UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address
by
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of the
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
(Unesco)

on the occasion of the opening meeting of the
tenth Regional Conference of National Commissions
for Unesco of the Europe Region

Berlin (German Democratic Republic),
10 April 1989
Mr President,
Mr Minister,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to begin by thanking Mr Günther Kleiber, member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Unified Socialist Party of Germany and First Vice-President of the Council of Ministers of the German Democratic Republic, for his kind words of welcome. I like to see in his presence here not only a symbol of his country's attachment to the ideals of the Organization, but also a mark of the personal interest that he takes in strengthening European co-operation within Unesco.

To you, Mr Papageorgiou, the outgoing President, I should like to convey the Secretariat's warmest thanks for the exemplary manner in which you have accomplished the task assigned to you by the ninth Regional Conference of European National commissions, held in Delphi in 1985.

I also wish to address my sincere congratulations to Mr Neugebauer, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Chairman of the National Commission of the German Democratic Republic for Unesco, on his triumphant election to the presidency of your Conference.

Let me emphasize first of all the active role played by the German Democratic Republic in the life of our Organization, not only through its National Commission and its Permanent Delegation in Paris, but also thanks to the personal action of Mr Siegfried Kaempf, member of the Executive Board of Unesco, whose presence among us I am pleased to note. I should add that the German Democratic Republic has in the past hosted numerous Unesco meetings: I need only mention the major International Congress on the Development and Improvement of Technical and Vocational Education, which took place in this city in June 1987.

I should like, once again, to express my profound gratitude to the Government and the people of the German Democratic Republic for the warm welcome that they have extended to all the participants in this Regional Conference. In doing so, I wish particularly to thank the National Commission for Unesco of the German Democratic Republic for the diligence and efficiency with which it has made the preparations for this Conference.

I am pleased to greet the members of National Commissions who have come from the other regions of the world. Their presence here serves to strengthen the bonds of solidarity that unite all the Member States of the Organization.

Finally, I am delighted to see here the representatives of those centres and institutes whose action to promote European co-operation within Unesco deserves to be both applauded and encouraged.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

How could I fail to sense in the presence of this assembly which is living proof of European co-operation, an echo of that great hope that I carry deep within me: that the day will dawn when the powerful coalition of the eternal values of the mind of the intelligence, science, culture and morality of all countries, will restore to men and women their dignity and to international co-operation its essential significance as an undertaking designed to generate solidarity among the nations of the world?

Your Regional Conference is of particular importance, taking place as it does some months before the session at which the General Conference is to examine the Draft Medium-Term Plan for 1990-1995.

The major challenges facing humanity on the threshold of the third millennium are of direct concern to us all. They place our Organization at the world crossroads where all who seek ways — such arduous ways — towards a truly worldwide humanism must meet and join forces. They make it essential for the Europe region to shoulder its global responsibilities in preparing the societies of the twenty-first century. Unesco will contribute to the full to this work of preparation, and the National Commissions will work with it, in their twin roles as national bodies and outposts of Unesco.

The agenda of this Conference offers a particularly favourable opportunity for engaging in a wide-ranging discussion of all questions affecting Unesco's future action, and the principles and methods by which that action should be guided.

I cannot, in the context of a single speech, outline all the essential features of our policy in every field. However, in confining myself to the main lines of your agenda, I should like to tell you how greatly I appreciate the contribution that you have made to the process of preparing the third Medium-Term Plan. Thanks to the pooling of your skills and to the in-depth reflection in which you have engaged at the subregional, regional and interregional levels, you have enabled the Secretariat to prepare a synoptic document which reflects a multi-faceted vision of the Organization. Concurrently, by enlisting, as is your role, the support of the scientific and intellectual communities at every level, you have helped to achieve an objective that has been very dear to me, namely, ensuring that the preparation of the third Medium-Term Plan is a truly collective undertaking, involving the direct commitment of all Unesco's sectors and services and all its partners.

The draft third Medium-Term Plan has now been completed. It was prepared on the basis of 130 EX/Decision 4.1 of the Executive Board, which specified what its structure and its main lines of emphasis should be. It is now your task to study the substance of this collectively prepared draft document, a task in which you must be guided by two major concerns: to ensure the balance between continuity and innovation, on the one hand, and, on the other, the effective implementation of the action envisaged.

I detect — to my great satisfaction — a consensus regarding several major lines of emphasis for the future: eradication of illiteracy, promotion of sustainable development, adoption of vigorous measures to counter the fragility of ecosystems and the tentacular proliferation of towns and cities, safeguarding of all the features of our cultural heritage, promotion of communication in the service of humanity as a whole, improvement of our understanding of the development of individuals and of society, and formulating of development strategies, particularly in regard to the development of human resources. Given the complexity of these problems and
their global scale, it is essential for us, reaffirming Unesco's ethical mission, to make its work and role truly relevant to today's world in order to construct peace, to guarantee solidarity in development and to make our peace with nature.

The World Decade for Cultural Development, the principle of which was decided on by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1986, offers us both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity it represents is to give fresh impetus to intellectual freedom and creative expression; its challenge is that of finding practical ways of building the cultural dimension into development.

It was Thomas Carlyle who said, 'the great law of culture is: let each become all that he was capable of being; expand, if possible, to his full growth; resisting all impediments, casting off all foreign, especially all noxious adhesions, and show himself at length in his own shape and stature, be these what they may'.

This region has a very special role to play in this Decade. Were not two cities, Athens and Rome, the cradles of western civilization? The combined phenomena of glasnost and the move to a unified market in the European Economic Community have rekindled an interest in cultural identity and heightened support for expanded cultural co-operation in Europe. This natural interest first in ourselves should be broadened during the Decade to a global effort to achieve international cultural understanding.

There have been some notable achievements in the implementation of the Decade since the last session of the General Conference in 1987. The Bureau of the Intergovernmental Committee approved, at its meeting of 20–21 February, the revised Strategy for the Decade as well as the criteria and the process for selecting Decade activities. The Decade secretariat has computerized the over 150 project activities and proposals from Member States, United Nations agencies, other international intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and individuals that have come to their attention. It is noteworthy that 57 of these projects were initiated in Europe.

Thirty-seven Member States have established National Committees for the Decade, sixteen of which are in the Europe region.

Co-operation within the United Nations system has been reinforced. At the last meeting of focal points for the Decade of the organizations and programmes of the United Nations system, on 6–7 February, five areas for joint Decade projects were identified: development of craftspeople and handicrafts; culture and the environment; training of decision-makers and communicators; women's activities; and drug, alcohol and tobacco abuse and crime. Our co-ordinating machinery will become an Inter-Agency Steering Committee for the Decade by the end of this year.

Certain things have therefore been accomplished. Much remains to be done. While the justification for most of the other existing decades: International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation, International Decade for Disaster Reduction, Industrialization in Africa, is clear and non-controversial, some have questioned the need for a World Decade for Cultural Development. And yet how many wars have been waged and conquests justified in the name of cultural superiority and religious intolerance? How many regional conflicts and subnational tensions today are related to cultural differences? Along with development, perhaps the greatest challenge of the twenty-first century will be the respect for cultural diversity. Who among us would prefer a monochrome canvas to a mosaic or a kaleidoscope? It was Thomas Jefferson who suggested that uniformity of opinion was no more desirable than that of face and stature.
Eight years remain to address both the challenges and the opportunities of the World Decade for Cultural Development. I am confident that Europe will be a significant actor in this venture on which we have all embarked together.

The most important challenge facing Unesco is the creation of a literate world: a world in which education is available to all as a means of enhancing the dignity of the individual and the progress of society. Unfortunately, we are today very far from meeting this challenge. In the developing nations, there are more than 100 million children between the ages of six and eleven who are not enrolled in school and 900 million illiterate adults. On average, nearly half the women and over a quarter of the adult men in the developing nations are illiterate.

It was this troubling situation which prompted the Executive Board to decide that literacy would be the absolute priority of the Organization during the period of the third Medium-Term Plan which begins in 1990. As many of you know, Unesco is approaching the problem in a number of complementary ways. First, the observance of International Literacy Year, for which Unesco is the lead organization, is designed to create public awareness of the problem and mobilize government commitment and action: indispensable conditions for success in the struggle against illiteracy. But there is also a critical need for international support. With this in mind, Unesco has entered into a partnership with UNICEF, the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank to launch a major new initiative aimed at education for all. A jointly-organized World Conference in March 1990 in Bangkok to launch this programme will be a highlight of International Literacy Year and the first step in a concerted decade-long assault on illiteracy. The strategy to be pursued has two essential aspects: national commitment and international encouragement and support.

Illiteracy is, of course, a problem which touches all regions in different degrees and ways. Even the States of the Europe region with traditions of free public education stretching back a century or more are not spared. Illiteracy, usually in the form of what is termed 'functional illiteracy', affects a sizeable portion of the population in many States in the region—often ten to twenty per cent. Under the third Medium-Term Plan, Unesco will give increased attention to encouraging information exchanges among the States of the region on ways of preventing and combating illiteracy and functional illiteracy in industrialized countries. The Unesco Institute for Education in Hamburg (Federal Republic of Germany) will serve as the centre of a network for the exchange of information and experience on this issue, which is of growing public concern. In the industrialized countries, as in the developing nations, the enhancement of human competence through education is the source of both personal success and national progress.

It is scarcely necessary to remind this illustrious gathering of the seriousness of the environmental problems facing the world today. It is more than ever necessary that all the potential effects of human activity on ecosystems should be taken unfailingly into account. Environmental education and training must be backed up by precise and comprehensive information on the structure and functioning of ecosystems and on ways of preserving their essential equilibrium. Hence the importance of the role played by Unesco's international and intergovernmental scientific programmes, such as the Programme on Man and the Biosphere (MAB), the International Hydrological Programme (IHP), the International Geological Correlation Programme (IGCP) and the programmes of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC), to which should be added the International Environmental Education Programme.
Much still remains to be done in order to sharpen and expand the new awareness of the dangers threatening our environment, and of the myriad assaults, some originating a long time ago, others quite recent, to which it is subjected.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Beyond Europe's shores, other duties await you, duties that are inherent in the common lot of humankind. No culture can flourish by withdrawing behind the frontiers of its own identity. The problems of those countries that are still referred to as 'developing' - a term which in many cases has long ceased to be appropriate - must be constantly uppermost in your minds. It lies with you, it lies with the Organization, to join forces, to pool those salutary energies that will lead humanity away from the brink to which the extremes of self-interest would drive it, like those men in Alfred de Vigny's tragic vision fighting among themselves in a coach racing headlong towards a precipice.

Because its activities emphasize the primacy of human dignity, the kinship of peoples, the indivisibility of a historical heritage and a destiny shared by all, the Organization is duty-bound to be the catalyst of a moral awakening throughout the human race.

At this point I would refer once again to the essential problem of the Organization's universality, at a time when it is setting out on the path of renewal and when, more than ever, it is in need of everyone's assistance in order to discharge to the full the unique task incumbent on it.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Berlin calls to mind a past that must never be allowed to return. Berlin is the symbol of the obstacles which must be overcome in order to usher in a brighter future. Today, we are still witnessing bloody wars in various parts of the world; today, thousands of children still die each day of hunger and of ignorance. We cannot speak of peace so long as this situation persists. Schiller's 'new day' awaits us all.

I am certain that this Conference - whose proceedings the Secretariat will follow with the closest attention - will constitute an important stage on the long road leading to that new day of peace, of peace in freedom, justice, equity and respect for the rights of all women and all men. As we travel this road, making the necessary changes on our way, we must all seek together to improve the key to that brighter future, namely, our behaviour towards one another, both as individuals and as communities.