**The Information Society**

Societies all over the world are changing. In countries of many different kinds information now plays an increasingly important part in economic, social, cultural and political life. This phenomenon is taking place regardless of a country’s size, state of development or political philosophy.

**The characteristics of information societies**

Information societies have three main characteristics.

First, information is used as an **economic resource**. Organizations make greater use of information to increase their efficiency, to stimulate innovation and to increase their effectiveness and competitive position, often through improvements in the quality of the goods and services that they produce. There is also a trend towards the development of more information-intensive organizations that add greater amounts of value and thus benefit a country’s overall economy.

Secondly, it is possible to identify **greater use of information among the general public**. People use information more intensively in their activities as consumers: to inform their choices between different products, to explore their entitlements to public services, and to take greater control over their own lives. They also use information as citizens to exercise their civil rights and responsibilities. In addition, information systems are being developed that will greatly extend public access to educational and cultural provision.

The third characteristic of information societies is the **development of an information sector within the economy.** The function of the information sector is to satisfy the general demand for information facilities and services. A significant part of the sector is concerned with the technological infrastructure: the networks of telecommunications and computers. Increasingly, however, the necessity is also being recognized to develop the industry generating the information that flows around the networks: the information-content providers. In nearly all information societies, this information sector is growing much faster than the overall economy. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) estimates that in 1994 the global information sector grew by over 5% while the overall world economy grew by less than 3%.

Both developed and developing countries are being transformed into information societies. Most of them are concerned to use information to improve their relative competitiveness or, at least, to retain their position in an increasingly competitive global market. There is a concern, however, that the shift towards information societies will increase the gap between the developed and the developing countries. To counter this, the World Bank has recently launched its Information for Development initiative.