

U N E S C O

High-level Round Table

“Shaping the Future through Knowledge”

Tunis, Tunisia, 17 November 2005

**Organized on the occasion of the
World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)
Tunis, Tunisia, 16-18 November 2005**

Summary Report

Paris, November 2005

A. Introduction

1. The UNESCO High-level Round Table “Shaping the Future through Knowledge” was hosted by Mr Koichiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, in Tunis, Tunisia, on 17 November 2005 as UNESCO’s main parallel event during the World Summit on the Information Society (16-18 November 2005).¹

B. Objectives

2. The High-level Round Table aimed at discussing how to build equitable and inclusive knowledge societies and, in particular, how to harness the potential of knowledge and put it at the service of sustainable development.

3. The meeting was a follow-up to a similar event organized during the first phase of WSIS held in December 2003 in Geneva. At that time participants agreed that information, communication and knowledge must continue to be at the core of human development. The advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) afford new opportunities, not least for networking, sharing and targeted applications, notably for poverty reduction.

C. Participants

4. The High-level Round Table included high level personalities from governments, civil society and the private sector, namely Mr Atsushi Aiba, Professor, International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Japan, Mr Hans Åkerblom, Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Sweden, Mr Ahmed Darwish, Minister of State for Administrative Development, Egypt, Ms Wendy Hawkins, Director of Education, Intel Corporation, USA, Mr Nicholas Negroponte, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA, Mr Abdulaziz Othman Altwajri, Director-General, ISESCO, Ms Viviane Reding, Commissioner, Information Society and Media, European Commission, and Ms Lynn St. Amour, President/CEO, Internet Society, USA. It was moderated by Ms Anne Leer, United Kingdom.

5. The debate was attended by more than 150 participants and broadcast live on the Internet with over 700 live connections.²

D. Structure of work

6. The High-level Round Table was opened by the Director-General of UNESCO³ who requested participants to share their experience and vision on how knowledge can influence human and societal development and turn it towards a more equitable future. Anchoring the discussion, Mr Matsuura outlined three sets of issues:

- What are the preconditions for enhancing access to information and knowledge? What is necessary to create an enabling environment? What is the importance of technical and

¹ <http://www.unesco.org/en/wsisis/tunis>

² Video-on-Demand at <http://www.unesco.org/en/wsisis/tunis>

³ Full text of the Opening Address by the Director-General in Annex I.

societal innovation and the corresponding need for related investment in human and institutional resources as well as infrastructure?

- What processes, frameworks and approaches can facilitate knowledge creation, knowledge sharing and knowledge application for developmental purposes and economic advance for all countries? What is the role of ICT in this process? How do we ensure this occurs in a gender-sensitive and inclusive manner?
- How do we harness the power and rich heritage of local and indigenous knowledge systems? How can we ensure their preservation and integration within contemporary patterns of global exchange and networking?

7. The format of the event was a moderated discussion among the panellists followed by exchange with the audience, which included participants who are prominent in their field.

8. The High-level Round Table was closed by the Director-General of UNESCO thanking the panellists, participants and the moderator for their important inputs.

E. Summary of the debates

a) Vision

9. Addressing the moderator’s questions such as “Do we know where we want to go?” and “Do we share the same vision of knowledge societies?” participants agreed with UNESCO’s four core principles for knowledge societies: freedom of expression; universal access to information and knowledge; respect for cultural and linguistic diversity; and access to quality education for all. There was an unanimous conviction that ICTs are providing unprecedented opportunities to realize these principles.

b) Reality

10. From the outset, the participants noted that the growth of “e-society” does not guarantee the development of knowledge, let alone wisdom. They voiced concern about the loss of vast quantities of knowledge notably indigenous and local knowledge, which “cannot be transmitted through the keyboard” and for the inability of huge numbers of people to access information that is vital to them but is not available in their language.

11. Both the panellists and audience pointed out that the much heralded vision and promise of the global information society are slow to materialize. The gap between the knowledge rich and the knowledge poor is more pressing with more than 800 million illiterates worldwide and the digital and knowledge divide is widening, in spite of all the advances in ICTs. Although there are many isolated success stories, much work remains to be done. There are a series of perceived threats such as the erosion of cultures and languages, loss of public archives and cultural heritage, falling educational standards, a “dumbing down” and dominance of global media. The audience challenged the panel with remarks such as: “All we learn about each other is now via TV and Internet. The quality of what’s available on the screens is therefore all-important”.

12. Despite the globalization of lifestyles and cultures, cultural and linguistic diversity remain essential for the development and well-being of societies - “To bridge the Knowledge gap we have to bridge the linguistics gap”. Regarding language diversity, it was pointed out that out of an estimated 6000 languages in the world, we lose one language every two weeks. As English seems to be growing as the world’s *lingua franca*, the question is what can be done to protect and foster all languages in future knowledge societies, which inter alia have to face the challenges of cost barriers to making content available in all languages on the Internet.

13. There was some disagreement on these issues, from one point of view that, “In 200 years, there will be one primary language which will be global and in addition people will speak local languages”, to “all people have the right to communicate in their own local language” and “if we do not preserve the world’s languages and heritage, we fail future generations and impoverish humanity”. However, languages as the embodiment of cultures are both part and parcel of the intangible heritage and are essential instruments of communication, said Mr Matsuura in closing this part of the debate.

c) Strategy

14. The main strategic approach for shaping the future to knowledge is to address the knowledge and linguistic divides and not only the digital gap, with a strong emphasis on people’s participation in decision-making and the establishment of new structures.

15. Panellists agreed on key points for the strategic way forward and emphasized that investment in education and in high quality content remains fundamental. So far, too much attention was given to, and too much investment has been made (and more often wasted) on technology, rather than on people and content and what we want to use the technology for.

16. One speaker highlighted the crucial role of the Internet and openness that must be safeguarded in order to guarantee access to information and knowledge to all, through open standards, community approaches, freedom of expression and freedom of access. Another drew the link between good governance and knowledge, where the key need of the citizen is government transparency and that the means of facilitating this is for the people to be able to access information.

17. Others highlighted the important role of libraries, archives and museums as a basic premise for building knowledge societies, describing them as “cultural operators of society” that, however, need to “reinvent themselves” by, for example, establishing new links between “formal” and “non-formal” knowledge. Whereas the establishment of digital libraries is important, the role of traditional libraries as “realms of knowledge” must not be underestimated. In addition, the role of “mediators” guiding through information and knowledge and the importance of information literacy as opposed to ICT literacy with its purely technology driven approach, was highlighted.

18. Panellists also emphasised the importance of encyclopaedias as gateways to information and knowledge, both in printed and on-line forms. Referring to the reliability and relevance of information provided through these compilations of knowledge, they

discussed different forms of vetting the quality of the information provided in these compendia, for example by institutions with international credibility or by new forms of community based “social filtering”. The issue of credibility was seen as dependant on the reactions of the community of users, as it “must be the community that develops the trust”. Much concern was expressed that disinformation exists on the Internet, and its use for extremism jeopardizes tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

19. Panellists agreed that no new knowledge institutions are needed, but that those existing need to “think fresh and new” so that they do not become redundant. They should not assume the old ways in making knowledge available to all but should try and “shape the future”. In this context, the European approach was quoted as a crucially multicultural experience based on freedom of information and freedom of expression.

20. Speaking on the issue of learning for and in knowledge societies, participants highlighted the challenges inherent in the radical changes in learning delivery methods from the paper based to the electronic and distributed learning environment. In this context learning processes for knowledge creation, knowledge deepening and knowledge acquisition need to change radically, including greater community involvement and more emphasis on information literacy to develop the ability to analyze, criticise and bring together information that is meaningful.

21. It was acknowledged that the aim is for students to become content and knowledge “producers” – they are “generators of information and knowledge” as children who have access to information and ICT “will be the economic engine of the world”. On the issue of knowledge structures, as distinct from existing institutions and knowledge processes, there was a feeling that traditional structures have to change and that the existing intellectual property rights structure cannot respond adequately to the creators of content in a distributed and electronic environment – “we use old structures for new ideas”.

22. Participants of the meeting were also presented with new promising developments including the production and dissemination of low-cost computers, such as the \$100 lap top developed by Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As children are the “major agents of change”, electronic books for children could serve as “Trojan horses” for youth to use the computer for accessing the Internet including its knowledge repositories such as Wikipedia.

d) Action

23. Many outstanding critical issues need to be addressed. Panellists and the audience provided a list ranging from: intellectual property rights; access to credible and quality content; multi-lingual and cultural diversity; concerns over control of content; regulation of the Internet; commerce versus public services, how to make partnerships of multi-stakeholders work; models for funding and supply; the need for new ways of thinking and new models to manage new opportunities, products and services across borders and old paradigms; and, the need for transparency and collaboration.

e) Requests

24. The panellists made the following requests as to what topics UNESCO should be focusing on over the next two years in its efforts to promote knowledge societies:

- Focus on people and content first; technology only provides tools
- Focus on education and learning, in particular on primary rural education
- Focus on funding
- Focus on partnerships and new ways of thinking and working
- Focus on an “outside in” vision of knowledge societies, promoting the concept of a better, more equal world through access to learning, smart use of information, media and ICTs
- Focus on capturing language scripts on the Internet, as without such linguistic diversity, there can be no education and no communication
- Focus on the preservation of information and knowledge.

Address by
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

on the occasion of the High-level Round Table on
Shaping the Future through Knowledge

Tunis, Tunisia, 17 November 2005

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased and honoured to welcome all of you to this High-level Round Table organized by UNESCO on the occasion of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). My particular thanks go to the panelists and discussants for responding positively to my invitation to participate.

This discussion is aimed at building on the earlier event that we organized during the first phase of the World Summit held in Geneva two years ago. On that occasion, I convened a High-Level Symposium on the theme of “Building Knowledge Societies - from Vision to Action”. This morning, in my speech in the Plenary, I stressed that UNESCO has been promoting the concept of “knowledge societies”, which constitutes a strategic framework for action of our Organization.

Allow me now to briefly outline the four key principles on which the building of equitable and inclusive knowledge societies appears to rest.

The first principle is based on respect for human rights – in particular, freedom of expression, which must apply not only to traditional media but also to new media, including the Internet. It is the basic premise of knowledge societies.

The second principle is universal access to information and knowledge, especially information in the public domain. This is an essential precondition for broader participation in knowledge societies and for accelerating social and economic development.

The third principle concerns respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, so that the societies of the future celebrate pluralism, inclusion and tolerance.

Finally, the fourth principle is access to quality education for all. This is essential for building and developing the necessary skills and capacities for development, progress and peace in all societies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We believe that the concept of knowledge societies offers an inclusive, plural and holistic vision involving both men and women on an equal basis with a clear development-oriented perspective; and that this vision captures the complexity and dynamics of current trends within the globalization process.

Further elaboration of this concept is to be found in the *UNESCO World Report 2005: Towards Knowledge Societies*, which was released for the Summit and which we are making available to you today. The Report explains the significance of the shift from the concept of “the Information Society” to that of “Knowledge Societies”. While the advent of an interconnected

world has rapidly re-ordered our relationship to information and education, the question of how to build societies based on shared knowledge has not yet been adequately addressed.

This is the reason I decided to launch this *UNESCO World Report* for the attention of all major UNESCO stakeholders. It was drafted on the basis of the initial contributions of more than seventy experts from all over the world and was finalized by the Secretariat of UNESCO. This publication demonstrates the capacities of our Organization to serve as a laboratory of ideas and to play this role by stimulating dialogue and by offering an intellectual, strategic and ethical vision on this important subject.

The *UNESCO World Report* recommends areas for possible action by the competent national and international bodies. It offers some ethical and practical pointers, reflecting the conviction that emerging societies will unquestionably have to put education and access to knowledge at the heart of their concerns if they are to be successful in meeting the world’s major development challenges.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The scope of UNESCO’s mandate in the field of education, the sciences, culture and communication ensures the relevance of its mission in a world in constant transformation. The opportunities created by the ICT revolution offer a new dynamic in all spheres of activity in society, while at the same time creating a situation of growing interdependence.

As a forum and a place for meeting and debate, UNESCO is deeply committed to devising paths that could lead to multilateral solutions in all fields of competence covered by its mandate. It is in this context that we need your contribution and guidance. We ask you to share your experience and vision on how knowledge can influence human and societal development and turn it towards a more equitable future. Indeed, this Round Table itself is a vehicle of knowledge-sharing, which is central to our concerns.

To anchor our discussion, there are three sets of issues which I hope we will discuss from the outset of today’s meeting.

First, what are the preconditions for enhancing access to information and knowledge? What is necessary to create an enabling environment? What is the importance of technical and societal innovation and the corresponding need for related investment in human and institutional resources as well as infrastructure?

Second, what processes, frameworks and approaches can facilitate knowledge creation, knowledge sharing and knowledge application for developmental purposes and economic advance for all countries? What is the role of ICT in this process? How do we ensure this occurs in a gender-sensitive and inclusive manner?

Third, how do we harness the power and rich heritage of local and indigenous knowledge systems? How can we ensure their preservation and integration within contemporary patterns of global exchange and networking?

I am very hopeful that your ideas will help to further develop our reflections on how to build knowledge societies and how to deepen our understanding of what this requires. These are issues that are crucial to our future. I therefore hope that the outcomes of the Round Table will contribute to the wider discussions occurring within this second phase of the World Summit.

I should like to conclude by expressing in advance my appreciation of the valuable contributions of all of you – panelists, discussants and participants - to the deliberations of this High-level Round Table.

Thank you very much.