

## Inclusive Knowledge Societies for Sustainable Development

UNESCO  
March 2012

### Introduction

Knowledge can add value to human experience and progress by enhancing livelihoods and contributing to the social, cultural, political and economic development of societies. The new communication and information tools (ICTs), including social networking, have created new opportunities for the creation, preservation, dissemination and use of information and knowledge. As such, the effective use of the ICTs offers real prospects for human and sustainable development and the building of more democratic knowledge-based societies.

UNESCO advocates for the building of sustainable and inclusive Knowledge Societies, which are equitable, open and participatory, and are grounded on the following four key principles:

- **freedom of expression** (should apply to traditional, contemporary and new forms of media, including the Internet);
- **access to quality education for all;**
- **respect for cultural and linguistic diversity;**
- **universal access to information and knowledge**, especially in the public domain.

The insistence on the plural form of Knowledge Societies rests on the conviction that there is no single uniform model, dictated by technology or market relations, to which all societies must conform. The nature of Knowledge Societies should be conceived as plural, variable and open to choice, and freedom of expression is inseparable from this vision.

### (ii) The reasons why it should be part of the global development agenda

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS, 2003-2005) set a common vision of societies in which information and knowledge play critical roles in enabling the development of countries, local communities and individuals, including the marginalized and most vulnerable. Freedom of Expression is part of the same rights-based, empowerment approach.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

**Freedom of expression** is not only a human right. It is also a prerequisite for democracy, development and dialogue. Accurate and professional reporting is often the only recourse that the society has to combat corruption and the abuse of power; denounce human rights violations; reinforce transparency and accountability; encourage well-informed policy choices and greater participation in the decision-making process; and facilitate an open

dialogue between the state and civil society on issues of public concern. Independent, free and pluralistic media have a crucial role to play in the good governance of democratic societies and sustainable development by promoting participatory and human rights-based approaches and access to information and knowledge. Thus, freedom of the press should not be viewed solely as the freedom of journalists to report and comment, but also, it is strongly correlated with the public's **right of access to information and knowledge**, and ultimately, to building knowledge societies.

In the Millennium Declaration, United Nations Member States expressed their strong, unanimous and explicit support for democratic and participatory governance and recognized free and open media as one of the tools necessary to achieve this goal. The Declaration further affirmed that Member States "will spare no effort to promote democracy and strengthen the rule of law" and went on to resolve "to strengthen the capacity of all countries to implement the principles and practices of democracy and respect for human rights".

Access to education is a basic right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. **Access to quality education for all** is essential for building and developing the necessary skills, capabilities and capacities essential for effectively analyzing, using, creating and disseminating knowledge. Knowledge in turn is central to processes of development, progress and social cohesions in all societies.

It could be argued that one of the shortcomings of the MDG agenda was the absence of a concern for **socio-cultural contexts and linguistic diversity**, which resulted in development programmes not being sufficiently adapted to the local environment, or, in some instances, implemented at the expense of local cultural resources and assets. Culture and linguistic diversity embody human knowledge and experiences which have developed over time in response to a wide range of environmental contexts and influences. This constitutes a tapestry of experiences and expressions, which provide a rich base of available knowledge and is a record of human heritage and its links to the past and the present. Hence, culture and linguistic diversity confer meaning to human existence and are essential for the creation of new knowledge in a sustainable development perspective.

**(iii) Possible ways to bring it in (as specific goals/targets, as cross-cutting issues, or as part of the enabling conditions for a global agenda)**

The overall endeavour for further expanding knowledge societies could be reflected in both the specific goals and cross-cutting issues, and could also be part of the enabling conditions for a global agenda.

The post-2015 development agenda should be grounded on governments' commitment to freedom of expression, press freedom, and access to information and knowledge. This commitment could be translated into a specific goal and indicators related to e.g., the availability of an enabling environment for freedom of expression, press freedom and access to information and knowledge; access to ICTs and broadband; open access to information and knowledge; media and information literacy. These indicators for knowledgeable societies need to clearly reflect to which extent the relevant knowledge exists, and for

whom; it needs to reflect ideas of equity and inclusion and that knowledge needs to be shared and usable, as a public good.

Also, it could be useful to develop globally a more fine-grained understanding (e.g., through qualitative and quantitative indicators) on how ICT and knowledge policies and practices can better contribute to sustainable development and to peaceful coexistence.

With the proliferation and trivialization of ICTs, their use for the enactment of the cultural, social, economic and political aspects of knowledgeable societies becomes increasingly important. There is a need to better understand and measure how to ensure that knowledge becomes enabling and responsive to the varied regional contexts and the specific national environments. This knowledge dimension goes to the very heart of the UN's mission and needs to become measurable and transparent.