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## UNESCO AND THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

### OUTLINE

**Source:** Item proposed by the Director-General.

**Background:** In accordance with resolution 56/183 of the General Assembly of the United Nations, the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was held in Geneva (Switzerland) from 10 to 12 December 2003. Its second phase will be held in Tunis (Tunisia) from 16 to 18 November 2005.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this document is to provide a report on UNESCO's involvement in the process set in motion by the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and to obtain the support of the Member States for UNESCO's continued emphasis on implementation of the WSIS Plan of Action. It is also intended to provide a mandate to the Director-General for UNESCO's involvement in post-WSIS implementation mechanisms, including as needed Internet governance within its fields of competence, and for the development of any follow-up coordination mechanism to mobilize partners and resources.

**Decision required:** paragraph 22.

## **A. BACKGROUND**

1. The United Nations General Assembly resolution 56/183 endorsed the holding of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)<sup>1</sup> in two phases (Geneva, Switzerland, 10-12 December 2003 and Tunis, Tunisia, 16 to 18 November 2005), assigning a leading role in the organization of the Summit to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Although the WSIS process involves governments at the highest level, it also includes the participation of all relevant United Nations bodies and other international organizations, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, civil society, and media, with the intention of being a truly multi-stakeholder process.
2. For each phase, the Summit event marks the culmination of many months of preparation, in the form of consultations and negotiations among Member States, United Nations experts, the private sector, and non-governmental representatives reviewing vast amounts of information, and sharing a broad spectrum of experiences in issues related to the information society.

## **B. UNESCO'S PRINCIPLES FOR WSIS**

3. UNESCO's engagement with WSIS has been creative, consistent and constructive. Its distinctive contribution has been the elaboration of the concept of building knowledge societies, qualified by four key principles, namely: freedom of expression; quality education for all; universal access to information and knowledge; and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity.
4. UNESCO's position has been that, as both a description of present trends and as a characterization of a desirable future, the notion of a single global information society does not capture the full potential of the information and communication revolution for human development. By contrast, the concept of "knowledge societies" stresses plurality and inclusiveness instead of global uniformity. It maintains that the new technologies offer remarkable possibilities for advancing development. With these messages, UNESCO has helped to open up the Summit's agenda and make it more relevant to the concerns of all Member States.
5. A significant contribution by UNESCO to the intellectual debates taking place within the WSIS process will be the World Report on Building Knowledge Societies. This will contextualize the so-called "digital divide" within the wider "knowledge divide" that is particularly manifest in the world's North-South divide. The World Report is expected to strengthen the intellectual, strategic and ethical "watch" capacities of the international community.
6. UNESCO's advocacy of the need to build knowledge societies was endorsed by the participants of the Ministerial Round Table "Towards Knowledge Societies" (Paris, October 2003, at the 32nd session of the General Conference) and of the UNESCO High-Level Symposium "Building Knowledge Societies – from Vision to Action", December 2003, Geneva. In addition, the Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action adopted at WSIS in Geneva gave due recognition to these principles.

## **C. IMPLEMENTING THE WSIS PLAN OF ACTION**

7. Following the first phase of the Summit, UNESCO took prompt action by emphasizing the need to move beyond the global debate on the Declaration of Principles towards implementation of the Action Lines in the WSIS Plan of Action, thus operationalizing UNESCO's principles on how

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wsis.org>.

to build knowledge societies. More than half of the 150 actions that are listed in the WSIS Plan of Action fall under UNESCO's competence, mainly those related to access to information and knowledge, capacity-building, ICT applications such as e-learning and e-science, cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content, the media and the ethical dimensions of the information society. The UNESCO WSIS Action Directory<sup>2</sup> takes stock of these activities.

8. The Draft Programme and Budget for 2006-2007 (33 C/5) has been designed to continue implementing the outcomes of the Geneva Summit while also anticipating the likely outcomes of the Summit in Tunis.

#### **D. UNESCO'S THEMATIC MEETINGS FOR WSIS**

9. In addition to its programmatic actions, UNESCO has organized from February to May 2005 four meetings recognized as "thematic meetings" by the WSIS process:<sup>3</sup>

- (a) The first meeting on "Freedom of Expression in Cyberspace" was organized on 3 and 4 February at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. It examined the challenges and opportunities that freedom of expression, a fundamental human right, encounters in the global digital network. Participants of the meeting agreed that Internet media should have the same freedoms as print and broadcast media. The conference warned against establishing regulations for the flow of information in cyberspace stressing that the Internet should be based upon full human rights and it is the responsibility of all States to respect and defend these rights when it comes to their application in cyberspace;
- (b) The second thematic meeting on "Multilingualism for Cultural Diversity and Participation for All in Cyberspace" was organized by UNESCO in cooperation with the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) in Bamako, Mali, on 6 and 7 May. One of the main outcomes of the meeting was the clear recognition that a truly multilingual cyberspace can no longer be dominated by a few "global" languages but must seriously engage with the presence of lesser-used languages. While national frameworks of policy and programme are clearly important, the local level is crucial, as the building of pluralistic and inclusive knowledge societies is basically a grass-roots process;
- (c) The third thematic meeting on "ICT for Capacity-Building: Critical Success Factors" took place at UNESCO Headquarters from 11 to 13 May. Organized by UNESCO in cooperation with the Club of Rome, it focused on how to make the best use of current resources, energies and commitments to speed up response and find sustainable solutions to the problems that developing countries face in regard to using ICT for capacity-building, particularly in the field of non-formal education. The meeting clearly recognized that new paradigms of ICT and learning are taking shape that offer a variety of opportunities for large-scale, sustainable and accelerated action;
- (d) The fourth thematic meeting on "Cultural Diversity in Knowledge Societies" was organized from 17 to 19 May in St Petersburg, Russian Federation, integrated within the framework of the conference "UNESCO between Two Phases of the World Summit on the Information Society", organized by the authorities of the Russian Federation and the Russian National Committee for the Information for All Programme. It explored how ICT may contribute to the promotion of cultural diversity and resulting opportunities for socio-economic development and empowerment.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/wsisdirectory>.

<sup>3</sup> [http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=17637&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17637&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).

10. All four meetings endorsed UNESCO's key principles for building knowledge societies and stressed UNESCO's role as a facilitator of WSIS implementation activities or mechanisms. UNESCO took the opportunity to foster its multi-stakeholder approach to WSIS implementation activities and to formulate proposals for concrete actions in its areas of competence. The reports on the meetings will be introduced into the WSIS process and their conclusions will inform UNESCO's future strategies and activities, particularly within the framework of document 33 C/5.

11. UNESCO was also involved in a variety of other events that contributed to the debates evolving throughout the WSIS process.<sup>4</sup>

## **E. UNESCO DURING WSIS IN TUNIS**

12. At the Summit meeting in Tunis in November 2005, UNESCO will be an active participant and contributor, not least through its efforts to organize the three following parallel events building on UNESCO's concept of "knowledge societies":

- (a) A High-Level Round Table on "Knowledge for Development". Drawing on the thematic consultations of recent months and the World Report, the Round Table will be a political and leadership event aimed at highlighting key ideas and principles which UNESCO seeks to promote to help increase people's access to and use of information and knowledge for human development;
- (b) A Round Table on "The Role of UNESCO in the Construction of Knowledge Societies through the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme". The event will review national, regional and world experiences in implementing UNESCO Chairs and networks in ICT and will consider how this UNESCO mechanism can help to bridge existing information and knowledge gaps;
- (c) A Workshop on ICT in the service of people with disabilities. The workshop will look at policies that promote accessibility in the digital world, especially in developing countries, and at how access to cyberspace for people with disabilities can be enhanced.

13. As was the case at the Summit meeting in Geneva, UNESCO will offer an exhibit as a clearing-house of its actions relevant to the WSIS objectives and a meeting point open to all Summit participants.

## **F. IMPLEMENTATION OF AND FOLLOW-UP TO THE WSIS OUTCOMES**

14. There is as yet no final consensus regarding the process or mechanisms for the implementation of and follow-up to the WSIS outcomes. This process should be guided by United Nations resolution 57/270 "Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to the

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<sup>4</sup> For example: "Role of Media in the Information Society in Africa and the Arab States" organized by Moroccan Ministry of Information on the initiative of the International Network of UNESCO Chairs in Communication (ORBICOM) and the Swiss Federal Office of Communication, 22-24 November 2005, Marrakech, Morocco; "Internet, Human Rights and Culture" organized by the Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO, 4-5 February 2005, Oegstgeest, The Netherlands; Consultation meeting on the Latin American and Caribbean WSIS process organized by the Government of Ecuador, UNESCO and United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 4-6 May 2005, Quito, Ecuador; "Virtual Society of Literature" organized by UNESCO and the Finnish Literature Information Centre (FILI), 20-21 May 2005, Helsinki, Finland; WSIS Contributory Conference on "ICT and Creativity" organized by Austrian Government, 2-3 June 2005, Vienna, Austria.

outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic and social fields”. As there is no single ownership of the issues of the information society, neither within the United Nations system nor within the other parts of the global community, the implementation process must be genuinely multi-stakeholder, transparent and non-bureaucratic. Although primary responsibility for implementation resides at the national level, there is significant scope to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the vast amount of implementation efforts through greater coordination and cooperation and by continuing the mobilization and momentum occasioned by WSIS.

15. Accordingly, it has been proposed that coordination of implementation should be structured based on the Action Lines in the WSIS Plan of Action. For each Action Line (consolidated or otherwise), a multi-stakeholder team would be established comprising key actors prepared to work together to facilitate cooperation and coherence in implementation. This team should be self-selecting and open to civil society and the private sector.

16. UNESCO stands ready to assume the role of facilitator for the following Action Lines falling within its mandate and competence:

- C3. Access to information and knowledge;
- C4. Capacity-building;
- C7. E-learning and e-science (under “ICT applications”);
- C8. Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content;
- C9. Media;
- C10. Ethical dimensions of the information society.

17. UNESCO and ITU are key actors in the WSIS process. ITU has a mandate and expertise in the field of telecommunications infrastructure and UNESCO has a mandate and competence in the fields of education, science, culture, communication, access, media and ethics. As these fields are central to the aims of WSIS, it is appropriate that UNESCO and ITU should assume prominent roles in the coordination of the implementation of the WSIS Plan of Action at the Action Line level.

18. UNESCO is also ready to share responsibility with ITU for the overarching coordination process or mechanisms of the Action Line multi-stakeholder teams. The focus would be to gather and exchange information, consolidate stocktaking, facilitate any review processes and reduce the amount of duplicated effort. The mechanism would not operate in a prescriptive fashion, but could channel insights gained during implementation to the relevant policy forums.

19. At the inter-agency level, coordination among the heads of international agencies should be enhanced to ensure the integrated and coordinated implementation of the outcomes of WSIS by the United Nations system. An appropriate inter-agency mechanism to foster coordination and cooperation, such as a committee or network with one or two lead agencies acting as task managers or chair, should be established under the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB). UNESCO and ITU stand ready to assume a co-joint role as the possible lead agencies within the CEB framework.

## VII. INTERNET GOVERNANCE AND FINANCIAL MECHANISMS

20. Several issues being addressed by the World Summit, such as Internet governance and financial mechanisms, are of high importance for UNESCO. Therefore, UNESCO is following the debates on these matters with great interest. The Working Group on Internet Governance,<sup>5</sup> whose report was published in July 2005, strongly supported an open, transparent and inclusive approach echoing UNESCO's consistent advocacy of the principles of openness, the free flow of information and freedom of expression.

21. With regard to financial mechanisms, UNESCO has taken note of the report of the Task Force on Financial Mechanisms that was published in January 2005. The report examines the many different funding mechanisms for ICT for development, noting that there is sometimes a mismatch between needs and available funding. The Director-General has endorsed its recommendation that greater cross-sectoral and cross-institutional coordination on financing programmes should be undertaken, both on the part of donors and recipients.

22. In the light of the foregoing, the General Conference may wish to adopt the following resolution:

The General Conference,

Recalling 166 EX/Decision 3.6.1 and 170 EX/Decision 94,

Reiterating its support of the concept of building knowledge societies along with four key principles, namely: freedom of expression; quality education for all; universal access to information and knowledge; and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity,

1. Congratulates the Director-General on the prompt action undertaken to implement those parts of the WSIS Plan of Action that fall under UNESCO's competence and on having organized the four thematic meetings for WSIS;
2. Requests the Director-General to continue planning activities under document 33 C/5, in all Major Programmes, as appropriate, by taking into account the WSIS Plan of Action and the conclusions of the UNESCO thematic meetings for WSIS;
3. Encourages the Director-General to ensure high visibility of UNESCO and its principles at the Summit meeting in Tunis, Tunisia (16-18 November 2005), through the organization of parallel events and a UNESCO exhibit;
4. Requests the Director-General to ensure that the World Report on Building Knowledge Societies is widely promoted during the Summit meeting in Tunis;
5. Encourages the Director-General to continue to involve non-governmental organizations and civil society closely in the WSIS process;
6. Endorses the principles of openness, the importance of the free flow of information and freedom of expression, as basic to any Internet governance mechanism;
7. Supports the appeal of the Task Force on Financial Mechanisms for greater cross-sectoral and cross-institutional coordination on financing programmes, both on the part of donors and recipients;

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.wgig.org>.

8. Endorses 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;
9. Requests the Director-General to report on the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the Summit and UNESCO's action in that area to the 34th session of the General Conference, through the Executive Board.