



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

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Объединенных Наций по
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науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
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Welcoming Remarks 38th session of the General Conference of UNESCO

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UNESCO House

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Thank you.

Mr President of the General Conference,
Madam Director-General,
Honourable ministers,
Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and a great honour for me to welcome you to the thirty-eighth session of the General Conference of UNESCO on behalf of all 58 members of the Executive Board and on my own behalf as Chair of the Board.

In less than two weeks we will celebrate the seventieth anniversary of our Organization.

The Executive Board, in collaboration with the Director-General, has made every effort in preparing for this celebration.

We are all very pleased that several Heads of State and Government, representing all the regions of the world, have decided to visit UNESCO during our celebration.

This is more than just a mark of respect for the work that we do.

It is a recognition of the lasting need for an organization such as UNESCO and also a proof of political will at the highest level to recognize the only United Nations agency responsible for worldwide policy in relation to education, the natural, social and human sciences, culture, communication and information.

This recognition makes us particularly proud.

The author and adventurer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry reminds us that:

“Your task is not to foresee the future, but to enable it.”

Mr President, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

For decades now, we have known that the world is rapidly evolving in both positive and negative ways.

The positive changes created new opportunities – people are more connected. However, it is sometimes difficult to find efficient and relevant solutions to some of the more negative changes we experience.

Nonetheless, we must consider sustainable solutions now – with a view to preserving our planet – our only planet.

As Prince Charles, The Prince of Wales said:

“Our children and our grand-children will ask not what our generation said, but what we did. So let us give them an answer of which we can be proud.”

These are wise words indeed.

Let me reiterate we are in a period of profound transformations – not only in social terms, but also in all areas of the Organization’s activities and mandate.

Transformations are upon us in education, in the sciences, in culture and – above all – in the innovation-driven communications and information field.

We have to face these challenges, analyse them and take all necessary actions with sustainable solutions.

Today, at a time of such rapid change, and after 70 years of our existence what are our forces that make peace lasting? What are our foundations that make development sustainable and human-oriented?

These are the kinds of questions that we must continue to ask ourselves.

Our objective is that we should be able to keep up-to-date with these kinds of changes, and provide policy solutions that allow us to confront them “head-on”.

UNESCO is one of the leading specialized agencies within the United Nations system capable of tackling today’s major challenges through a prism that concentrates our five fields of competence.

This is our added value.

And this is what should make us the “go-to” agency to resolve twenty-first century problems that will preserve our world and its universal values for the future.

This global and holistic transformation has formally been announced by the decision of the United Nations Summit last September, to adopt the Post-2015 Development Agenda and its seventeen (17) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and another 196 inter-connected targets.

These goals and targets define the expectations of the world community for the next 15 years, and beyond.

This is why I believe that UNESCO now faces a new test of unusual proportion: a review of our relevance, our existence, and our role.

Most importantly, we need to adopt a dynamic approach in reviewing, our strategy and our plans of action.

Let me repeat again, I believe that the secret to our success will not only lie in multiplying our energies or increasing our financial resources, but also in the kinds of effective partnerships we can achieve with our fellow organizations within the United Nations system, and our alliances with non-governmental partners, including from the private sector, academic circles the media, and other interested stakeholders – in a way similar to the approach pursued by the Education Sector in developing SDG 4.

We should begin to become concerned when we search where our core competences in culture and sciences have been integrated into the globe’s transformative agenda.

Apart from a few marginal references in some targets, we – and here I mean both the representatives of our Member States and the Secretariat – should continue to invest intensive efforts to make this possible.

What has the catch-phrase “*a driver and an enabler of sustainable development*”, which can be applied to both culture and the sciences, brought about?

In this regard, let me take this opportunity to appeal to all of us – and again I say both the Member States and the Secretariat – to redouble our close efforts to gain ground in these areas.

We must seriously and honestly undertake a reflection about our future vision, our focus and priorities and our *modus operandi* for the next 15 years and beyond.

We must ensure that ‘sustainability’ is written into the genetic code of our Organization.

Our current Medium-Term Strategy runs until 2021, that is to say four years into the transformative period.

In order to attain further influence and impact, a review and analysis of the Medium-Term Strategy and its relation to the 2030 agenda is considered as our first step of home work towards the world community.

The General Conference, therefore, should mandate the Executive Board to review our Medium-Term Strategy next year in an in-depth manner, together with the Director-General.

We all know that structural and conceptual changes are difficult to implement and that it is often hard to change our habits including also the need to leave marginal activities aside. But this change has to come from a bottom-up approach, emerging from a space for exchange and thought. And we need to provide support to accompany this process.

Allow me, ladies and gentlemen, to begin with Culture for the future.

Should UNESCO concentrate almost all of its resources – both human and financial – to focus only on the implementation and administration of our Conventions?

Certainly this may satisfy the expectations of many Member States.

I would suggest that we must concentrate our efforts to pursue other intellectual and creative dimensions – like, for example, in the field of the arts, in literature and books, in creativity, and in the linkage to the creative economy and so on, to name just a few.

In this regard, I would urge us all not to lose sight of the potential for culture to be a source of human dignity, that the celebration of our diversity becomes the common ground for each to live equally with the Other, and for culture in all its many forms to be the true driver of sustainable development that we so desire.

Our concept of a Culture of Peace and Intercultural Dialogue, which are based on the principle of living together better and on respect and acceptance of one another – were born here at UNESCO – and which gave rise to the Rapprochement of Cultures must be much more than well-meaning slogans.

We must re-gain our moral and intellectual leadership of these meaningful concepts to establish the harmony of civilizations.

After all, the world looks to UNESCO for guidance and inspiration on these vital matters.

Now, Mr President of the General Conference, let me turn to the Sciences of the future.

The coming years mark a unique and challenging time for UNESCO to reconfirm its relevance and to prove the impact of its mandate in the Sciences.

UNESCO's role in promoting international Science, Technology and Innovation cooperation, as well as its work concerning the ethics of science and technology, have never been as relevant as they are now – especially as we begin to implement the 2030 sustainable development agenda.

Our work in the Sciences must become more visible. For example, the research and analysis undertaken by the United Nations Secretary-General's Scientific Advisory Board, housed here at UNESCO must be further promoted.

In fact, everything that we do must take into consideration our ability to provide effective policy advice that can easily provide real impact in our Member States.

This requires focus, determination and confidence.

It asks for support and trust among the Member States and the Secretariat to share this noble mission.

We must encourage and facilitate the spread of ideas by today's young and dynamic thinkers.

Our youth are too often considered as lacking in experience. However, as the results of the 9th UNESCO Youth Forum show, young people have excellent creative potential and also great aspirations for our Organization.

UNESCO must be the House of close collaboration amongst all generations so that all experiences are mutually beneficial and that knowledge and creativity are transmitted between the generations.

This now leads me to the field of Education which is the cornerstone for our collective future.

We must be sure that information and communication technologies (ICTs) will provide the tools for a more human education essential for every individual to accept differences – whatever they are.

The use of ICTs is an efficient means to reach this objective through greater efforts towards mobile and e-learning so that through their use we are able to reach the un-reachable, in particular, in Africa and the Arab region.

Mr President of the General Conference, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me now to address you in my own Language, Arabic, one of the official languages of UNESCO to demonstrate that UNESCO is indeed the house of diversity.

UNESCO was founded 70 years ago in an endeavour on the part of the founders to build the defences of peace in the minds of men. At that time the goal was to limit instances of the use of force and prevent States from resorting to war to resolve disputes. Nowadays, internal and civil conflicts have emerged on the scene and are growing at an alarming rate. These are more distressing and ferocious than the wars between States in the traditional sense, as understood by the peoples of the world.

UNESCO was founded in 1945, before people used telephones. Even in the mid-1980s, it took a whole day to make an international call. And at the end of the 1990s, we students studying abroad would still await the arrival of someone from our country bringing with them local newspapers for us to read. Nowadays, all this can be done in an instant with a single device that most of us carry in our pockets or bags. We can follow in sound and pictures the news and events happening anywhere in the world in real time, whether walking in the street, waiting for a bus, taking a lift or even while attending meetings. Furthermore, we can make telephone calls with the same device, whether on the ground or above it, on board an aircraft.

From the time of UNESCO's foundation until the mid-1990s, ideas were prisoners of the body and could only be transferred with the transfer of the body from one country to another, with all the crossing of political and geographic boundaries that this entailed. At best, ideas could be conveyed through books from abroad, which might or might not arrive. When I was an academic researcher in the 1990s, I was obliged to leave my own country and travel abroad to obtain access to articles or study books in my scientific field. Nowadays, it takes me no more than an hour or two to access all the scientific sources and references published anywhere in the world, in any language I want.

At this point I would like to pause for a moment and tell you that I sometimes notice surprise in my daughter's eyes when one of them comes to tell me that she wants to travel to another country to see her friends and I reply automatically that she will have to obtain the necessary visas and that that takes time. She responds very simply, "In that case, I'll go to my room and contact them all in

their different countries.” Nowadays we can exchange views and ideas without having to obtain visas or cross political borders.

Our generation feels a sense of pride and achievement that we can work with computers and surf the Internet, whereas our children’s generation handles digital media with absolute ease and considers them as an integral part of life. Look at how any child under the age of ten can operate a tablet, a computer or a mobile phone. I am perhaps not exaggerating when I say that I personally – and I believe that this is the case with most of us – rely upon my children to teach me how to use modern electronic devices. It is as though they are born knowing how to use technology.

The world has changed and is changing with tremendous speed. Ideas are now transferred, exchanged and disseminated at great speed. However, we are still faced with the challenge of how to safeguard our sons and daughters against the abuse of communications to ensure that they do not fall victim or prey to extremist ideology, calls to violence and propaganda for the use of force. Some of us still believe that our countries’ political borders or even the walls of our own homes represent a bulwark protecting our sons and daughters but the fact of the matter is that, for them, these borders have become virtual ones. It is easy to communicate mistaken and extremist ideas from anywhere in the world to any of our sons and daughters at any time while they are at home and even when we are sitting with them in the same room, feeling reassured that they are safe from all of this as long as we are watching over them at home or in the same room.

In the light of all these changes, the challenges facing the world have been compounded and become more complicated. They have taken a different form and structure, requiring us to react to and deal with them no less quickly and to display the same capacity for continuous change.

This Organization is an authentic part of today’s world with all its components and, at times, contradictions. We have no alternative but to unite to combat extremism, reject violence and fight against movements that seek to spread new cultures designed to breed feelings of lack of respect and persecution or to incite hatred of the other, not only when the other is from a different civilization, religion or creed but even if they belong to the same civilization, religion and creed.

These groups try to penetrate and take control of our young people’s minds. We have a duty and responsibility to future generations to afford them proper protection by providing suitable educational opportunities to enable them to protect themselves and by bringing them up in such a way that the capacity for sound thought and ability to enter into constructive dialogue are developed. The challenge now no longer consists in exploring how to deal with the phenomenon but how to provide the necessary means of protection before it gets completely out of control.

Here I have to stress the need to consider the role played by UNESCO’s Social and Human Sciences Sector and the Communication and Information Sector. They must be provided with the proper environment and resources to enable them to formulate initiatives and action plans characterized by innovation, renewal and flexibility.

In this regard, it would be remiss of me not to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the Director-General, Ms Irina Bokova who, aware of this danger and the responsibility of our Organization to address it, organized the first international conference on “Youth and the Internet: Fighting Radicalization and Extremism” last June, with financial support from China, Bulgaria and Egypt. We have seen how beneficial and productive the discussions during that conference were and we must now exploit its success, build upon its outputs and take effective action. We need wait no longer to move forward on the basis of its outputs.

While we may fear the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction and strive by all means to limit them, I firmly believe that we should also fear the spread of the ideology of extremism and violence. Indeed, it may pose an even more deadly risk than nuclear weapons. We must eradicate it before it is too late.

Mr President of the General Conference,
Ladies and gentlemen,

My belief in the role of this international Organization is so strong that it approaches the level of an article of faith. I hope that it will continue to carry out a pioneering role in its spheres of activity and remain able to deal with the challenges facing today's world with the same spirit and enthusiasm displayed by its founders, which was a key driving force behind its establishment.

We must face our problems candidly, robustly and boldly.

We must look beyond small details to the total picture.

We must take a bird's eye view of our problems and rise above trivial disagreements over form.

We must work as a single task force to face our common enemy, which seeks to corrupt the minds of our young people. The most dangerous thing is to corrupt the head, for if the head is corrupted, everything else also becomes corrupt.

For decades, we have maintained that UNESCO is "the conscience of the world". However, I say with a loud voice in front of you today that UNESCO not only represents the conscience of the world but also "the intellect of the world". We, as Member States, must supply this intellect with the lifeblood to nourish it and make it able to think wisely and objectively. The lifeblood which we pump into the intellect of the world (i.e. UNESCO) is what will prevent the shedding of innocent blood on the ground due to ignorance and violence.

When participating in Conference subcommittee discussions, I hope that each of us will call to mind the image of the child who wants to learn but does not have the opportunity, the researcher who seeks to excel but does not have an office or the scientist who has an idea or invention but cannot find a laboratory in which to conduct experiments.

- We must imagine the scale of the torment and hardship endured by those forced to leave their homes and homelands in search of somewhere they and their children will feel safe, driven by the hope that their families will receive the minimum level of basic health and education services.
- We must be aware that our common human heritage has now, more than at any other time in the past, become a target for destruction, plunder and theft.
- We must think about the dire consequences and effects of climate change, which represents a new environmental challenge facing humankind across the world.
- We must think about the threat to the populations of small islands, which may be washed away and erased from the world's map.
- We must be aware of the problems facing the populations of regions threatened by desertification and regions suffering from scarce water resources, the main preoccupation of whose leaders is how to provide clean water for drinking and agriculture.
- We must think about how to provide clean and renewable sources of energy at affordable cost to meet the demands of development.
- We must think about how to protect journalists and media workers from the dangers they face in the course of carrying out their work.

All these and other citizens of the world are looking to us at UNESCO, hoping that the resolutions and programmes which we shall adopt at this session will help to meet their needs and achieve

their dreams and ambitions, thereby benefiting them and all the citizens of the world. Thus we shall enable the Organization to fulfil its mission of spreading peace and bringing prosperity to all humankind.

At the Organization's internal level,

- We must endeavour to open the Organization's doors on a permanent basis to intellectuals, thinkers, creative individuals, artists, writers, scholars and experts, making UNESCO a meeting place for the leaders of science and enlightenment.
- We must involve young people more closely in our activities.
- We must attract non-governmental partners, who will play an effective role in helping us to carry out our duties.
- We must deepen the culture of plurality and take a vigorous stance against those who seek to impose their ideology or enforce their culture at the expense of the other. We must demonstrate to all that plurality and difference of opinion are a source of intellectual enrichment.
- We must disseminate all aspects of the culture of "respect for the other".
- We must promote the concept of "intellectual cooperation", for which this Organization was established.
- We must encourage creativity and the search for innovative solutions.
- We must change our way of thinking to enable us to anticipate and take into account future challenges. We should play the role of the physician who prevents, not of one who cures.
- We must study in a scientific way the best ways for the Organization to attract financial resources. I am confident that funds can be attracted to finance our activities and programmes, if we are able to demonstrate to funding bodies that we have success stories and that our activities and programmes are relevant to the age in which we live and adequately address the challenges faced by the world.
- We must use our strengths and our achievements over the last 70 years as the basis for a new departure for the Organization, as one capable of keeping pace with the succession of problems faced by the world and addressing them swiftly and effectively.

In the course of this session,

We must take advantage of our presence together and direct our energy towards programmes on the ground that will have a practical and productive impact on everyone.

We must make use of the tremendous political momentum generated by the participation of leaders attending the Conference to explore the problems besetting us from their perspective and to explore their thoughts and ideas on how to address them. I believe that this is an excellent opportunity to convey, through them, a message to the people of the world to the effect that "We at UNESCO are keen to stay and work with the same capacity and enthusiasm. We are able to develop and to interact and deal with contemporary challenges".

At this defining moment, we face a great challenge, namely "to be or not to be". I am confident that together we shall succeed and that we shall indeed "be". In fact, I am certain that we shall be the

lantern and the compass by which all are guided, for the good and safety of humankind, to achieve the development we desire and spread peace in its widest sense at all levels.

With these words that express the hopes which fill my heart and occupy my mind – and I am certain that they occupy your minds just as much if not more so – I conclude my opening remarks. Speaking on behalf of all the members of the Executive Board and for myself personally, I hope that this 38th session of the General Conference of UNESCO will achieve the results we desire and that our efforts will be crowned with unprecedented success.

Thank you for your kind attention.