

**Hundred and sixty-sixth Session**

166 EX/19  
PARIS, 3 March 2003  
Original: English

Item 3.5.1 of the provisional agenda

**UNESCO'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORLD SUMMIT  
ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY (GENEVA 2003 AND TUNIS 2005)**

**SUMMARY**

The present document outlines UNESCO's action undertaken in preparation of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and gives a summary of UNESCO's proposals for the elements to be included in the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action.

Decision proposed: paragraph 17.

## UNESCO's involvement in the preparatory process

1. UNESCO attaches very high importance to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) recognizing that the two meetings of the Summit, in Geneva, December 2003 and in Tunis in 2005, are major events on the global agenda.
2. UNESCO is fully supporting the WSIS preparatory process endeavouring to shape consensus on the four principles that the Organization considers as essential for the development of equitable knowledge societies – **equal access to education, universal access to information (in the public domain), freedom of expression and cultural diversity.**
3. The consensus shaping process has been mainly conducted through:
  - (a) The organization of a Conference entitled “European Perspectives for the Information Society. UNESCO Regional Pre-Conference for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) for the Europe Region” by the German National Commission, on behalf of UNESCO, in cooperation with the State Government of Rhineland-Palatinate (Germany), the Federal Government Commissioner for Cultural Affairs and the Media, and ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen) German Television (Mainz, Germany – 27-29 June 2002);
  - (b) The participation in the formal and informal meetings of the Preparatory Committees (PrepCom I, Geneva, Switzerland, 1-5 July 2002; PrepCom II, 17-28 February 2003; Informal meeting on contents and themes, Geneva, Switzerland, 16-18 September 2002);
  - (c) The participation in the formal regional preparatory conferences: the Pan European Regional Ministerial Conference (Bucharest, Romania, 7-9 November 2002); the Asian Regional Pre-conference (Tokyo, Japan, 13-15 January 2003) during which UNESCO organized a panel discussion on “Cultural and Linguistic Diversity”; the Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Conference (Bavaro, Dominican Republic, 29-31 January 2003) and in the Western Asia Preparatory Conference (Beirut, Lebanon, 4-6 February 2003).
  - (d) The organization, with the French National Commission for UNESCO, of an international symposium on “Freedom of expression in the Information Society” (Paris, France, 15-16 November 2002). The two-day debates held at UNESCO Headquarters last November have shown the crucial significance of the issue of freedom of expression in cyberspace and the importance of respecting this principle for creating equitable knowledge societies, respectful of cultural diversity;
  - (e) The organization of a briefing session for permanent delegations (UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France, 11 September 2002);
  - (f) The co-organization, together with the Ministry of Science and Technology of Brazil, and the United Nations ICT Task Force, of the “International Forum: Latin America and the Caribbean in the Information Society” (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 26-28 September 2002);
  - (g) The co-organization with ITU and Hondutel (Honduras Telecommunications Company) of a consultation meeting on “Challenges and Opportunity of the Information Society” with representatives from Central American countries (Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 29-31 October 2002);

- (h) The hosting at UNESCO Headquarters of a meeting of Small Member States from the Europe region (Monaco, Andorra, San Marino, Iceland and Luxembourg) for preparing input to PrepCom II (UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France, 16 January 2003);
- (i) The organization of several meetings aimed at gathering the civil society and NGO representatives views on the issues the WSIS should address and on their involvement in the preparation process. This consultation process began in February 2002 with four thematic meetings and continued with a plenary meeting (22-23 April 2002). A regional consultation process was also launched with an African civil society workshop (Bamako, Mali, 26-27 May 2002);
- (j) The organization on UNESCO's website of an online discussion forum for non-governmental organizations and civil society to discuss their input in the Final Declaration and Plan of Action to be adopted by the World Summit of the Information Society (9 December 2002-15 January 2003);
- (k) The participation in the work of the informal drafting group convened by the President of the Preparatory Committee to prepare an orientation document for PrepCom II (13-16 December 2002).

#### **UNESCO side events**

4. Several side events to accompany and support the political decision-making process at WSIS are presently being planned by UNESCO. They include round table discussions, workshops and an exhibition.

5. In order to further sensitize Member States to the concerns of UNESCO in the development of the information society in general and in the WSIS process in particular, the Director-General is planning to organize a Ministerial Roundtable entitled "From the Information Society to Knowledge Society" during the 32nd session of the General Conference. The discussion on this theme should make it possible to highlight the principles that are considered by UNESCO as being essential for the development of equitable knowledge societies, namely cultural diversity, equal access to education, universal access to information and freedom of expression.

#### **UNESCO's proposals for principles and actions**

6. UNESCO's proposals for the elements to be included in the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action are based on its specific mandate. This mandate leads UNESCO to promote the concept of *knowledge societies* rather than that of global *information society* since enhancing information flows alone is not sufficient to grasp the opportunities for development that is offered by knowledge. Therefore, a more complex, holistic and comprehensive vision and a clearly developmental perspective are needed.

7. The proposals are responses to the three main challenges posed by the construction of 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 newly required norms and principles.

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

- (a) cultural diversity;
- (b) equal access to education;
- (c) universal access to information (in the public domain);
- (d) freedom of expression.

9. Indeed, knowledge societies should be strongly based on a commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression. Knowledge societies should also ensure 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. Information should be of high quality, diversified and reliable. An important principle of knowledge societies should be the diversity of cultures and languages.

10. To realize these principles UNESCO works towards the attainment of three strategic objectives: (a) to foster digital opportunities and social inclusion enhancing the use of ICTs for capacity-building, empowerment, governance and social participation; (b) to strengthen capacities for scientific research, information sharing and cultural creations, performances and exchanges in knowledge societies; and (c) to enhance learning opportunities through access to diversified contents and delivery systems.

**(a) To foster digital opportunities and social inclusion enhancing the use of ICTs for capacity-building, empowerment, governance and social participation**

11. Knowledge societies are only equitable if all people, including disadvantaged and marginalized groups (e.g. people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, people living in extreme poverty), as well as women and youth benefit equally from ICTs for network strengthening, information sharing, creating knowledge resources and developing skills necessary for life/work in the new digital environment.

12. The use of ICTs should be encouraged as a means of empowering local communities and help them combat marginalization, poverty and exclusion, especially in Africa and least developed countries (LDCs). The enhancement of dialogue between citizens and public authorities should be 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 various levels.

**(b) To strengthen capacities for scientific research, information sharing and cultural creations, performances and exchanges**

13. For knowledge societies to be equitable participation in all forms of intellectual life for educational, scientific, cultural and communication purposes should be ensured. The production and dissemination of educational, scientific and cultural materials and the preservation of the digital heritage should be regarded as crucial elements of knowledge societies. Networks of specialists and of virtual interest groups should be developed, as they are key to efficient and effective exchanges and cooperation in knowledge societies.

**(c) To enhance learning opportunities through access to diversified contents and delivery systems**

14. ICTs should contribute to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, the sharing of knowledge and information. ICTs have the potential to introduce in the educational process a higher degree of flexibility in response to societal needs. The potential of ICTs to lower the cost of education and to improve internal and external efficiencies of the education system should be grasped. Knowledge societies should offer opportunities to use ICTs as innovative and experimental tools in the process of renewing education.

15. ICTs are to be seen both as educational discipline and as pedagogical tools capable of enhancing the effectiveness of educational services. A broad-based dialogue among all stakeholders and consensus should be built at national and international levels. This can yield strategies and policies for expanding access to education and learning, progressing towards Education for All (EFA) targets at country level and renewing formal and non-formal education systems.

**UNESCO's position reflected in other contributions**

16. Many countries, IGOs, NGOs and civil society organizations have positions that are similar to those of UNESCO. An overview of some of these positions is given in the annex.

17. The Executive Board may wish to adopt a decision along the following lines:

The Executive Board,

1. Having examined document 166 EX/19,
2. Endorses UNESCO's strategy to help developing the global information society towards knowledge societies based on the principles of cultural diversity; equal access to education, universal access to information and freedom of expression;
3. Calls upon UNESCO Member States to fully recognize these principles in preparing both meetings of the Summit (Geneva, 10-13 December 2003; Tunis, 2005);
4. Encourages the Director-General to continue to closely involve non-governmental organizations and civil society in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process;
5. Requests the Director-General to report to the Executive Board at its 169th session on the results of the Summit meeting in Geneva.

## ANNEX

INCLUSION OF UNESCO'S PRINCIPLES IN FINAL DOCUMENTS  
OF MAJOR PREPARATORY CONFERENCES

	Universal access to information	Access to education	Cultural diversity	Freedom of expression
<b>PrepCom I</b> <sup>1</sup>	The importance of universal and inclusive access to the information society.	Education, human resources development and training.	Preservation of linguistic diversity and cultural identity as a priority.	No reference.
<b>Africa Preconference</b> <sup>2</sup>	Study and promotion of relevant solutions adapted to the environment for ICTs, especially in rural areas; Establishment of public access points and of an African backbone.	A set of concrete proposals for ICT use in education and training in Africa should be developed for submission to the second Precom meeting.	Multilingualism should be promoted and cultural diversity maintained as the driving force for the process of developing contents.	Every citizen should be guaranteed freedom of expression and protected access to information.
<b>European Preconference</b> <sup>3</sup>	Promoting universal access at affordable cost, improvement of connectivity, community-led development, community access centres and public services.	Developing human capacity through education and training; Acquisition of skills integrating ICTs; lifelong learning and continuous training; new opportunities for e-learning.	Promoting linguistic diversity and cultural identity; NICTs to stimulate multiculturalism and plurilingualism; broaden the contents of the public domain.	All persons (must) exercise their right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom to hold opinions without interference.
<b>Asian and the Pacific Preconference</b> <sup>4</sup>	Equitable and ubiquitous access to appropriate content in accessible formats, equitable and appropriate access for all to affordable and easily-accessed information and communication network infrastructures.	Promote the use of ICTs for capacity-building and human development, including ICT literacy, with special reference to requirements of people with disabilities.	Preserve the rich and diverse cultural heritage of the Asia-Pacific region in the information age, cultural and linguistic diversity.	Creation of appropriate and transparent legal frameworks ensuring freedom of expression, privacy and security.

<sup>1</sup> Geneva, Switzerland, 1-5 July 2002, <http://www.itu.int/wsis/preparatory/prepcom/prepcom1.html>

<sup>2</sup> Bamako, Mali, 28-30 May 2002, <http://www.geneva2003.org/bamako2002/>

<sup>3</sup> Bucharest, Romania, 7-9 November 2002, <http://www.wsis-romania.ro>

<sup>4</sup> Tokyo, Japan, 13-15 January 2003, <http://www.wsis-japan.jp>

<b>Latin and American Preconference<sup>5</sup></b>	The information society should serve the public interest and the aim of social well-being. The effort to build an information society shall encompass access to ICTs.	Developing and implementing networks, progress performance measures and innovative e-learning mechanisms. Emphasizing the education of key users of ICT.	The information society should serve the public interest and the aim of social well-being by contributing to ... linguistic diversity and cultural identity.	The existence of independent and free communication media ... is an essential requirement for freedom of expression and a guarantee for the plurality of information.
<b>Western Asia Preconference<sup>6</sup></b>	Removing social and cultural barriers that impede transformation into the new information society, Women's participation, special needs of rural communities and poor strata of the population.	All schools, universities and learning institutions should have Internet and multimedia access, training of teachers, development of e-learning process and learning networks, developing human capacities through education and training.	Encouraging standards, presence and management of Arabic digital content on electronic media and on the Internet.	Empowering e-government through access to information, introducing e-democracy and e-governance in the decision-making process of local and national governments.

<sup>5</sup> Bavaro, Dominican Republic, 28-30 January 2003, <http://www.indotel.org.do/wsis/>

<sup>6</sup> Beirut, Lebanon, 4-6 February 2003, <http://www.escwa.org.lb/wsis/>