FROM THE INFORMATION SOCIETY TO KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES

UNESCO and the World Summit on the Information Society

UNESCO attaches very high importance to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) recognizing that the two meetings of the Summit, in Geneva, 10-12 December 2003 and in Tunis in 2005, are major events on the global agenda.

UNESCO has fully supported the WSIS preparatory process from its beginning acting on two levels: on the one hand, the governmental level involving Members States, mainly through their National Commissions for UNESCO and, on the other hand, on the non-governmental level through professional communities and civil society.

In both cases, UNESCO has succeeded to define and promote its positions setting the ground for its contribution to the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action that the Summit is expected to adopt. Many of these positions have already been recognized in the preparatory process.

From the Information Society to Knowledge Societies.

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.

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.

Four Principles.

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

- ↗ Cultural diversity
- ↗ Equal access to education
- ↗ Universal access to information (in the public domain)
- ↗ Freedom of expression

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.

Three strategic objectives

To realize these principles UNESCO works towards the attainment of three strategic objectives:

1. To foster digital opportunities and social inclusion enhancing the use of ICTs for capacity building, empowerment, governance and social participation.
2. To strengthen capacities for scientific research, information sharing and cultural creations, performances and exchanges in knowledge societies; and
3. To enhance learning opportunities through access to diversified contents and delivery systems.

Objective I
Fostering digital opportunities and social inclusion

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

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.

Objetive II:
Strengthening capacities for scientific research, information sharing and cultural creations, perfomances and exchanges.

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.

Objetive III:

Enhancing learning opportunities through access to diversified content and delivery systems

ICTs should contribute to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, the sharing of knowledge and information. ICTs have 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.

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.