



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

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

196th session of the Executive Board

Plenary Meeting

Opening Remarks

**H.E. Ambassador Mohamed Amr
Chairperson of the Executive Board**

UNESCO Headquarters, Paris

13 April 2015

Mr Hao Ping, President of the General Conference,
Ms Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO,
Members of the Board,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you to the Executive Board of UNESCO as the work of its 196th session gets under way.

This is the Board's third session since the end of the 37th session of the General Conference, which was held in November 2013.

As you know, the spring session of the Board immediately preceding the General Conference is the most important Board session of all because it is at that session that agreement is reached on the matters to be approved by the General Conference, such as the programme and budget to be executed by the Organization over the coming biennium. Furthermore, this year's Board sessions are particularly important given that we will be celebrating the 70th anniversary of this venerable Organization, whose founders gave it the great responsibility of ensuring that "it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed". What a lofty and great responsibility it is to seek to advance and preserve humankind! Human beings are the source of creativity and the engine of life. That is why I very much hope there will be, at this and the next session of the Board, a space for us to debate and reflect together on the future role of UNESCO in the light of the long experience it has accumulated over 70 years, a role which is commensurate with the accelerating changes we are witnessing at this delicate point in time.

Allow me, on this occasion, to share with you some of my preoccupations, which, I am certain, are also your preoccupations, indeed the preoccupations of all of us. Whenever we hear of an armed attack against a university or a school, the deliberate destruction of a museum or an archaeological site, or an aggression against the soul of a human being because of his or her thoughts or beliefs, I find myself automatically wondering "What is our role?" How can our Organization meet the challenges of the age in which we live? How do we stand with respect to these challenges which assail us from all sides? How can we prepare ourselves and future generations in order to avert a repetition of such events?

What hurts me is that some people seek to avoid answering these questions, or avoid discussing and examining them in depth, on the grounds of our lack of potential or our poor resources, or they remain content to issue statements criticizing or condemning each fresh incident, which is soon lost to oblivion ... until we are confronted with yet another, similar incident, and we voice the same questions and the same scene is repeated.

It may be that raising questions from time to time is one facet of our attempt to seek the truth. Raising questions means that we care and are interested, or else we wouldn't be raising them! But this is not the case today: I find that the phenomenon of asking questions appears on the surface from time to time. And here I may quote what Paulo Berredo Carneiro said: "It is UNESCO's mission for us always to be asking questions".

In my attempt to understand reality and to arrive at some answers to the questions we ask ourselves, I find myself prompted to seek to understand why there was an appeal for the establishment of this Organization. At times, understanding the present requires you to go back to the past, in the hope that that may help us to decipher the code (if I may be permitted that expression) governing this Organization, which is constantly, through its programmes and activities, seeking to advance human behaviour and achieve development for human beings.

This search took me back to the time the idea of founding this Organization was first mooted and what those who did so said at the time. The appeal for the establishment of this international body came at a time of extremely complex international circumstances, at one of the most difficult moments in the history of the world, namely the Second World War. It is surprising that the appeal

for the establishment of this Organization goes back to 1942, in London, which was living under the pounding of bombs and the roar of artillery.

In such circumstances, it is more usual for people to say: “What’s the rush? Let the war finish, and then we’ll think about what we will do.” But fortunately, that is not what happened. The founding fathers: politicians, jurists, thinkers, philosophers, writers and researchers held their meetings, and spared none of their time or energy in putting the idea into practice.

It became clear to me that the fundamental motivation behind the establishment of the Organization was to achieve “intellectual cooperation”. Let me reiterate that phrase to you: “intellectual cooperation”. That is what France was then urging, supported by China and a number of countries of Latin America. That is probably why our Organization stands on the shoulders of the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, which was founded in Paris in 1925, and was the instrument by means of which intellectual cooperation was achieved under the auspices of the League of Nations. Indeed, that institute was a kind of League of Nations UNESCO, with its own galaxy of scientists and pioneers in the field of thought.

I wondered: “what is meant by ‘intellectual cooperation’ and how is that important?” I found a number of explanations of that phrase, including the words of Georges Bidault, French Foreign Minister at the time of the appeal for the establishment of this Organization, to the effect that it remained “necessary to add a third mainstay to the twin cornerstones of the economy and social policies,” and those of Paul Valéry that “if our intellect gives us more room and greater power over the affairs of this world, this is conducive to increasing the chances of this world to recover more speedily.”

In this same connection, allow me to quote the then British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, who said at the international conference convened for the purpose of founding UNESCO: “Today the peoples of the world are islands shouting at each other over seas of misunderstanding... ‘Know thyself’, said the old proverb. ‘Know your neighbour’, we say today. And the whole world is our neighbour.” End quote.

I found myself agreeing with what he said, and thinking that he was speaking of our current state.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This Organization came into the light of day bearing one of the most important messages for humankind, which is building the defences of peace in the minds of men. If we take that into consideration, and in the light of the chief reason for which its founders were striving, namely “intellectual cooperation”, this prompts me to say, with full confidence, that these defences which we strive to build are based on “thought”, which is the cornerstone for the building of the defences. Our world today is in great need of works of the intellect: it needs this thought to lead us in enlightened fashion to the achievement of creativity, growth and development.

We must work to achieve intellectual cooperation, not only among ourselves here at UNESCO; rather, this needs to be a message which holds sway worldwide. Some may say: “How can such cooperation be achieved when there are such differences in points of view among cultures regarding various subjects?” And this is very apposite. The aim of those who propagate this idea may be none other than an attempt on their part to ensure that extremist thought dominates and leads us to waves of blind terror all over the world. I am certain that what unites us is far greater than what divides us, and that it behoves us to unite our visions and cooperate intellectually in order to counter those who strive to spread the spirit of violence and extremism, and to eliminate hatred between peoples. Our common enemies are extremism and terrorism. But this enemy attacks no region or state from outside. Rather, it seeks to penetrate our societies in order to combat us within our very home. There is no need for me to cite the number of regrettable events that have occurred in the six months since the last session of the Board against educational and

cultural institutions in all continents of the world. The figures are deplorable and the indicators are dangerous.

Where do we stand on the positions proclaimed by leading intellectuals worldwide down the ages? In the 18th century, Voltaire famously said: “I do not agree with what you have to say, but I’ll defend to the death your right to say it.” On another occasion, he said, “Be extremely tolerant with him who disagrees with you. For if his opinion is not completely right, you may not be completely wrong about your stubbornness about your own opinion.”

The philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes) said in his commentary on the words of the sage Aristotle: “It is fair that a man should apply the same arguments to his adversary as he does to himself, and that he should accept from his adversaries the same arguments that he applies to himself.”

Along the same lines, Gandhi said: “You must be the change that you wish to see in the world.”

Ladies and gentlemen,

Unbending belief is the source of intellectual terrorism. On the other hand, revising one’s opinion on all matters is the most important key to progress. And here, one of the most beautiful guidelines is what the Arab thinker Ibn an-Nafīs said: “When equal minds are faced with the same problem, the least advanced among them is better placed to solve it than the most advanced.”

We need to look at the problem from a bird’s eye view. We need to look on the scene from all angles with an innovative gaze. We need to see our reality from its point of view. We need to find renewable formulas for dialogue which are compatible with the nature and mechanisms of the age and with its challenges. We need to shoulder our responsibilities towards the present and future generations so that we may shape an appropriate environment, not only in order to guarantee freedom of expression and opinion, but also to ensure that what is expressed is not misunderstood or is misused in order to destroy our societies and our own world. We must work tirelessly and ceaselessly before it is too late and we actually become incapable of addressing the matter with our reason and logic, before the language of violence and the use of force gets the upper hand. We need to disseminate the culture of peace and tolerance. We need to strengthen cultural diversity as a right and a duty. We need to revise both the style and method of our educational curricula which are taught to pupils in our schools. We need to grow closer and closer together. We need to get back to the fundamental message of this Organization and to gear our action to that of other international organizations with a view to “intellectual cooperation”.

I hope that my message may reach you all, and that our celebration of the 70th anniversary of the Organization may prove the beginning of a new age. Let us prepare for it over this coming year with an integrated programme of action to be submitted to the Executive Board at its forthcoming session and to the General Conference next autumn. Let our slogan be “How to translate the message and principles of UNESCO into a more concrete reality, a reality which is able to meet the challenges of extremism, which holds firm to a single opinion, and which counters fanaticism?” On this basis, I urge the Members of the Board, my colleagues the ambassadors and representatives of Member States kindly to provide me with any ideas or suggestions which may help to achieve this objective, to which I have referred in my statement, in order to change the face of the Organization and make it more effective. I shall spare no effort to respond to these suggestions and to communicate with you regarding them, with a view to consulting the Director-General in order to benefit from them and build on them.

I also urge the Director-General to continue to play in that regard the constructive role that we have entrusted to her ever since she took on the responsibility of managing the Organization. I urge her to prepare the climate and to propose mechanisms and various alternatives in order to devise a programme of work which responds to our aspirations and which makes our celebration of the 70th anniversary a quantum leap towards the achievement of a better future.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues, allow me now to state what I believe to be the challenges and opportunities that UNESCO must take up in order to remain wholly relevant in the post-2015 development agenda.

Education is a basic human right. It is essential to any effort to eradicate poverty and empower individuals.

As Abraham Lincoln once said, “If you think education is too expensive, try ignorance”.

To my mind, this means that there is an obligation to ensure that each and every person has access to quality education in a safe environment – from school to university – no matter the cost.

To that end, UNESCO has been responsible for the “education for all” (EFA) movement since the Dakar Forum in 2000.

UNESCO’s work, leading to the Muscat Agreement (Oman, May 2014), has helped to improve the proposed goal (sustainable development goal 4) concerning education in the post-2015 development agenda.

Through its experience of EFA and by virtue of its convening power, UNESCO should continue to pursue its vital role, following the World Education Forum 2015 (to be held in the Republic of Korea), of supporting, coordinating and rallying round all partners in the field of education for action in the sustainable development agenda.

We must ensure that UNESCO is able to meet the global challenges in the field of **sciences**.

Science, technology and innovation are essential vectors for the implementation of sustainable development.

The fundamental question facing us all is: how to exploit this scientific knowledge for the benefit of all, especially the most marginalized?

As remarked by the philosopher Gaston Bachelard: “For a scientific mind, all knowledge is in response to a question. If there were no question, there would be no scientific knowledge. Nothing proceeds from itself”. That is why I have invited several scientists – many of them women – including laureates of the 2015 L’Oréal-UNESCO Prize “For Women in Science” to address the Executive Board in the framework of the series of events held on “UNESCO at 70 and Future Prospects”. It is only with its many partners that UNESCO will be able to provide answers to the major challenges of our time.

Similarly, ladies and gentlemen, UNESCO is the only organization of the United Nations family with a mandate in the field of **social and human sciences**. UNESCO can be a catalyst for social change, if the appropriate political will is demonstrated by its Member States.

Given the current global context, marked, in particular, by the radicalization of youth, UNESCO has a duty to provide solutions to fight against discrimination, racism, intolerance and above all, to promote gender equality, social inclusion, peace, security and human rights. We can also provide practical solutions to current challenges through our activities in sport or bioethics.

I am always amazed to see how UNESCO’s International Convention against Doping in Sport is referred to so little in the media. This clearly must be remedied, as UNESCO’s standard-setting instruments should be widely known to the general public.

Ladies and gentlemen, we must also remember that **culture** is now recognized by world leaders as a catalyst for economic, social and environmental development.

However, this recognition is still not fully reflected in the post-2015 development agenda where the inclusion of cultural issues remains fragile.

This situation must be rectified. We must ensure that culture is fully integrated into the post-2015 political declaration and that the specific target for culture is maintained.

This is an urgent matter: the recent attacks on world cultural heritage are attacks on humanity as a whole.

I would like to thank the Director-General for her condemnation of this destruction and the United Nations Security Council for the adoption of Resolution 2199. I hope that UNESCO can offer real-impact solutions in such crisis situations where its expertise is so valuable. An effective standard-setting instrument to protect museums appears to be essential, as every effort must be focused on the effective protection of world heritage.

The looting and illicit trafficking of cultural property are fast becoming disasters which require a strong, purposeful response, particularly given the situation in countries where there is armed conflict.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, we cannot forget our work on **information and communication** which must be maintained as these themes constitute key elements of the post-2015 agenda.

Development requires the creation of knowledge societies where freedom of speech and universal access to information allow individuals to drive progress.

The media also plays an essential role in our society. UNESCO is the only United Nations agency with a mandate for the promotion of freedom of speech and the press. More must be done to ensure that journalists are trained to share information objectively and are protected when carrying out their professional tasks.

The moment has come for all UNESCO's sectors to work together to build a common vision which inspires change around the world.

Dear colleagues,

I should also like to mention the important work that we do for our two global priorities, Africa and Gender Equality.

The need to develop young people's skills in Africa is of particular concern to UNESCO. We need to work more closely with the African Union building on each other's capacities to build an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, as outlined in the AU's Agenda 2063 "The Africa We Want". To this end, I am really impressed by the extraordinary vitality of African youth and their involvement in the promotion of a culture of peace and sustainable development on their continent.

In this respect, I should also like to emphasize and welcome the initiative by the Director-General to organize next June the first-ever international Conference on Youth and the Internet: Fighting Radicalization and Extremism.

We must also do our part as Members States for the advancement and promotion of gender equality. It is regrettable that in the twenty-first century widespread discriminatory norms and practices against women and serious obstacles on the road to gender equality still remain deeply rooted. The responsibility to eliminate these practices and to remove the obstacles rests with all of us – Member States, international organizations, and civil society.

Also the needs of Small Island Developing States deserve our full attention – especially within the context of climate change, sea-level rise and coastal erosion – effects that they themselves did not cause – but for which global solutions urgently need to be found.

Young people tell us that the training they receive does not equip them fully for today's opportunities – and still curricula is lacking in many countries the innovation we desperately need to provide the knowledge and skills today's youth needs to help them to compete in an ever-changing global economy, thus giving them a sense of purpose and belonging in an increasingly impersonal and globalized world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the next two weeks when we will consider the budget to be recommended for the next biennium, I believe that it will be essential for us to avoid a purely technical approach to the issue, and to focus on its consequences for the longer term issues of UNESCO's future role and mandate.

It is my earnest wish that our discussions on this question will be open and constructive, and that it will help the Board make recommendations to the General Conference that are appropriate and relevant to meet the needs and challenges we face today, and which will enable UNESCO to deliver meaningfully on its mandate.

There are several other important issues that we must address during this session. Among them is the question of governance.

Not only will we need to address the working methods and effectiveness of our Board, but we will also need to address the challenges facing the many other decision-making bodies within our Organization that have also been assessed by the External Auditor. Let me, in this regard, thank them for the continuous guidance and assistance since our last meeting.

We must also carefully plan the agenda of the General Conference since it is one of our constitutional duties.

I was informed also that the Director-General is preparing some very high-level events to coincide exactly with our birthday celebrations, and I am certain that we all look forward to hearing from her about these events too.

Finally, dear colleagues, there are also some very significant international events that will be taking place before the end of the year. They too merit our attention now, so that we can be informed of them and – where appropriate – provide inputs that may help improve UNESCO's impact.

Chief among these events is of course the COP 21 meetings that will be held immediately after the General Conference. I know that the Director-General and the Secretariat are heavily involved in the preparations of this milestone United Nations event, and I appreciate the full support of the host country in these preparations.

But before that, there is the World Education Forum 2015 that will be held in May in Incheon, Republic of Korea. The objectives of this major educational event will be to agree on the post-2015 education agenda and a Framework for Action, pending the outcomes of the special United Nations Summit on sustainable development that will be held in New York in September.

Also too, there is the International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Post-2015 Education that will be held in Qingdao, China. This meeting will examine the interface between education and the ICTs to provide solutions on how ICTs can be leveraged to support the achievement of post-2015 education goals and targets.

I am convinced that these events will be of great interest to us all in the coming months.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, before concluding, allow me to take this opportunity to express a collective word of thanks to our Director-General Ms Irina Bokova who has repeatedly spoken out

in defense of UNESCO's mandate and about the expertise that we have at our disposal to address concretely the challenges I have enumerated this morning.

The ills of today's world need to be addressed by UNESCO – and in cooperation with other organizations within the United Nations family – UNESCO should lead and remains more relevant than ever before.

Just as Member States expect much of UNESCO, much is to be expected of us strategically and constitutionally in the coming two weeks to ensure that the world's expectations will be adequately addressed.

Dear colleagues, I wish you success in your deliberations and hope that your contributions will ensure the accomplishment of all the great initiatives for which UNESCO is renowned.

With these words of encouragement I am pleased to announce the 196th session of the Executive Board of UNESCO open.