Education in and for the Knowledge Society

Introduction: UNESCO and the Knowledge Society

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to address you on the occasion of this conference, and especially this panel, whose theme is central to UNESCO.

Before coming specifically to the subject of this panel, I would like to underline UNESCO's approach on the "Building knowledge societies", a theme that our Organization has endeavoured to promote and which constitutes a strategic framework for action for our Organization in the coming years.

Throughout the preparatory process for the World Summit, UNESCO ensured that a number of key intellectual and ethical concerns were taken into account. The consultations held with governmental and non-governmental organizations, professional organizations and civil society have been unanimous in this respect. The fact is that, over and above the technical aspects, the real issue is to take the human dimension of the digital divide into account. Education is an overarching goal in this context. Indeed, information for all is impossible without education for all.

UNESCO has therefore proposed that discussions be centred on the concept of "knowledge societies", a concept that the capabilities to identify, produce, process, transform, disseminate and use information to build and apply knowledge for human development.

For UNESCO, the building of equitable knowledge societies rests on **four key principles:**

The **firs**t, the principle of freedom of expression, must apply not only to traditional media but also to new media, including the Internet. It is the basic premise of knowledge societies. UNESCO whose mandate is to promote the "free flow of ideas by word and image", is therefore acting unequivocally in keeping with Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is important then to continue to mobilize energies and efforts to promote freedom of expression and its corollary, freedom of the press, as a basic right indispensable to the exercise of democracy. Freedom of expression is a major avenue through which creativity,

innovation, criticism and questioning can be brought. Our insistence on the plural form of knowledge societies rests on the conviction that there is no single uniform model, dictated by technology or market relations, to which all societies must conform. The nature of knowledge societies should be conceived as plural, variable and open to choice, and freedom of expression is inseparable from this vision.

The **second principl**e, access to quality education for all, is essential for building and developing the necessary skills and capacities for development, progress and social peace in all societies. Access to education is in fact a basic right, to which information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide immense opportunities of increasing access.

The **third principle** concerns respect for cultural and linguistic diversity. The aim is to foster the expression of cultural and linguistic pluralism, both in content and in the various types of production – news, documentaries and educational materials. (The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity; the Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace, the new Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage).

Lastly, the **fourth principl**e, universal access to information and knowledge, especially information in the public domain, is a prerequisite for broader participation in development processes.

Global Commitments

Let me come back to the second principle: Education in and for the Knowledge societies.

ICTs invite a profound rethinking of the purpose of education and its relevance to national development. They have the potential to widen access to education at all levels, to overcome geographical distances, to multiply training opportunities, and to empower teachers and learners through access to information and innovative learning approaches – both in the classroom, from a distance, and in non-formal settings. Specialists widely agree that without judicious use of technology, defined in the broadest sense to encompass radio, television and computers, many developing countries will be unable to satisfy the basic educational needs of

all children, youth and adults, nor will they be in a position to meet the rising demand for higher and continuing education.

Education for All is the foremost priority of UNESCO, because education is both a fundamental human right and a key to sustainable development and peace within and among countries. Achieving the goals set in Dakar and at the Millennium Development Summit means ensuring that the digital divide does not further marginalize the poorest sectors of the population, and it entails finding creative, alternative paths to learning. It also calls for continuous reflection on ensuring that education does justice to the local context – particularly cultural, linguistic and economic needs and the global one, in light of the reality of growing interdependence between nations

UNESCO has encouraged a profound reflection on the changing role of education and the knowledge, skills and values that are required to participate fully in our societies. The International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, headed by Jacques Delors, recognized that our societies must overcome tensions between the global and the local, the universal and the individual, tradition and modernity, and between the extraordinary expansion of knowledge and the capacity of human beings to assimilate it. As a result, the Commission emphasized four pillars that it describes as the foundations of education: *learning to live together*, *learning to know*, *learning to do* and *learning to be*. The Commission also stressed that learning throughout life is the lifeblood of society, and discussed the need to expand the number of opportunities and entry points for learning.

The broad questions on which we now need to focus include:

- How can one use ICTs to accelerate progress towards education for all and throughout life?
- How can ICTs bring about better balance between equity and excellence in education?
- How can ICTs help reconcile universality and local specificity of knowledge? and
- How can education help individuals and society to master and benefit from ICTs that increasingly permeate all facets of life?

Human capacity and open and distance education

Lifelong learning is, therefore, a crucial imperative in knowledge-based societies characterized by rapid technological, economic, cultural and demographic changes. The nature and pace of change in knowledge-based societies governs the demand for lifelong learning. So how will we invest more in knowledge creation, processing and dissemination? How will we change the systems of knowledge, education and training?

These are critical questions for which we still seek the answers. We need to emphasize that in a world characterized by rapid obsolescence of knowledge; by rapid growth and change in knowledge; the conventional modes or systems of education may become inadequate. Open and distance learning methodologies may offer viable alternatives:

In the context of open and distance learning, the new media have several benefits. ICTs bridge the geographical and transactional distance between the teachers and the learners and provide unique opportunities to meet the rapidly increasing demand for learning throughout life in resource-scarce environments. ICTs help overcome geographical, economic and socio-cultural barriers; provide greater interactivity; reduce cost; enhance virtual proximity and access; bring greater variety of learning resources and provide greater flexibility and learner control. We now realize that the technical capacity of ICTs has far exceeded the capacity of the educational community to respond fully to the opportunities and challenges that this rapid change has brought. But there can be no doubt that technology will alter and reshape the entire landscape of education.

While the new ICTs offer unparalleled flexibility and tremendous potential for lifelong and open and distance learning, there exists a wide gap between developed and developing countries in access to and utilization of the new ICTs. We must now combat this serious problem of the digital divide.

The Digital Divide and Barriers to Learning Opportunities

We live in a world marked by contrast. A few of the notable contrasts are prosperity against poverty, knowledge against ignorance and globalization against marginalization. The two

reinforcing clusters are seen as globalization, knowledge and prosperity and marginalization, ignorance and poverty. In a recent report on inequalities in education Oxfam observed that the income gap between rich and poor is increasing nationally and internationally. But while income is perhaps the most visible manifestation of inequality, and income poverty the most visible form of deprivation, the less visible disparities in education are reinforcing both inequality and poverty. The poorest countries and poorest people are those with the least access to educational opportunity. In future, the linkages between lack of education and other forms of deprivation will be further strengthened by globalization, technological change and the communication revolution.

Closely linked to poverty, ignorance and marginalization, the digital divide threatens the very future of developing countries. The digital divide basically refers to the huge gap in access and use of ICTs between regions, societies and communities across the world. It has been emphasized that the digital divide should be seen not primarily in technological terms, but as embedded in broader inequalities in education and training. The sobering reality for the developing world is that "ICTs may be global in scope but are far from global in reach."

Admittedly, we must not underestimate the importance of access to technologies and infrastructure, which are still cruelly lacking in many parts and regions of the world. What can the concepts of "digital revolution" or "information society" effectively mean to 80% of the world's population who have no access to basic telecommunication facilities, or to approximately 860 million illiterate people, or to the 2 billion inhabitants who still have no electricity? The priority given to narrowing the digital divide in every respect is therefore fully justified. UNESCO is taking an active part in a range of international initiatives, particularly in response to the Millennium Development Goals, to bridge the digital divide that separates rich countries from poor countries and privileged groups from underprivileged population groups within the same country.

Learning to learn using new technologies or, in other words, building media literacy is a major challenge for developing countries. Using the technology as a tool to further the learning experience even without the mediation of a learning institution is necessary to build confidence and competence. An inadequate response to the need for media literacy would result in the creation of yet another barrier to meaningful participation in learning.

Bridging the Digital Divide

We need to bridge the “digital divide” and promote “digital inclusion”. We need to emphasize ways to use ICTs in promoting greater participation of the poor, of girls and women in particular. In the developing world we need to promote access to education for people in rural and remote places. Gender equity requires innovative approaches to promote female literacy and female enrolment in all stages of education.

All the Organization’s initiatives in the field of education and ICTs aim to provide evidence-based information and examples of innovative best practices, facilitate policy dialogue, provide technical support, and promote regional/international partnerships and networking.

Five Areas of Expertise

In spreading knowledge and use of ICT in education, UNESCO relies on five key areas of expertise to carry out its mission:
Laboratory of ideas: Identifies emerging problems, seeks strategies to solve them, creates space for dialogue, and tests innovative solutions.
Standard setting: Develops new standards in key areas such as technical and vocational education and the recognition of higher education qualifications.
Capacity-building: Expands the capacities of governments, experts, civil society and communities through policy advice, developing training material and conducting training workshops, international conferences and information sharing.
Clearinghouse: Gathers and shares information, especially best practices and innovations.
International catalyst: Stimulates international cooperation in education.

To finish, UNESCO has published a series of publication for the World Summit that is available on our web site and that I encourage you to consult.