

Global Knowledge Conference Poses New Challenges for Role of United Nations System in Development

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Toronto - The "information revolution" the "knowledge society" and the "learning organization," were the key issues of one of the most unique world conferences in recent years - "Global Knowledge 97: Knowledge for Development in the Information Age" which was organized here by the World Bank and the Canadian Government.

The conference, from June 22 to 25, had a most innovative format. It was also sponsored by the U.S. and the Swiss Governments, by the UNESCO, the UN Development Program, Unilever, Dell Computers and the Aga Khan Development Network. In addition, there were 30 associated sponsors, including governments, UN agencies, NGOs, foundations and private companies, mainly from the computer and telecommunications fields.

More than 2,000 participants from 138 countries attended the conference, as well as representatives from 23 inter-governmental agencies. Approximately 50 percent of those present came from the U.S., Canada and the World Bank alone.

The Toronto conference took place a few days after the G-8 summit in Denver where the U.S. President has launched a new "Africa Initiative" following the earlier efforts of the UN's Special Initiative on Africa and UNESCO's Priority Africa Program. The World Bank's own focus on Africa was reflected by the fact that almost half of the 775 participants in Toronto from developing countries came from Africa.

The conference's three major themes were "understanding the role of knowledge and information in economic and social development;" "sharing strategies for harnessing knowledge;" and "building partnerships to empower the poor and foster international dialogues about development."

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stressed at the opening session that "knowledge is power; information is liberat-

ing and education is the premise of progress in every society and family. Information and freedom are indivisible: the information revolution is unthinkable without democracy and true democracy is unimaginable without freedom of information."

World Bank President James D. Wolfensohn, who initiated the conference, declared that the Bank should be a source of knowledge and expertise, not just money. "While the Bank's key role is still providing loans to poor countries, it should gradually become a knowledge bank, i.e. a repository of knowledge and expertise... this is a new form of bank that no commercial institution is able or prepared to do."

Mr. Wolfensohn's commitment to lead the World Bank into this new direction is also demonstrated by the fact that not only will the conference lead to follow-up discussions on the Internet, but also that the Bank's *Development Report 1998* will deal exclusively with the topic "knowledge in the service of development."

Practically all of the more than 100 working group sessions, with speakers from virtually every stakeholder in the knowledge economy, discussed every conceivable aspect of the vast knowledge potential of the new information technologies. The substance of the knowledge transfer was not at the center of the deliberations.

UNESCO had arranged a special session, "Scientific Knowledge: Making the Most out of the Best." The meeting was chaired by Maurizio Iaccarino, Assistant Director-General for Science. The panel consisted of six members of UNESCO's International Scientific Advisory Board (ISAB): Nobel Prize Winners Werner Arber of University of Basel and Joshua Lederberg of Rockefeller University; Wakoka Hironaka, chair of the science and technology committee of the Japanese Diet; M.G.K. Menon, former Indian Minister for Science and Technology; Ana Maria Cetto, University of Mexico; and

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Albert Fischli of the Roche Research Foundation.

Two of the Director-General's Special Advisers, Wadi Haddad and myself, also attended the session.

UNESCO Director-General Federico Mayor, in his address to the plenary on "Global Knowledge and Local Culture," welcomed the initiative leading to the Toronto conference, but he stated that the development of the new information and communication technologies must not do harm to the existing cultural beliefs and values of the developing countries. Mr. Mayor also pointed out that

an intelligent application of technical advances must be based on a scientific foundation in order to derive maximum benefits. "After all, there is not applied science without science," he said.

In the light of the Toronto meeting, UNESCO has the obligation to insure that the scientific base which it supports is compatible with the needs and values of the developing countries. This obligation should be an important criterion for the evaluation of UNESCO's programs.

The new emphasis of the World Bank on knowledge illustrates that development will require the integration of a broad set of components consisting of the generation and application of knowledge which will guide the financial resources of the World Bank with regard

to the development process. The role of UNESCO as one of the principal supporters of advances in basic sciences is now identified as a critical part of this integrated system set in motion by the World Bank and is an important guide for the allocation of their resources.

It is against this context that UNESCO's call for a World Science Conference in 1999 illuminates the central contribution of the Organization in this worldwide development.

IPU Agreement

Paris - UNESCO and the Interparliamentary Union (IPU) signed a cooperation agreement on June 26 calling for them to "pursue common objectives of peace and security."