Background paper:
From the Information Society To Knowledge Societies (December 2003)

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UNESCO and the World Summit on the Information Society

The two parts of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), in Geneva, 10-12 December 2003, and in Tunis, in 2005, are major events on the global agenda and hence, UNESCO attaches high importance to the WSIS process and its outcomes.

UNESCO has fully supported the WSIS preparatory process from its beginning, working at the governmental level involving Member States, mainly through the Executive Board and through National Commissions for UNESCO, as well as with non-governmental organizations, professional communities and civil society - in all of UNESCO’s areas of competence - education, the sciences, culture as well as communication and information, the latter with special emphasis on freedom of expression, media and the press.

In each case, UNESCO has defined and promoted its views and positions (see below) and contributed them to the Draft Declaration of Principles and the Draft Plan of Action that the Summit is expected to adopt.

In October 2003, during its General Conference, UNESCO organized the Ministerial Round Table, "Towards Knowledge Societies", which adopted an important Communiqué. It sets forth a set of principles - including universal access to information and press freedom - that should guide the utilization of ICT to maximize its effectiveness for individual, community and national development.

From the Information Society to Knowledge Societies

UNESCO’s proposals for the Summit are based on its specific mandate, leading it to promote the concept of Knowledge Societies building on that of the global Information Society.

UNESCO believes that, in addition to technological, infrastructural and economic forms of information, dimensions of knowledge rooted in community, culture and social identity must equally be addressed. For UNESCO, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) must be linked to the recognition that knowledge is the principal force of the social, political, cultural and institutional dimensions of development, founded on human rights.

The plurality inherent in the concept of Knowledge Societies implies diversity, variety and openness to choice. Accordingly, UNESCO wants to ensure that information societies evolve into knowledge societies, in which people can access and exchange
quality information and ideas that are relevant to their life and development.

Through its proposals, UNESCO is responding to the three main challenges in building Knowledge Societies:

- first, to narrow the digital divide that accentuates disparities in development, excluding entire groups and countries from the benefits of information and knowledge;
- second, to guarantee the free flow of, and equitable access to, data, information, best practices and knowledge in the information society; and
- third, to build international consensus on shared values and principles.

### Four Principles

There are four principles that are essential for the development of equitable knowledge societies:

- Freedom of expression;
- Equal access to education;
- Universal access to information, especially in the public domain;
- Giving expression to cultural diversity.

Knowledge societies should be based on a strong commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression as defined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and pluralistic and independent media. Knowledge societies should allow the full realization of the right to education and of all cultural rights. In knowledge societies, access to the public domain of information and knowledge for educational and cultural purposes should be as broad as possible. An important principle of knowledge societies should be encouraging and giving expression to cultural and linguistic diversity.

### Three Strategic Objectives

In recognition of these principles, UNESCO has three strategic objectives:
I. to foster digital opportunities and social inclusion, by using ICT for capacity-building, empowerment, governance and social participation;

II. to strengthen capacities for scientific research, information-sharing, cultural creativity and performances and exchanges in knowledge societies; and

III. to enhance learning opportunities through access to diverse content and delivery systems.

**Objective I**

**Fostering Digital Opportunities and Social Inclusion**

Knowledge societies will only be equitable when all people, including disadvantaged and marginalized groups (e.g. people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, people living in extreme poverty), women and youth, benefit equally from ICT such as by strengthening networks, sharing information, creating knowledge resources and developing the necessary skills for life and work in the new digital environment.

The use of ICT should be encouraged as a means of empowering local communities and helping them to combat marginalization, poverty and exclusion, especially in Africa and Least Developed Countries (LDCs). The enhancement of dialogue between citizens and public authorities is one of the major objectives of knowledge societies. They should be based on the sharing of information and the genuine participation of social groups at all levels.

**Objective II**

**Strengthening capacities for scientific research, information-sharing and cultural creativity, performances and exchanges**

Equitable knowledge societies should ensure participation in all forms of intellectual life for educational, scientific, cultural and communication purposes. The production and dissemination of educational, scientific and cultural content, and the preservation of digital heritage, should be regarded as crucial elements of knowledge societies. Networks of specialists and of virtual interest groups should be developed, as they will be key to efficient and effective interaction and cooperation in knowledge societies.
Objective III
Enhancing Learning Opportunities Through Access to Diverse Content and Delivery Systems

The quality of teaching and learning, and the sharing of knowledge and information, should be enhanced by the application of ICT. It has the potential to introduce greater flexibility into the educational process in response to societal needs. The potential of ICT to lower the cost of education, and to improve internal and external efficiencies of education systems, needs to be recognized. Knowledge societies should offer opportunities to use ICT as an innovative and experimental tool in the process of renewing education.

Information and communication technologies should be seen both as an educational discipline and as a pedagogical tool capable of enhancing the effectiveness of educational services. There is a need for a broad-based dialogue among all stakeholders and to build a consensus at the national and international levels. This could yield strategies and policies for broadening access to education and learning, progressing towards Education for All (EFA) targets at the country level and renewing formal and non-formal education systems.

Normative Documents

Normative Actions taken by UNESCO’s General Conference at its recent session complement the Organization’s overall commitment to a successful WSIS:

- **The Recommendation on the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace**, concerns four aspects that must be taken into consideration so that the greatest number profit from the potential of ICT: development and promotion of multilingual content and systems; Access to networks and services; Development of public domain content; and Reaffirming and promoting the fair balance between the interests of rights-holders and the public interest.
- **The Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage** is designed to assist States in preparing national policies to preserve, and provide access to, digital heritage.