

UNESCO-ACEID CONFERENCE
**“Information Technologies in Educational Innovation for
Development: Inter-Facing Global and Indigenous Knowledge”**
Official Opening Address
Imperial Queen’s Park Hotel
December 12, 2000

It is an honour for me to welcome all of you, most warmly, to this International conference on “Information Technologies in Educational Innovation for Development: Inter-Facing Global and Indigenous Knowledge”

Ladies and Gentlemen: Every day, newspaper, professional journals, television broadcasts — even the shopping malls — remind us of the new technological World in which we live. We are bombarded by images of new technological wonders, all promising to make our lives better. Information and communication technologies are binding everyone in the World together in a real way, never imagined before. We are told these technologies offer great hope for humankind — and potentially, they do. They offer the promise of unlimited access to information to all, in a way only dreamed of in the not-so-distant past. They offer the promise of providing a more “level playing field” in the globalized economic World of tomorrow. They promise to connect people, across distances of time and space, as never imagined before.

But, as we are all becoming increasingly aware, for all the tremendous promise the new information communication technologies are bringing to the World, there are also disturbing perils. One such peril would seem to be the increasingly isolated live people are living, especially in urban environments, all across the planet. Perhaps in part to escape the crush of over-population, and the anonymity that comes with urbanisation, ICT technology seems to offer solace and escape. Can’t get along with your family? — find a chat room, or an “affinity group” of people more like yourself! Is this a good thing? Certainly not, if it leads to the “anti-socialisation” of peoples. For just as the people of the entire World are becoming connected in cyber-space, they seem to also be becoming dis-connected in real-time and space. I don’t know if there is a casual connection in this, or not, but I think it is worth pondering.

Also among the perils brought on by the advent of ICT technologies, is the very real possibility of smaller, so-called “indigenous cultures”, being left behind, or completely overwhelmed, after hundreds, even thousands, of years of development and evolution. Just as unique species of plants and animals in the rainforests are disappearing, we are facing the potential disappearance of unique human cultures and their intellectual heritages — some only to be kept “alive” to fuel a new tourism, that seeks comfort in finding something of the past.

Often when we hear the term “indigenous knowledge”, many of us immediately think of traditional handcrafts and herbal medicines. It is true, these are kinds of indigenous knowledge. They have been accumulated over centuries, and painstakingly handed down from one generation to another. Today, they are in jeopardy of being lost in the un-yielding march of modernization, and the implementation of technology. There is much more at stake here than first meets the eye. There is much more to indigenous knowledge than quaint arts and crafts and traditional medicine, important and worth consideration as they are. To me, indigenous knowledge encompasses much more than this.

Indigenous knowledge also includes agricultural knowledge, knowledge of local flora and fauna even the local history of the earth and weather systems. It includes languages and dialects, different styles of cognition, and different systems of logic. It includes different means and traditions of social inter-action, different methods of conflict-resolution, different means of achieving social cohesion, different methods of child-rearing and old-age caring, different ways to mark rites of passage. The possibility of losing these kinds of human achievements, is simply unacceptable. Still, fueled by the onslaught of technology, these are some of the aspects of what is called Indigenous Knowledge, that are at risk today.

Currently, sometimes through the din of modern technology and life, there seem to be some indications that more value is being placed on so-called “Indigenous Knowledge”. In 1995, The United Nations declared “The Decade of Indigenous Peoples”. That sounds good, but I am not entirely sure what it means! After all, aren’t we all indigenous to somewhere? Are not all cultures under pressure, and exposed to the treat of losing our cultural identities, our traditions, our values, and our cultural knowledge? Are we not all harnessed to the same great engine of change?

Perhaps the question that begs to be asked first is, “Who is Indigenous and Who Isn’t? Secondly, “What is Indigenous Knowledge that differentiates it from other knowledge?” Perhaps the toughest question of all is, once we have identified it, “Just what Indigenous Knowledge do we want to maintain, save and nurture into the next century and beyond? Who is going to make those decisions, and upon what criteria should those decisions be made? These are keep questions and too often, I fear, we have a tendency to gloss over the hard questions, erect a new “politically correct” edifice and label, and then just go on doing nothing much very differently.

I applaud this conference for offering an opportunity to explore these and many other related questions. I hope and trust that you will give yourselves this week to fully examining some of the fundamental and difficult questions with

which you will be confronted. But, please keep in mind, words, without actions, are just words! A conference, no matter how noble and well-intended, that does not result in action, that does not stimulate change, that does not lead to invention and innovation, that does not result in a serious re-consideration of its themes, is very hard to justify. It is my hope that you, many of whom have travelled so very far to get here, will take your time here seriously, participate fully, and seek to apply what you learn here to yourselves and to your professional environments when you return to your homes.

Ladies and Gentlemen: I hereby declare open this International Conference on: “Information Technologies in Educational Innovation for Development: Inter-facing Global and Indigenous Knowledge” officially open. I wish each of you well. I trust that your stay in Thailand will be pleasant, and most memorable. I wish you every success in the work before you, in addressing these important issues and topics.