

Joint UNESCO and ITU Global Symposium on Promoting the Multilingual Internet

Geneva, 9-11 May 2006

Chairman's Summary Report and Recommendations

This first joint event organized by UNESCO and ITU after the Tunis Phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) covered a wide range of issues that impact on bringing languages and cultures to the Internet. The *Tunis Agenda* emphasized a commitment to work towards multilingualization of the Internet, as part of a multilateral, transparent and democratic process, involving governments and all stakeholders, in their respective roles.

The *Tunis Agenda* acknowledged the importance supporting local content development, translation and adaptation, digital archives, and diverse forms of digital and traditional media, and recognized that these activities can also strengthen local and indigenous communities. The *Tunis Agenda* specifically recognized a need to: advance the process for the introduction of multilingualism in a number of areas including domain names, email addresses and keyword look-up; implement programmes that allow for the presence of multilingual domain names and contents on the Internet and the use of various software models in order to fight against the linguistic digital divide and ensure the participation of all in the emerging new society; and strengthen cooperation between relevant bodies for the further development of internationally-agreed, non-proprietary technical standards and to foster their global deployment.

During the three-day Symposium, a number of presentations were made and discussions were held regarding standardization activities and technical solutions for internationalized domain names (IDNs), for equipping non-scripted languages to allow them to be present on the internet, the development and promotion of local contents and software, and measurements of the current linguistic diversity on the internet. Perspectives of domain name registries and an overview of the associated intellectual property issues that arise when multilingual domain names are deployed were also presented.

It is clear that the issues to be considered are extremely complex and broadly accepted solutions cannot be resolved at this time. On the other hand, we have seen that there are many issues that are well understood and for which solutions are available - and can be addressed now - and that there are people willing to roll up sleeves, and carry on hard work for future achievement. Action forward should be planned in tiers, with goals to achieve at each tier. There is no doubt that the global community can benefit from a roadmap and/or guideline documents highlighting the numerous issues associated with possibilities for a specific language or script "community" to enhance its presence on the internet. This is a difficult task and requires substantial and strengthened cooperation among relevant bodies. **In line with the WSIS outputs, I would encourage ITU and UNESCO to regard this event not as a specific event, but as the firm start of joint work programme on promoting the multilingual internet, which will be in addition to each organization's ongoing activities in their domain of competence regarding other dimensions of multilingualism.**

Furthermore, recognizing that there are a number of relevant bodies with particular expertise in this topic area, it would be desirable that UNESCO and ITU, after establishment of an initial working relationship at the secretariat and technical levels, as appropriate, to solicit participation by experts and representatives of those bodies in this work programme and to strengthen their cooperation with them. As a first step, a joint work programme team should lead the preparation of an action plan towards development of roadmap and/or guidelines discussed above.

It has been clear from the debates that the capability of languages to be present - or properly represented - on the internet is uneven across the different regions. For example, there are hundreds of unscripted languages in all continents and particularly in Africa and Asia, while this is a much lesser problem in Europe. In areas where languages are codified and they use non-Latin character sets, the issue of IDN and internet keywords are high on the agenda. As observed during the Symposium, specific technical solutions remain highly debated and controversial. However, one thing is clear: the needs of end users should remain at the center of the debate and their needs should be the highest priority. Thus, I would propose that follow-up regional events be organized by ITU and UNESCO with the assistance of regional and global partners, as part of the above-mentioned work programme, aiming to further understanding the requirements and issues in different regions, and to try to quantify efforts and resources needed to improve the situation and presence of languages on the internet.

Another result from the Symposium is the desire to avoid a highly fragmented internet. Instead, there should be one universal internet, supporting all languages and scripts of the world. However, in order to avoid a highly fragmented internet, new and strengthened cooperation between relevant bodies and among experts for further development of technical standards and to foster their global deployment is an absolute necessity.

The importance of increased coordination to ensure harmonization of standards related to multilingualization was stressed, and studies should be undertaken to build a global harmonized framework for a multilingual Internet. The meeting emphasized that the evolution of the internet should use consensus-based, internationally agreed technical standards - such as ITU-T Recommendations and ISO and IEC International Standards - and that proprietary solutions should be avoided at all costs. It is also clear that initiatives for measuring language diversity on the internet would greatly benefit of harmonized methodological standards and semantic interoperability. Further, the community would benefit from the use of software tools that can be easily shared, such as those produced by open source efforts.

It is fundamental that, in the end, multilingualism - whether using IDNs, keywords or contents - be natively supported in operating systems and browsers, not retrofitted, to avoid the need for plug-ins, which creates a constant source of user and operational difficulties.

While a lot of attention has been paid to solving technical problems related to internet naming and addressing - which are likely to be properly addressed and resolved in a short time frame -, it is important to focus attention also on fostering multilingualism of contents. There is a long way ahead in tackling the issue of linguistic resources, and on their multicultural diversity content as dealt by ICTs. A good number of research and development projects and some promising experiences for multilingual translation, speech recognition, knowledge engineering, etc. - a sample of which we have seen in

this Symposium - offer opportunities for a broader concept and practice of multilingualism on the Internet.

It is also clear that the most controversial activity concerning bringing about the multilingual internet is that of specific considerations with regard to implementation of IDNs, while there is a good consensus on the need for scripting oral languages and documenting their heritage. Paradoxically, many resources are being dedicated to the issue of implementing IDNs and internet keywords, while supporting language scripts and documentation activities are faced with limited funding. Properly balanced coordination of existing resources and knowledge can help progress in both issues. **Therefore, in line with the WSIS outputs, I would encourage UNESCO and ITU to take a lead role in promoting international cooperation for developing the multilingual internet and to encourage interested relevant organizations as well as individuals to actively join these initiatives and strengthen their cooperation in this regard.**