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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
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Statement by
Mr Abdul Waheed Khan
Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information

On the occasion of the

Workshop
ICT and Persons with Disabilities
Organized by UNESCO at the
World Summit on the Information Society
Tunis, 16 November 2005

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to address this workshop on “ICT and persons with disabilities” organized by UNESCO in partnership with the “Association BASMA pour la Promotion de l’Emploi des Handicapés”, a very active Tunisian NGO, and with the support of the WSIS Civil Society Disability Caucus and the DAISY Consortium. This event will be complemented by an afternoon ‘case presentation’ session taking place at the UNESCO stand. It is also fully integrated to the WSIS disability agenda that continues on the 18 November 2005 with a session on Disaster Preparedness of Persons with Disabilities within the “Second Global Forum on Disability in the Information Society”.

I am particularly happy to be here with you in my capacity as Assistant-Director-General for Communication and Information. This illustrates the importance that UNESCO has given to fostering the use of ICTs in education of all human beings over its recent history.

When UNESCO was founded 60 years ago, no one in the world of education could have foreseen how radically this field would change by the beginning of the twenty-first century. The process of globalization, rise in student mobility, increasing emphasis on lifelong learning, the proliferation of open universities, growing role of private sector providers, advent of the Internet, e-learning and virtual classrooms – all of these developments have profoundly altered the nature of education over the past few decades, and the future undoubtedly holds further radical changes. However, more important than all of these achievements combined is the inclusive dimension that ICTs in education can provide, when coupled with appropriate educational methodologies and policies.

Throughout this period, UNESCO has continued to uphold the fundamental human right to education and the principle that education should be accessible to all and throughout the life span. It was, for example, largely through UNESCO's advocacy that the concept of lifelong learning came into widespread use from the 1970s onwards. UNESCO also remains committed to the free exchange of ideas and knowledge, development of a culture of learning, to the promotion of knowledge as a global public good, and the building of truly democratic and open learning societies. In the perspective of these aims, the new world of education that is now unfolding offers both immense promise and great challenges.

Since the first phase of the Summit in Geneva, UNESCO has been advocating the promotion of "knowledge societies", broadening the concept of "information society" aiming at a more inclusive and holistic approach. Originally advocated by UNESCO, the concept of "knowledge societies" has now received the overall support of many stakeholders in civil society, governments, academics and the international community. I wish to underline that UNESCO has been emphasizing the concept of "knowledge societies" along with four key principles, namely, freedom of expression; quality education for all; universal access to knowledge and information; and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity. We believe that this concept is a very powerful tool to promoting the well being of humankind, as it was largely supported during our recent 33rd General Conference.

On the one hand, advances in information and communication technologies are enabling education to reach out, on a hitherto unprecedented scale, both to geographical areas and to sections

of the population previously unreached. This aspect of democratization of education is particularly relevant for persons with disabilities, including those victimized by the recent wars.

On the other hand, this vision will remain unattained as long as there is a gap between the technological “haves” and “have nots”. This “knowledge divide” will continue to widen unless urgent steps are taken to close it. The world leaders attending this World Summit on the Information Society have clearly recognized this dilemma, but have also expressed great confidence in the implementation of the WSIS Action Plan and in the contribution that ICTs can make to achieving universal education worldwide.

Indeed, the power of ICT to revolutionize delivery of education and teacher training including for persons with disabilities, is particularly important to grasp given the present situation, where the rate of progress towards achieving the education for all goals is uneven and in some cases too slow.

With this background, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish to highlight that it does not make any sense to talk about education for all if policy makers do not address the digital inclusion of persons with disabilities: Over 10% of the world’s population suffers from a variety of disabilities or impairments. The digital inclusion of persons with disabilities is therefore a matter of ensuring human rights and quality of education for all!

This Summit is an opportunity to reiterate that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have the potential of providing key improvements in the lives of persons with disabilities. ICTs offer individuals the ability to compensate for physical or functional limitations, to access knowledge by adapting digital media to the nature of their impairments, and to enhance their social and economic integration in communities by enlarging the scope of activities available to them.

There is however an aspect that sometimes is overlooked: the important contribution of persons with disabilities can offer through ICTs to the benefit of social evolution of humankind. It is a multi-dimensional process in which all persons can benefit. In fact, the true dimension of “knowledge societies” will materialize only when all abilities and knowledge is shared in the cyberspace.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The UNESCO General Conference at its 33nd session in October 2005, recognizing the important role of UNESCO in following through on the decisions of this Summit, has reiterated the Director-General’s approach to the implementation of and follow-up to the WSIS outcomes, stressing in particular:

(a) UNESCO’s mandate and competence to act as a facilitator for the implementation of the Action Lines: “Access to information and knowledge”; “Capacity-building”; “E-learning and e-science (under ‘ICT applications’)”; “Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content”; “Media”, and “Ethical dimensions of the information society”;

(b) UNESCO’s and ITU’s prominent roles in the coordination of the implementation of the WSIS Plan of Action, both at the action line level, and as needed in any overarching coordination mechanism or process and/or at the United Nations inter-agency level.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Summit will come to its end, but the challenge for promoting a true knowledge society is only in its eve. Under its mandate, UNESCO – in partnership with all stakeholders from public and private sector – will be providing its contribution to the Action Plan. As a matter of fact, the forthcoming programme will contemplate a great number of activities addressed particularly for the digital inclusion of persons with disabilities. We will be focusing in the years to come on inclusive education and access to information to enhance the quality of life of persons with disabilities and assist in ensuring their active participation in society both offline and in the electronic environment.

In closing, let me express our gratitude to the Tunisian Government and authorities, to all speakers who generously volunteered to participate in the workshop, to the audience and also to the entire team of BASMA to whom we thank for all the logistical support to make this event possible.

Thank you.