knowledge societies will accomplish their mission only if they succeed in fostering an ethic of collaboration and become knowledge-sharing societies.

UNESCO is working to build knowledge societies that are the source of human and sustainable development for all. To that end, priority must be given to linguistic diversity, by encouraging bilingualism, and if possible trilingual’s, starting at primary school level. Appropriate measures must also be taken to promote linguistic diversity in cyberspace.

Progress must be made towards certification of knowledge found on the internet, i.e. towards quality labels to identify outstanding websites providing particularly reliable and valuable information.

Women’s contribution to knowledge societies must be increased: access for

Towards knowledge societies?

Knowledge society success stories

When it declared independence in 1965, Singapore had all the characteristics of a less-developed economy. For the last 40 years, the government has put into effect proactive policies aiming to boost the population's skills, increase productivity and create the conditions to attract industries with high-level capital and added value. As a result Singapore has become a real economic hub for Southeast Asia and its GDP per capita (US\$25,000) exceeds that of many industrialized countries.

In 1971, several thousand people settled on a desert plain 20 km from Lima (Peru) and created the **Villa El Salvador** community. Without any outside assistance, the settlers built houses and roads and founded schools and organizations. As the decades went by, their determined action for participatory community development turned their shantytown into an organized municipality. The development effort relied on women and women's groups, which played a key role in the venture's success. Today 98% of the children attend school and the illiteracy rate among adults (4.5%) is the lowest in the country. Proof of the extraordinary vitality of this volunteer democracy is the existence of some 100 clubs for cultural, sports, artistic and other activities in a community that now numbers more than 400.000 inhabitants.

women to basic, secondary and university education as well as to scientific careers must be encouraged by appropriate measures (scholarships, flexible schedules, more women teachers and researchers, in-service training, creating positions for women mediators).

Knowledge is a powerful lever in the fight against poverty. The knowledge economy is an opportunity for emerging countries and for their people's welfare. The Indian state of Kerala, for instance, despite its low per capita income (US\$432 in 2003), boasts social indicators and a rate of human development close to those of industrialized countries. Life expectancy has risen to 73 years and school attendance is over 90%. Thanks to the quality of its research infrastructure, Kerala contributes significantly to making India the 8th country in the world for scientific publications. But not all societies are ready for such changes. We must therefore make sure that the expansion of the knowledge economy does not aggravate the inequality between those in the centre and the more marginal, incapable of producing the goods and services on which growth now depends. The World Report stresses that effort must be made, particularly in schools, to teach future web surfers to sort, prioritize and use wisely the information available on the internet.

Before we can reap the benefits of reaching the level of knowledge societies, investments are necessary. Between now and 2015, the number of teachers must increase by an estimated 15 to 35 million, more than 3 million of them in sub-Saharan Africa. This represents a considerable rise in the

expense budget, one that these countries probably won't be able to afford. To achieve universal access to primary school by 2015 in developing countries and countries in transition, some US\$9 billion more is needed annually, in other words more than four times what donor countries are now contributing per year. The recent initiative to cancel part of the debt of heavily-indebted poor countries is very encouraging. These countries have taken advantage of their debt reduction to spend more on education (40% of recovered resources) and on health (25% of resources).

Contact :

Jérôme Bindé, publication director of the World Report: Towards Knowledge Societies
j.binde@unesco.org

To Find Out More

www.unesco.org/shs, click on Prospective Studies

The World Report is available on line in PDF format in English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese and Arabic