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MicroUse Information

ALEXANDRIA DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES: A Baseline Document for Planning Global Information Infrastructure (GII)

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NIT '94: The 7th International Conference on New Information Technology was the first *NIT* conference held in the American soil, Alexandria, Virginia, USA. This was a meeting forcing us to look back and assess on what was able to establish and accomplish in the last six conferences, explore and discuss the problems and issues facing library and information leaders around the world during this digital age, and finally establish new agenda for libraries and new directions for the future *NIT* conferences. Most fittingly the theme of NIT '94 was Planning Global Information Infrastructure, and the conference produced a ground-breaking book with the same title (Chen, 1995).* One of the most important products for that meeting is the *Alexandria Declaration of Principles*, which has become a baseline documents for many countries in developing their library and information polices, and information infrastructure. It has been translated in several languages, and we encourage wide distribution of this document. For this reason, it is reprinted again here for our colleagues in Vietnam as well as other neighboring countries.

ALEXANDRIA DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES

GENERAL CONTEXT

In November 1994, the *7th International Conference on New Information Technology, NIT '94*, was held in Alexandria, Virginia. It brought together representatives from countries representing every region of the world and every stage in economic development. The focus of *NIT '94* was on planning the Global Information Infrastructure (GII), reflecting the emphasis given by the President of the United States to the effective use of new information technologies for the advancement of an

international well-being. Speakers presented papers that provided a technical context for discussion of the social objectives, and the result of the discussions was a consensus of agreement on this *Alexandria Declaration of Principles* for development of the Global Information Infrastructure.

Although this *Alexandria Declaration of Principles* is derived from the *NIT '94* Conference, its focus is not on the new information technologies themselves or on what the series of *NIT* conferences should be doing; rather, it is intended to be a general document that many others can use, as well as the *NIT*. Furthermore, although the *NIT '94* Conference was convened in the United States, this *Declaration of Principles* is not intended to be solely a United States document but a global one. To some extent it is intended to serve as a checklist to identify issues that should not be overlooked and to state them without political implications.

Although the *NIT* conferences are not the focus in this Declaration of Principles, among the recommendations is that the *NIT* Conferences have been and could continue to be an effective means for accomplishing the objectives identified. In that sense it was recommended that a future *NIT* Conference might be conducted as a virtual conference, using modern means of electronic communication as an experimental way of reaching out to share critically needed information and to train.

THE NATURE OF THE GLOBAL INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE (GII)

Before identifying the principles embodied in this *Declaration*, it is valuable to comment briefly on the essential elements of the GII that make it important and on what it provides that makes it different and unique.

The GII derives directly from the Internet as a worldwide network providing means by which individual persons can deal with its component subsystems. It is designed as a structure under which specific ideas will fit without making judgment on what the system should look like. It is intended to serve not institutions but individuals and communities to which they belong.

The GII is an open, self-organizing, interactive, resilient, interconnected system providing dynamic and democratic means for people not only to find information but also to put forward their own ideas for others to see. It is intended to be responsive to change - not resisting it but thriving on it.

STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

The discussions during the Conference led to the formulation of the following principles:

PRINCIPLE 1. EMPOWER INDIVIDUALS

The GII should be a means for empowering individuals through knowledge. Persons in many places and at any time can interact with the many different subsystems, and can be broadcasters as well as receivers.

In stating this principle, it is recognized that empowering individuals has the potential of creating political problems. On the one hand, in some political contexts, empowering citizens may pose a threat to established regimes and, on the other hand, those regimes may misuse the GII as simply another way to propagandize, abusing the information access channels to meet their own political

agendas. There also may be social problems in the empowerment of individuals through knowledge. There is a large cognitive leap between providing access to knowledge and empowering individuals. Empowerment has many social and political implications.

In application, therefore, this principle should be used carefully and modestly.

PRINCIPLE 2. EDUCATE AND TRAIN IN USE

A principle of crucial importance is the need to offer education and training in how to use information and the GII. There is a need to equip people with information-handling skills that will make them more effective as citizens and more productive as individuals. There is a need to help persons who are at risk because they lack the skills and to provide them with the tools to deal with information. Information literacy should be part of the educational system as a whole and seen as an investment in people.

PRINCIPLE 3. INCREASE KNOWLEDGE

As part of the principle of empowering individuals, but with even broader significance, the GII should serve as a means for adding to the available knowledge, preserving it in forms that will serve each country and each group of peoples, and encouraging the use of it. By doing so, the GII should increase understanding and decrease exploitation. Among the valuable technical contributions to serving that objective is the incorporation of system architecture that allows for highly distributed applications and collections.

PRINCIPLE 4. DEVELOP LOCAL RESOURCES

There is a disparity in the library and information holdings among individual countries, so some countries need to augment their holdings in very basic ways. In this respect, the need is not just for more sophisticated finding aids or services but for the basic collections on which to build them. As a part of this principle, countries have a need for information produced outside of their countries; thus development of the GII requires ready availability to information that may be already available elsewhere.

As an equally important part of this principle, countries also have a need for information that they themselves produce. Each country has unique strengths, distinctive competencies that relate to its collections of knowledge as well as to its information skills and ability to produce goods and services. To develop those strengths, there is a need within each country for professional skills in the management of information to support the creation, organization, dissemination, and utilization of local knowledge resources.

PRINCIPLE 5. IDENTIFY RESPONSIBILITIES OF INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

Librarians and other information professionals have crucial roles to play in development and implementation of the GII. The librarian serves as the preserver and caretaker of cultural heritage, by assuring that the record of the past will be available for the future. The library serves as an access point, without being the controller of the access. Librarians exemplify the underlying principles of the GII.

More generally, librarians and other information professionals are the means for assuring effective use of the resources of the GII. Beyond knowing how to find information, they know how to organize it and use it effectively. They can also be a means to develop uses and to help users benefit from them. In this respect, it is important to note that uses include not only highly sophisticated ones but those that help individuals cope with their own basic needs. Librarians have a special role in meeting the needs of the populations at risk, as intermediaries in accessing the GII and as navigators to the information.

PRINCIPLE 6. EDUCATE THE INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

There is a need to educate the information professional to fill these roles. It requires college-level education, intense basic training programs, workshops, and conferences. The technology itself can provide opportunities and means, such as virtual or electronic conferences, that can reach out, expand, and enlarge the professional participation in GII.

In some respects, the content, curriculum, and standards need to be international; in that context there is a potential role for regional and international organizations to provide outlines and syllabi for the knowledge and skills information handlers need to have. In other respects, the content needs to emphasize local needs and resources.

PRINCIPLE 7. BUILD FROM COUNTRY TO REGION TO INTERNATIONAL

A central principle in this Declaration is that each country and each region should make its own decisions about the development of the GII. There should be no one recipe, no international mandate, but rather each country and society should develop its own system to become part of a larger network.

More specifically, there are real risks in imposing international objectives on national or regional entities; which can be illustrated by the failure of many international development programs that have brought experts to a country to create wonderfully designed projects that did not work in the context of the local political and economic situation.

To implement this principle, there is a need for long-range and short range strategic planning at national levels, for means internal to each country to prepare and coordinate such strategic plans and to translate them into programs and budgets.

A corollary is that a guide should be developed for such strategic planning, usable at both national and institutional levels, a tool to serve key policymakers and decision makers. It should serve as a map rather than a prescription of which road to travel to get to the destination.

PRINCIPLE 8. NATIONAL AGENCIES IN DEVELOPMENT

There is a need for national agencies to play crucial roles in the development of the GII and in its transition into operation. First are the governmental agencies responsible for national legislation and planning. Second are nongovernmental agencies that serve as means to convince governments and people that information has value and to support them in implementing the necessary policies. Third are the major libraries of each nation - the places at which the core collections, services, and skills of information professionals and entrepreneurs may be concentrated. In some countries the national

library may be the best focus as the key player in the GII; in others it may be major university libraries.

PRINCIPLE 9. PUBLIC/PRIVATE SECTOR COOPERATION

In developing national plans, cooperation between the public and private sectors is crucial. On the one hand, government must have a role in the "public good" aspects, as economists use that term to refer to basic infrastructures and resources; public funding may well be required for basic operations and services. On the other hand, the private sector is in the best position to provide enhanced operations and services; within each country there needs to be a viable private sector with sufficient strength to produce the kind of information products and services that are available in more developed countries.

There should be a partnership between the government and the private sectors, with intensive collaboration between them and an infusion of the values of each sector into the other, so that they each understand, acknowledge, and respect if not adopt what the other can contribute.

PRINCIPLE 10. NEED FOR APPROPRIATE ECONOMIC POLICIES

There is an increasing gap among various countries and societies, which has been exacerbated rather than relieved by the increasing role of information, in large part because there has been inadequate recognition of that role. To aid in reducing that gap there is a need, at the macroeconomic level, for national accounting that will support other principles, aid in development of national and regional information infrastructures, assist collaboration between public and private sectors, and foster the development of local resources.

At the microeconomic level, there is a need to recognize the distinction between information as a capital investment and information as an expenditure. It is clear that information and the GII have an economic role as capital resources in the creation of new information.

SPECIFIC ISSUES THAT NEED RESOLUTION

In each of the components that make up the GII, there are issues that will need resolution; they constitute both barriers and opportunities, with one person's barrier being another's potential opportunity.

Among the issues is language. On the one hand, a lack of a common language creates fragmentation, not only locally, but globally; terminology of one country may not be understood or even appropriate in another. On the other hand, although this lack of a common language could argue for standardization, people want to preserve their languages, so they would argue for diversity and multiplicity. A principle therefore is that the development of the GII could be an opportunity to assure that the richness and diversity of languages be preserved in the system. In that sense, language is part of the infrastructure.

A whole set of issues revolve around technical requirements. Among them is the need for standards, such as commonly accepted formats, but not so constraining as to stifle development.

Legal issues arise with respect to copyright, privacy and confidentiality, personal and business equity, health and safety, and security.

There are issues raised by differences in culture, especially as reflected in the means for communication. There are issues related to generational gaps, with different perceptions between the older and the younger society members.

The affordability of information is clearly an issue. For some countries, the costs in shipping journals are frequently substantially more than the cost of the journals themselves. And the time it takes for delivery makes them out of date when they are available.

A critical issue is the sheer complexity of the GII. In this respect, there may appear to be too much information, too rich an array of resources. It is easy to get lost in the very process of retrieval, and difficult to get to the appropriate information. Every effort should be made to make it simpler and user friendly, to make it a little less complex to the end users, to simplify the user interface to the GII. There needs to be an infrastructure for the information ocean, and for each country it needs to be locally applied.

Even libraries are complex and very intimidating - particularly university libraries as well as local libraries.

There is need to develop an inventory, a directory of resources - not just a bibliography in the traditional library sense, but an information inventory that constitutes knowledge of information. This may need to be subsidized, because the commercial interests may completely overlook the need for these finding aids.