

**World Summit on the Information Society
TUNIS PHASE, PREPARATORY MEETING (PREP-COM 1)**

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United Nations University



L'Université des Nations Unies

The United Nations University (UNU) is committed to the Declaration of Principles and will implement activities related to the Plan of Action of the World Summit on the Information Society, Phase I Geneva 2003. The UNU recognizes the real and pressing need to improve the current state of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) use in an educational context in the developing world and has proposed a joint initiative with the ITU that would support the creation of an **African University Network (AUN)**. The present situation with regard to Internet connectivity in Africa is often characterized by circumstances whereby an entire university with tens of thousands of students may only have capacity similar to a small business or even a private household in the industrialized world. Allowing this situation to continue could have severe consequences with respect to the African Diaspora, access to knowledge and information, inter-university collaboration, distance learning and the web presence of the African institutions of higher education. The UNU, ITU and other partners are proposing to implement a feasibility study to examine how best to improve Internet connectivity for African educational institutions.

The UNU is also working closely with the United Nations Environment Programme to develop a **Global Virtual University** with support in the pilot phase from the Government of Norway. This project was described in the UN Secretary General's 2003 annual report to the General Assembly as a concrete initiative designed to bridge the Digital Divide. In the initial phase, African universities in Ghana, Uganda and South Africa are working with their colleagues in Europe to develop online courses related to Global and Environmental Development Studies. It is planned that this masters level programme will commence in 2005.

The UNU recognizes that the WSIS Phase II, Tunis 2005, is a key platform for the development of concrete measures designed to assist the international community in achieving many of the goals set out in the UN Millennium Declaration and an important step forward in the WSIS Geneva 2003 plan of action fostering enhanced distribution of the potential benefits associated with the use of ICT for development.

Within the UNU system, six of the thirteen research centres have undertaken research activities of direct relevance to the WSIS process. This research includes an assessment of the relationship between the Information Society and global economic development

undertaken at the UNU World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), exploration of the impact of learning and innovation in ICT firms and of the potential benefits of ICTs use in small and medium-sized enterprises in Africa (UNU-INTECH). The UNU would endeavor to introduce findings from these policy-focused research activities into the summit process leading up to Tunis in 2005.

As a direct follow-up to the Geneva phase of the WSIS, the UNU, ITU, UNESCAP, Japan Telecommunications Ministry and its partners will organize in April 2005 an international conference on **Knowledge Sharing - Innovations to Bridge the Digital Divide (The Road from WSIS Geneva 2003 to WSIS Tunis 2005 and beyond)**. This conference, which will be held in Tokyo, would examine the current approaches to bridging the digital divide outlined by Kofi Annan in his speech to the Plenary in Geneva in December 2003. The conference would bring together key stakeholders currently involved in major social, technological and institutional innovations designed to improve access and encourage the sharing of public domain knowledge on a range of key topics of pressing global importance including the environment and health. It would seek to promote new avenues for technological collaboration and content sharing designed to help bridge the digital divide and enhance the role of educational and other institutions in the developing world. Recommendations and actions would be developed at the conference that would be presented to the Tunis segment of the WSIS to be held on 16 to 18 November 2005. The UNU is seeking to have this important event designated as an official WSIS Thematic Conference.

In conclusion, recognizing the potential of the Information Society as a means to promote the spread of democratic practices, good governance and environmental sustainability, the UNU will continue to work with universities, national governments, international organizations, civil society in different part of the world to ensure the implementation of projects designed to contribute to the successful attainment of the goals set out in the WSIS action plan. The UNU will continue to implement four main areas of work with respect to the WSIS.

These are:

- (1) Promotion of research and training in software development techniques and the development of computer science curriculum (through UNU-IIST);
- (2) Research and policy recommendations on environmental issues associated with the Information Society (through the UNU Centre);
- (3) Research on Designing the Knowledge Economy (dealing with policies and tools for technology and innovation in the modern context) and on the evaluation of the patterns of adoption of ICTs in small enterprises in developing countries (through the work of UNU-INTECH); and
- (4) Further development of online learning activities within the UNU network. Specific examples include the Asia Pacific Initiative being developed in collaboration with Keio University (Japan) and CISCO Systems as well as the Water Virtual Learning Centre developed by UNU-INWEH in Canada.