



Dieses Dokument wird unter folgender [Creative-Commons-Lizenz](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/de/) veröffentlicht: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/de/>

The Charter of Civil Rights for a Sustainable Knowledge Society – a vision with practical consequences

Rainer Kuhlen

Gekürzt In: Heinrich Böll Foundation (ed.) *Visions in process. World Summit on the Information Society Geneva 2003 – Tunis 2005*

10.12.2003

rainer.kuhlen@uni-konstanz.de

The information society needs to become a sustainable knowledge society where the objectives of inclusiveness, fairness and justice can be achieved. A knowledge society calls for the unhampered and non-discriminatory use of knowledge and information based on the principle of sustainability.

This is the main message of the *Charter of Civil Rights for a Sustainable Knowledge Society* which, after a long, intensive, real and virtual debate among members of different German civil societies groups, was passed as of early summer 2003.

The Charter is the essential contribution of *German civil society* for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and a major step towards a *vision* which is needed to bring together the heterogeneous interests, needs and wishes of people and states in the world.

A vision for the Information Society

Only through a comprehensive, critical and positive vision of what the information society should develop into, the two official documents of WSIS, the Declaration and the Plan of Action, can expect broader acceptance of the people.

It is the *people* who have the right to decide in which society they and future generations want to live, and it the governments' duty to brings these dreams and visions into reality. Who else than those from *civil society* who really live in the new electronic environments and who have the knowledge and the skill and the moral legitimacy to build the information society is capable to formulate the vision for the Information Society.

We give therefore this Charter of Civil Rights for a Sustainable Knowledge Society as a gift to the governments of the world and expect them to transform the ideas, rights, and freedoms embedded in the Charter into real plans of actions. Whatever will we planned and will be done as an outcome of WSIS it needs to be justified under the principle of sustainability.

We accept that not everything is feasible in a short period of time, but, having based this Charter on the grounding concept of sustainability, we see the development of the information society in a broader perspective. WSIS at Genova 2003 is only the beginning of a long process.

Civil society is concerned about the increasing privatisation and commercialisation of knowledge and information. This transform knowledge into a scarce resource which not only contradicts the generally accepted objective of sustainability and openness but which also slows down scientific and economic progress, makes public life intransparent and insecure, and restricts the potentials for future development.

Main focus - the idea of a sustainable knowledge society

The Charter is coherent in its message. It has as its focus the idea of a sustainable knowledge society. It is this focus that can bring together the different and, in the foreground, conflicting interests. These are the main characteristics of a sustainable knowledge society:

- A knowledge society is sustainable when it preserves and promotes historically achieved human and civil rights for future electronically determined environments.
- A knowledge society is sustainable when access to knowledge is unhampered and inclusive. It is sustainable when it promotes cooperative forms of knowledge production as the basis for innovation and creativity.
- A knowledge society is sustainable when its knowledge forms the basis for effective means of preserving our natural environment. The increasing consumption of natural resources currently threatening our environment is in part a result of the mass propagation of information technologies.
- A knowledge society is sustainable when access to knowledge and information provides all peoples of the world with the opportunity for self-determined development in their private, professional and public lives. It is sustainable when it preserves for future generations access to diverse media and information resources.
- A knowledge society is sustainable when development in the North is no longer carried out at the expense of the South and when the potential of men is no longer realised at the expense of women.

Basic rights

The Charter combine *nine basic rights and values* which are fundamental for an information society which is people-centred – that means which reflects the interests and needs of the people.

With respect to the *principle of free access*, the Charter holds that knowledge must remain permanently accessible to the public. Knowledge is a common good and has in the hierarchy of social values a higher status than the protection of private claims which, in its limits of social responsibility, are of course also legitimate.

Access to knowledge must be possible for present as well as for future generations, for all peoples, at all times, in all places and under fair conditions. If there is one universal human right in the information society than is the principle of universal access to knowledge and information from which many other rights can be derived, such as, among others,

- *the right to privacy* in the use of knowledge and information,
- *the right of citizens to inform themselves through publicly available resources* and having unhampered, unfiltered access to documents of public organisations
- *the right of protection of human dignity also in the work environment* where access to the information and communication systems of their organisations must be provided for everyone

- *the right and the duty to preserve and promote the heterogeneity of cultures and languages* as a precondition for the individual and social development of present and future generations
- *the right to freedom of communication* as the right to participate in all kinds of communication processes
- *the right to free and open software development* and self-determined communication

Practical consequences

Such a view on the information society has practical consequences.

- What is needed is a renewed media structure where public service media and public-access points, only controlled by democratic structures, play an important role, both in developing and developed countries.
- What is needed are new cooperative forms and new organizational models for the production, distribution and usage of knowledge and information in all areas: science, administration, art and entertainment. Again, open access is here the leading principle.

Above all the reduction of the *digital divide* must be recognized the political objective of highest priority. There will be no information freedom in the world and no freedom in general when the discrimination of the majority of the people in the world will continue. The information society cannot be sustainable when it excludes now and for the foreseeable future from the benefits of information and communication technologies.

The information society, or as civil society prefers to call it knowledge society, will not be paradise on earth. People will continue to live with conflicts. This conflicts must not be solved on reasons of power but on reasons of knowledge and information, must be based on free communication.

The vision is there – a sustainable, inclusive, just and fair knowledge society where *human rights can become reality for everyone now and for in future times*. This is not an ethical, moral dream – civil society people, among them are many scientists also from the fields of economy and information sciences, have good arguments that under such a vision knowledge can grow, economy can flourish, societal welfare can develop and democratic structure can be expanded.

We the people from civil society, again, urge our governments to make such a world of a sustainable society possible.