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

at the opening of the Tenth Regional Conference of
National Commissions for UNESCO in Asia and the Pacific

Canberra, 30 November 1992
Mr Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade,
Mr President of the Conference,
Mr Chairman of the Australian National Commission,
Chairpersons, Secretaries-General and Representatives of
Asian and Pacific National Commissions,
Colleagues,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the opening of this Tenth Conference of National Commissions for UNESCO in Asia and the Pacific, it gives me great pleasure to welcome the representatives of National Commissions in the region and participants representing those new Member States that have yet to establish their Commissions. I should like to extend a particularly warm welcome to the delegates from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kiribati and Tuvalu, who are participating for the first time in the work of a Regional Conference of Asian and Pacific National Commissions. I am glad to announce that as of 23 November 1992 Vanuatu has decided to join UNESCO.

I am also pleased to greet the representatives of National Commissions from other regions, members of the Government and Parliament of Australia, members of the diplomatic corps, the representatives of other agencies of the United Nations system and those of non-governmental organizations, whose presence here is a gratifying sign of their interest in the work of UNESCO and its National Commissions and of their willingness to strengthen our joint commitment to our common ideals.

I am sure you will agree that we are fortunate to be gathered together in this splendid city of Canberra. On behalf of my colleagues and myself, I wish to express our sincere appreciation to the Government of Australia, to the Australian National Commission and to the many distinguished Australian personalities present here for their warm hospitality and their support for the work of our Organization. We are particularly grateful for the excellent facilities placed at our disposal and are conscious of the privilege of holding this meeting in the splendid new Parliament House building. I see this as an important symbol since the Parliaments represent, in a context of public freedom, all the constituencies of UNESCO - the people through whom a world of peace, justice and equity will be built.

One of the founding members of UNESCO, Australia has been consistent in its support for the aims of our Organization. This commitment has been reflected in a significant contribution to UNESCO's work at international, regional and subregional levels, not least its strong backing for the major intergovernmental scientific programmes and the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage. It has also played a conspicuous role in the life of UNESCO through its National Commission and its Permanent Delegation in Paris as well as through the many outstanding Australian personalities who have been members or are members of the Executive Board and who have served the Organization over the years.
I should like to pay a special tribute here to two eminent Australians, the late Sir Ronald Walker and the late William Gardner Davies, for their outstanding contributions over some four decades to the work of UNESCO. I also note the presence in this room today of a number of Australian personalities whom UNESCO counts among its staunch supporters.

Mr Minister,
Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Asia and Pacific region, to which we now welcome the newly independent republics of Central Asia, is notable for its enormous diversity. Accounting for over 70% of the world's population, this vast area comprises the most populous countries in the world and at the same time some of the smallest. A number of countries in the region have attained very high levels of development - economic and human - while others remain among the least developed. This wide spectrum of diversity is reflected in practically every aspect of life - political, social, economic, cultural, religious. It constitutes both a rich endowment and a challenge, marking the region out as one where international cooperation will have an essential role to play in the years to come.

Thanks in part to a good record of intra-regional and inter-regional cooperation, the Asia and Pacific region has registered substantial progress over the last three decades in UNESCO's fields of competence. However, such progress has been uneven both between and within countries and the region continues to face major problems of illiteracy, poverty and inequality. There are, for example, still over 50 million children each year who are not enrolled in primary-level education; more than 25 million drop out of school each year before completing primary education; and - even if the trend is positive for the first time in contemporary history - the adult illiterate population will still represent more than 670 million (mostly women) by the year 2000 if we do not take very strong measures. While these statistics reflect in large measure the problems confronting Asian countries with high rates of population growth, the oceanic character and necessarily small populations of the Pacific island countries create developmental problems of a very distinctive kind. Problems of a different order exist too in other parts of the region as a result of conflicts rooted in political or cultural antagonisms that have prevailed over a traditional spirit of tolerance and mutual understanding within the region.

What can and should UNESCO do, in the context of its overall programme, to help the Member States address these and other problems that face them separately and in common? This is the question that provides the backdrop to your discussions at this meeting. While most of you will be familiar with the proposals I made to Member States concerning UNESCO's next
programme and budget, I should like to share with you some of the
collections that I have drawn from national reactions to these proposals and
from the discussions that took place at the recent session of the Executive
Board.

Firstly, I should like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to
those National Commissions in Asia and Pacific which have participated so
actively in the ongoing preparation of the programme and budget. The
region's contribution to this process has been a most relevant and valuable
one. The general impression deriving from the some 850 pages of replies to
my preliminary proposals is one of increased interest and involvement by the
National Commissions in the planning and programming of the Organization's
activities. This is very satisfying since it enables the Organization's
programme to be the outcome of a truly collective action on the part of its
Member States, governing bodies and Secretariat.

The discussions at the last session of the Executive Board confirmed the
priority objectives of UNESCO in the aftermath of the Cold War and in the
context of new trends in international co-operation. Two global threats, in
particular, seem to demand UNESCO's maximum attention within the framework
of the collective efforts of the United Nations system.

The first of these concerns the growing divide between North and South,
which can only be reduced by the establishment of a global partnership for
development. Such a development, if it is to be meaningful, must be a
genuinely human development endogenous, sustainable, equitable and
incorporating the essential dimension of culture. Its worldwide promotion
will require a new sense of solidarity on the part of the international
community together with much greater synergy among all the relevant
international organizations and mechanisms. We need to invest less in
conventional peace-keeping, for which nations are traditionally well
prepared, and invest more in peace-building for which nations - the recent
examples are so evident - are unfortunately unprepared. Population growth,
the number one problem, will be only curbed through education and human
development. Emigration will only be moderated if endogenous development,
which implies the transfer of knowledge, reduces the need for people to
leave their homeland. Human sustainable development, to which UNESCO has an
essential contribution to make in virtually all its fields of competence, is
of the highest importance to rich and poor countries alike. For, in the
memorable phrase of Mahbubul Haq, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General
and co-ordinator of the UNDP's Human Development Report, "If opportunity
does not go to poverty, poverty will go to opportunity". As we emerge from
an ideological confrontation symbolized by walls designed to keep people in,
it is up to all of us to ensure that tomorrow's world is not one epitomized by
walls constructed to keep people out.

The other threat relates to the crucial need - which is also a duty and
right - for different cultures and ethnic groups
to live together in a peaceful, free and interactive way. The break-up of communism has opened up a Pandora's box of nationalist sentiment and ethnic antagonism that had been largely hidden by authoritarian regimes and held in check by the ideological struggle. Since its foundation, UNESCO has played a leading role in combating discrimination and exclusion in all its forms, whether based on race, nationality, ethnic origin, sex or religion. A very clear consensus has emerged for UNESCO, within its fields of competence and in close co-operation with other organizations of the United Nations system, to make it a priority to promote a culture of peace among human societies. In the aftermath of bipolarity and in a world where the tensions between global trends and local allegiances are likely to grow, UNESCO must step up its contribution to the shaping of a worldwide culture of non-violence, peace and equity - among other ways through the promotion of mutual respect and tolerance and the consolidation of pluralist and open societies within which human rights and democracy can flourish and the rights of minorities are safeguarded. Next year is the United Nations Year for the World's Indigenous People. Let us all contribute to better mutual knowledge, comprehension and esteem among all those living on the planet Earth.

As Secretary-General Boutros Ghali has strongly underscored in his Agenda for Peace and in his report to ECOSOC on the role of the United Nations in enhancing international cooperation for development, the challenge of fostering a culture of peace is closely linked to that of promoting human development. Both are in turn inseparable from the vital necessity of protecting the earth's environment. It follows that scientific and educational work in the environmental field must remain a complementary priority of UNESCO within the framework of the concerted contribution by all parts of the UN system to the implementation of Agenda 21.

Given the broad agreement that appears to exist on these main orientations for UNESCO's action, the question arises as to how these objectives should be pursued in the context of current trends in international co-operation. From the consultations and discussions on the preparation of the next programme and budget, it appears clearly that the way forward for UNESCO in the 1990s and beyond lies in a reinforcement of its intellectual functions, in a strengthening of its role as a catalyst for a "meeting of minds" in the service of its ethical goals of promoting human welfare and mutual understanding.

To achieve these goals, it is vital to establish a clear "division of tasks" within the UN system so as to ensure maximum efficiency in addressing the major challenges of our time. The specific task of UNESCO, as prescribed by its Constitution, is that of international intellectual co-operation, and it follows that the main focus of its action should be activities designed to promote the creation and sharing of knowledge. This general intellectual function dovetails well with that of providing the "upstream" input - research, analysis and policy formulation.
for operational activities carried out by the UN system. The coordination of such activities, as I have consistently stressed in a variety of UN fora, should strike an appropriate balance between convergence and complementarity. It is important for the quality and coherence of operational action that funding sources such as the World Bank and UNDP -- which are increasingly called upon to fulfil a co-ordinating function -- should make full use of the expertise and experience of the Specialized Agencies and resist the temptation to try to conduct the orchestra and play the various instruments at the same time.

At a time when civil society is taking over functions too long in the hands of authoritarian power, a particularly relevant challenge for international co-operation is to forge new partnerships with regional and subregional intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. It is with them that the line of development of institutions in the countries concerned should be worked out and monitored. It is through them that the number of missions, meetings and reports can be limited to the strictly necessary. We have in recent times been a reporting society. Now is the time for action. This is in my view a most important transition: we must now all write history and shape the event.

A number of steps have already been taken to strengthen the intellectual role of UNESCO. I am thinking in particular of the creation of the ad hoc Forum of Reflection, designed to support the Executive Board in its deliberative functions, and the establishment of the Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century and the World Commission on Cultural Development to be chaired respectively by Mr Jacques Delors and Mr Javier Perez de Cuéllar. These bodies should provide important inputs for future C/5 documents and for the next Medium-Term Plan and should serve to enhance the moral authority of the Organization, which will inevitably be measured by its intellectual authority.

The strengthening of UNESCO's intellectual function needs to be accompanied by a number of other emphases dictated by experience and by the changing context of its activities. There is, firstly, a generally recognized need for a concentration of the Organization's programme around its priority objectives, although one finds as always a lack of agreement on what the concentration exercise should exclude. The programming of UNESCO's activities must also allow sufficient flexibility for it to provide timely assistance, in concert with other organizations, in response to unforeseen and urgent needs of the kind that have recently arisen in Cambodia, former Yugoslavia, Somalia and the ex-URSS. The nature of the problems UNESCO is called upon to address likewise calls for reinforcement of the interdisciplinary and intersectoral character of its programmes. At the same time, as a knowledge-based institution, UNESCO needs to develop new instruments for what I have called "evaluating the intangible", that is to say, for assessing the complex and sometimes elusive issues it typically has to address as well as the practical impact of its work. The concentration efforts need to be balanced by a significant increase in the Participation
Programme to ensure a continued capacity to respond to requests from Member States for support for activities at the national level. Finally, the scale of the challenges facing the international community make it essential for the organizations of the United Nations system to mobilize the maximum support for their endeavours among the peoples of the world, creating partnerships encompassing the whole of civil society and transcending divisions of nationality, religion and culture.

In all these functions - co-ordination with other UN organizations, new partnerships, evaluation, information, execution - UNESCO has the very good fortune to be able to call on the National Commissions. More than ever, in a context of growing freedom, the National Commissions must provide that vital framework within which the most enterprising and committed members of the civil society can contribute to the achievement of UNESCO's objectives. The Commission likewise has the fundamental role of interpreting the Organization's aims, upstream, to those who take the political, economic and financial decisions in their countries and, downstream, to the general public and those who benefit from UNESCO's action.

It is not in Paris that the resolutions of the General Conference must be implemented. It is not in Paris that we can improve the distribution of our publications. It is at the country level, and the protagonists - if we are to correct a longstanding mistake - are, among others, the National Commissions. If a country really believes in UNESCO's mission, then it must act. It is crucial therefore that the National Commissions should be strong and enjoy appropriate recognition. This is not true of all of them, as we know. I intend to further reinforce assistance for equipment, particularly telecommunications, as well as establishing, wherever possible, a skeleton structure around which various partnerships can form. The formula developed by a number of particularly effective Commissions which have substantial permanent secretariats and their own resources is not transferable to every country in the world. New modalities must be found. Some have already been successfully tried out, and I have in mind systems for twinning experienced Commissions with less experienced ones, new forms of interregional consultation, the secondment of staff to Commissions that are being established or recognized, and innovative training activities at Headquarters and in the Field. Other possibilities need to be explored jointly.

As I announced at the last session of the Executive Board, I am determined to make an unprecedented effort to mobilize support for the development of National Commissions in countries where they either do not exist or are still very weak. But this effort will have neither meaning nor impact unless Member States undertake at the same time to fulfil their obligations under Article VII of the Constitution and as set out in the Charter of National Commissions. That implies a minimum of human and material resources and, above all, a status guaranteeing an adequate degree of independence and all the
authority required to carry out their mandate. The revival of intellectual co-operation in an intergovernmental framework such as UNESCO depends primarily on the political will of States - the will to offer their intellectual communities space for dialogue in an appropriate structure.

The National Commissions also have a role to play in giving effect to another of the emphases that will, in accordance with the decisions of the General Conference and the Executive Board, characterize UNESCO's future programme. I refer to greater decentralization. The aim here is to involve the Member States more clearly in both the design and implementation of the Organization's activities and to ensure that these have a tangible impact in the various countries of the different regions. As I have said, UNESCO is not the Secretariat, and still less Headquarters. In order to achieve genuine decentralization, we must give new momentum to co-operation with the National Commissions and must strengthen the links between the Commissions and UNESCO Offices in the Field. It is for this reason, and despite the financial implications, that I have considered it essential for the UNESCO representatives in Asia and the Pacific to be present at this important gathering.

Mr Minister,
Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At a time when UNESCO and the United Nations system is engaged in a process of far-reaching renewal, the Member States have an overwhelming responsibility to seek ways of strengthening multilateral co-operation to respond to the fundamental global challenges of the new century. This must include mobilizing support within the national community for the goals and activities of the UN. The message of peace, freedom, justice and solidarity which UNESCO, for its part, is endeavouring to convey through its activities in education, science, culture and communication is too heavy a burden for one messenger alone to bear. What are needed are messengers - and actors - in their thousands. And they are to be found here in this hall, in the Member States of Asia and the Pacific as well as those of other regions, among men and women of goodwill everywhere who are helping to organize the forces of the mind in the service of human understanding and well-being. I hope that your Conference, as well as helping to shape the Organization's future programme, will serve to strengthen these vital forces and, with them, the realization that UNESCO - like the UN system as a whole - is in the last analysis all of us.

In the culture of war the logic of force has prevailed. If we sincerely wish to inaugurate the culture of peace in which the force of reason will prevail, we must be able - passionately, compassionately - to identify the essence of our mission and to act; we must be able to speak out and dare to disagree with the apparently inviolable rules that have led to the toleration of
the intolerable and the admission of the inadmissible. Efforts towards change will provoke many reactions. This does not matter. UNESCO was not founded to adapt its goals to current practices, but rather to adapt current practices to its aims. My function as Director-General is not simply to manage the Organization, but to transform it so as to attain its objectives more fully. And this depends on the involvement of the National Commissions, on their capacity to mobilize support in their respective countries. What is required is a mobilization that will ensure a better future for our young people - some of them in danger because of an excess of material facilities, most of them in danger for exactly the opposite reason, and all in need of good examples; a mobilization of such lasting strength as will pay generations to come the tribute we owe them. Their rights, my dear colleagues, are our dignity.

Thank you for your attention.