

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by  
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of the United Nations Educational,  
Scientific and Cultural Organization  
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the Plenary Session of the  
World Summit on the Information Society

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Mr President of the World Summit on the Information Society,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

For UNESCO, the key issues facing this World Summit are not only, or even mainly, about bridging the technological divide. More fundamentally, it is about overcoming a new knowledge divide, which looms ever-wider as we see how knowledge is fast becoming the driving force of economic change and social development. This is why UNESCO has been promoting the concept of knowledge societies, which puts emphasis on empowering human beings to use and transform information in creative, productive and innovative ways. To this end, we must reflect on how we can build societies in which both digital and knowledge opportunities can flourish.

We are convinced that four key principles underpin such an endeavour: freedom of expression; equal access to education; universal access to information, including a strong public domain of information; and the preservation and promotion of cultural diversity, including multilingualism.

As the coordinator of the global drive towards Education for All (EFA), UNESCO insists that education is the key factor for building capacities to use and benefit from the new technologies. Greater progress in education requires more investment, greater quality, the creation of open and flexible educational systems accessible by

everyone, and the utilization of ICT-based tools and methods that enhance learning opportunities. I can assure you that UNESCO is already addressing these issues in practical ways and will reinforce its action in the follow-up to this Summit.

Fostering and respecting cultural diversity, including linguistic diversity, is one of the fundamental principles of the information society. The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) is a key reference point in this regard. Debates about content and language on the Internet are just one expression of the growing global concern about this issue.

Universal access to information and knowledge is central to inclusive knowledge societies. Let me again stress that the technological aspects are crucial – without connectivity, there is no access. But we must not neglect the “infostructural” elements in the form of community centres, schools, libraries and archives as public access points, or the crucial importance of a strong public domain of information. Inclusiveness also must extend to women and youth as well as local groups and indigenous communities whose enormously valuable knowledge must be preserved and protected.

Naturally, UNESCO is greatly heartened by the draft Declaration’s a clear and unambiguous statement concerning freedom of expression. We believe that it does not make any sense to speak about an information society, not to mention knowledge societies, without free and unhindered access to information and knowledge in

all forms and in all media. This principle, recognized in the first Article of UNESCO's Constitution and soon afterwards enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is, quite simply, fundamental.

These four principles are integrally linked and mutually supportive. Their incorporation in the Summit's final Declaration is sending a strong signal about the intent and political will to create knowledge societies which will give central importance to human creativity, cultural diversity and freedom in all its forms.

I am pleased that they are also reflected in the draft Plan of Action, in whose implementation UNESCO can and should play a leading role in line with its mandate, experience and expertise.

This leads me to my final point, namely, the practical tasks of implementation in the follow-up leading to the second phase of the Summit and beyond. For example, it is one thing to ensure a proper reference to freedom of expression in the key Summit documents; it is quite another to bring about the actual enjoyment of that basic principle of human freedom in all societies.

To sum up, there is much work still to be done and UNESCO, for its part, is as committed as ever to this task.